

## Lesson 4.



# The Creed After 381 and Its Use Today

## Introduction

Read Acts 20:25-32 and answer the following questions.

- We often say that we want pastors who will teach God’s Word “in its truth and purity.” What do we mean by that? How is that reflected in Paul’s words here? **We desire pastors who will teach us “the whole will of God,” all of the things God has revealed to us about himself and his saving work. Paul did not tell the Ephesian elders that he had taught them the basics or had given them some general truths that were open to dispute. He taught them all that God wanted taught, and he constantly warned them against false teachings.**
- Agree or disagree: Attacks against the truth of God’s Word that arise from within the church are more dangerous than those that arise from outside of it. **The biblical admonitions about false prophets as wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15) make this clear. Such distortions of the truth may be harder to discern.**
- After Paul warned the Ephesians that false teachers will arise from their own ranks, he urged them: “Be on your guard!” What are some ways we can *be on our guard* against false teachings today?

**Continuously study the Scriptures; ask our pastors and leaders questions, especially if they say something we are unsure about doctrinally; recognize the reality that Satan is actively trying to undermine the truth of God’s Word in our midst; carefully test the things we hear about God against the Scriptures; continue worshiping and learning God’s Word with other Christians. Don’t be distrustful, be curious, be informed, be wise to the truth.**

### 4.1 The Use of the Nicene Creed After 381

As we have seen, the 381 version of the Nicene Creed was first approved at a council in Constantinople, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire that was increasingly becoming one of the most important centers of the Christian church. In Constantinople, within the next century, this creed became the normal creed used for baptisms and then part of the Communion liturgy. By the sixth century it was used for both baptisms and the Communion liturgy by all of the Greek-speaking churches of the Eastern Roman Empire and their daughter churches—the churches we call Orthodox yet today (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Serbian Orthodox). The Nicene Creed is usually recited near the beginning of the Communion portion of the liturgy, after the Gospel reading (and after the sermon, if there is one).

In the Latin West, the Apostles’ Creed retained great importance, but a Latin version of the Nicene Creed of 381 came into common use as well. During the fifth century, the Western Empire was being overrun by Germanic invaders, many of whom were Arian Christians. This was most likely one of the reasons that the expanded Nicene Creed of 381 saw increased use in the West. In 589, a council at Toledo in Spain resolved that “before the Lord’s Prayer is said, the creed shall be chanted aloud by the congregation; this will be a witness to the true faith and will enable the people to approach and partake of Christ’s body and blood with hearts cleansed by faith” (Canon 2 of the Council of Toledo,

589). In the following centuries, while the threat of Arianism gradually died out, the practice of reciting the creed of 381 after the Gospel reading and before the Lord's Prayer spread throughout the western Latin church.

1. Does the rationale for reciting the Nicene Creed within the Sunday liturgy provided by the Council of Toledo make sense to you? What about how it was used in the Greek churches? in our Lutheran liturgy? *The early part of the liturgy, the Service of the Word, is devoted to hearing God's Word. The recitation of the creed is an affirmation of what has been heard. Also, being a reaffirmation of one's baptismal confession, it is a wonderful prelude to the Sacrament and could be considered part of examining oneself before receiving the Lord's Supper.*
2. Which of the two, the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, would you choose to use today as a baptismal creed? Explain your answer. *The Apostles' Creed still has the virtue of being the briefest, but the Nicene Creed naturally leads to fuller discussions of Christology and of the Holy Spirit. Either would be good, and both have been used as the basis for adult Bible information classes for new members.*

## 4.2 One Further Change: *Filioque*

Sometime in the centuries immediately following the council of 381, another phrase was added to the Third Article of the creed. After stating that the Holy Spirit was "the Lord and giver of life," the creed stated that he "proceeds from the Father," wording taken directly from [John 15:26 \(KJV\)](#). Western theologians like St. Augustine, however, citing verses such as [John 16:14-15](#), explained that the Son was also involved in the procession of the Spirit. Therefore, the Latin version of the creed's statement was augmented by the single Latin word *filioque* ("and the Son"). It thus read that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son."

Theologians in the Greek-speaking east did not question the Son's involvement with the Spirit. They did not see the Latin addition as wrong, but they preferred to say that the Spirit proceeded from the Father through the Son. While the new addition was used at times in the West in the later fourth and fifth centuries, it wasn't until about 800 that its use became more widespread. Meanwhile, the Greek-speaking east continued to recite the creed without the addition. Over the centuries the Eastern and Western churches continued to drift further apart culturally and politically. When the two churches experienced times of tension and anger, this small addition to the creed became an easy weapon to throw against the opposing side. To this day, the added phrase remains a point of dispute and disagreement between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

*[Many church history books overemphasize the *filioque* as if it were the most important disagreement leading to the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern and Western churches. In reality, the two churches had grown apart culturally, linguistically, and administratively for centuries. Their leadership had condemned each other on multiple occasions. What happened in 1054 was merely the last and most well-known occurrence—and the *filioque* was the excuse given.]*

3. Even if it was theologically correct for the Western church to add *filioque* to the creed, was it a mistake to alter an ecumenical creed without first consulting with fellow Christians in the East?

