

# UNPACKING THE NICENE CREED

## BETHESDA-BY-THE-SEA EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Week 1: Brief History of the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed; Overview of the Nicene Creed (pages 1- 6)

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### **Recommended Outside Readings**

*The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* — Luke Timothy Johnson

*Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* — Rowan Williams

# **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPLE CREED (NCC) AND THE APOSTLES' CREED (AC)**

## **Importance of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed and the Apostles' Creed**

NCC is the baptismal creed of the Eastern Church

NCC is the Eucharistic/Liturgical Creed of the Western Church

AC is the Baptismal Creed of the Western Church (BCP 304)

## **Questions faced by the early believers in Jesus**

Who was Jesus? What did the Crucifixion and Resurrection mean in terms of his nature? His mission? (These are issues in Christology.)

What must God be like given the fact that we learn about God and experience “Salvation” (however understood) through Jesus' life, death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit? (This is Trinitarian Theology.)

If Jesus is/was