*In hindsight, the answer is probably yes. However, in a period when barbarian invasions, the rise of Islam, piracy, economic depression, language differences, and many other issues made travel and communication difficult, it is easy to understand why such doctrinal conversations were difficult to have. Perhaps the West could have been more patient instead of insisting upon the addition before the East was ready to accept it.*

4. What cautions might this suggest to us today? Can you think of some present-day applications?

Maintaining purity of doctrine ought never be an excuse to neglect people's consciences. As Paul told the Corinthians, we can have great faith and knowledge, but **if we don't have love, it is useless** (1 Corinthians 13). If we find ourselves in situations where our doctrinal understanding requires us to take a particular action, we want to carefully consider how this might impact other Christians around us. **Love will compel us to take the time to explain why we are making the needed change.** Doing so will help us maintain unburdened consciences or help avoid making those around us feel disrespected. (cf. use of the word "submit" in marriage vows)

### 4.3 The Athanasian Creed or *Quicumque vult*

Sometime in the late fifth or early sixth century, a much more elaborate statement about the Trinity was composed, probably in southern France. Often the name of Athanasius was attached to it, but since it was composed in Latin a century or more after his death, he was only the inspiration for its formulations. It begins with the words "Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all, keep the catholic faith." Since the first two words in Latin are *Quicumque vult* ("Whoever wishes"), that Latin phrase is often used as a more accurate name for this creed.

The Athanasian Creed is made up of 44 sentences, almost all about the relationship between the members of the Trinity. It became a standard document in the Latin church, although its length kept it from being recited regularly in church services. It states unequivocally that "unless a person keeps this faith completely and entirely, he will undoubtedly be lost forever." It also combines both positive and negative statements to emphasize that the biblical teaching about the Trinity must be believed, even though that teaching does not agree with our human logic. For example, "The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal; yet there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being." Thus, it clearly spells out in great detail the same theology that was approved at Nicaea in 325, at Constantinople in 381, and in the writings of Athanasius. In this sense it is truly an "Athanasian" creed. Today this creed is sometimes recited in our services on Trinity Sunday. (For the text of the Athanasian Creed, see pages 284-285 of *Christian Worship: Hymnal*.)

5. Interestingly, while our three ecumenical creeds have appropriately accurate names, each name can also be misunderstood. Explain how each name is properly understood and how each can be misunderstood.

The Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles but accurately reflects the faith they handed down to the church. The Nicene Creed as we have it today was produced at the Council of Constantinople in 381, but it enshrined the theology of the 325 Council of Nicaea. The Athanasian Creed was written a century after the death of Athanasius but reflects his theology of the Trinity.

6. Can you think of other ways to use the Athanasian Creed today?

In a Bible study on the doctrine of the Trinity, this creed might be a good place to start. It can also be useful in situations where Christians are seeking to explain their trinitarian faith to people who do not believe in or understand the concept of the Trinity (discussions with Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, etc.).

### 4.4 Luther and the Creeds in Lutheranism

The Nicene Creed would have been part of the liturgy Martin Luther heard and recited as a young man. When he became a monk, Luther also came to know the Apostles' Creed, which was used in several of the daily services in his Augustinian monastery. As Luther struggled unsuccessfully to lead a pure life

even in the monastery, he came to have a special love for the Apostles' Creed, which proclaimed to him the forgiveness of sins each time he recited it. This may be one reason why he chose to include the Apostles' Creed rather than the Nicene Creed in his Small Catechism. On the other hand, while he made many changes to the Sunday liturgy, he retained the chanting or singing of the Nicene Creed, although it was to be sung in German.

Luther and his associates accepted these two creeds, together with the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult*), as accurate statements of doctrine that should continue to be used in the church. The first article of the Augsburg Confession (1530) states, "Our churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting."

In 1538 Luther wrote a booklet entitled *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith* (Luther's Works, vol. 42, pp. 199-229). Interestingly, the three "creeds" he included in the main part of the study were (1) the Apostles' Creed, (2) the Athanasian Creed, and (3) the "Te Deum Laudamus." He then added the Nicene Creed, which he said was sung in church every Sunday, as an appendix. Perhaps he didn't feel the need to explain the Nicene Creed because of its frequent use and because its contents were already contained in the other three "creeds."

In 1580, a generation after Luther's death, when Lutheran theologians gathered the most important Lutheran theological writings into *The Book of Concord*, the three ecumenical creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed (381), and the Athanasian Creed—were the opening documents in the volume. They were the oldest documents and the most widely accepted by Christians everywhere. Through the inclusion of the creeds, the Lutheran theologians of the 16th century confessed their connection to the teachings of the primitive church and the christological and trinitarian beliefs that are necessary for anyone who wishes to be saved.

7. At the time of his excommunication from the Roman church, Luther burned a copy of the Roman canon law, which contained the decisions of the councils throughout history. Why do you think he did that, since we know that he respected the early creeds that were approved by some of those councils?

While Luther never maintained that every decision made by church councils was wrong, he rejected the idea that councils had the authority, apart from Scripture, to establish doctrine. He was therefore denying the concept of the power behind councils, not the quality of every individual decision they had ever made or even the process. Such decisions, however, should not become a new law code for Christians who have been freed by the gospel.

8. Why do you think we retain the three ecumenical creeds in our Lutheran Confessions, since the later confessions already cover the teaching of the Trinity and the person of Jesus in great detail?

We do not want to give the impression that we are a sect. That could easily be the case if our only confessions of faith were "Lutheran" confessions, even if those confessions expressed the truths of the Bible. By using the ecumenical creeds, universally confessed by the Christian church, we are expressing our continuity with and inclusion in the universal (invisible) church. Our beliefs go back much further than the Reformation, via the early church all the way to Scripture.

9. Luther included the Apostles' Creed in his Small Catechism, which was written to help parents instruct their children in the basic truths of Scripture. If you were instructing your children or an unchurched friend about the basics of Christian belief, would the Apostles' Creed be a good place to start? Why or why not?

It would be a good outline, but should be backed up by Scripture. It maybe doesn't distinguish Law and Gospel very well. For evangelism, I might need to clarify the questions, before pointing to the Creed for the answers.

## 4.5 The Nicene Creed After 1,700 Years

In the 21st century, the Nicene Creed continues to be recited by Christians around the world every week. Except for the *filioque*, it remains the most ecumenical document in Christendom, that is, the writing that almost all who consider themselves Christians can agree with. This has caused some denominations to consider dropping the *filioque*—not because they no longer value it but in order to remove an obstacle for church fellowship. Because so many other differences exist, however, such an action would not have much practical effect.

At the same time, the Nicene Creed still separates us from those who do not accept the biblical teaching of the Trinity or the scriptural doctrine that Jesus, God's Son, is an equal member of the Trinity, "true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father." This creed continues to condemn the teachings of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and all other groups that confess a diminished Christ. The Nicene Creed in our liturgy is a continual reminder of who we are and what we believe—despite the fact that the concept of the Trinity is illogical, a mystery to our human minds.

The next time you recite the Nicene Creed in a worship service, think of the innumerable other Christians who are confessing that faith around the world. Think also of all the Christians of the past who have confessed this creed—the bishops at Nicaea in 325, the bishops at Constantinople in 381, the medieval Christians in the Latin West, and the Greek-speaking Christians in Orthodox churches. Think of Luther and the reformers, our own synod's founders, and our believing parents and grandparents. The Revelation of St. John pictures a great multitude that no one could count—from every nation, tribe, people, and language—standing before the Lamb's throne in their white robes with palm branches in their hands, crying aloud, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:10). When we recite aloud the Nicene Creed with fellow Christians around the world, we are perhaps getting a small taste of what awaits us in heaven!

10. From time to time it is suggested that we need a new confession to address present-day disagreements in the church. What are the pros and cons of doing this?

[As an example, you might point out that several decades ago WELS published *This We Believe*, which served this purpose ([wels.net](http://wels.net)).]

Pros: Such confessions allow us to clearly and succinctly address issues that perhaps have not been publicly addressed. They provide a unifying set of statements that summarize what church leaders teach and what members believe. They also allow us to clearly compare and contrast our teachings with those of other church bodies. (e.g. role of men and women; transgender theology, etc.)

Cons: Inherently, if you are going to draw up a set of statements on various topics, you also have to decide which issues are not going to be addressed. Where do you draw the line between what requires a confessional

statement and what does not? For example, it could cause offense if someone found statements on our website condemning abortion and homosexual activity but not racism.

11. List two or three of the most important or interesting points about the creeds and the early councils that you learned during this four-part study.

1. Arianism is still popular today. 2. Human logic often opposes God's truth. 3. Thank God for good, brave, precise and faithful theologians.

12. In what ways might our congregations and church body properly celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene council and the Nicene Creed?

Teach a Bible class on it! We just did!

## Final Thought and Prayer

The Nicene Creed has seen consistent use in the Christian church since the fourth century and has remained unchanged with the exception of adding the single word *filioque*. A more extensive treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, known as the Athanasian Creed, also came into use. Accompanied by the earlier Apostles' Creed, these creeds were included in the Lutheran Confessions as proper explanations of what the Scriptures teach about God and are still regularly used in our churches today.

Jesus prayed to God the Father, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). May we ever cherish these creeds as faithful explanations of who that true God truly is.

Prayer: Dear triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we praise and thank you for guiding the transmission of your Word through the centuries. Though afflicted by false teachings on every side, your church has never fallen because you have sustained it in your great mercy. Help us to always cherish true doctrine, that we may know and believe all that you have revealed to us about yourself. When we recite the Nicene Creed in the future, may it both strengthen our faith and give us a sense of unity with your people across time and around the world. We glorify and worship you, the only true God, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

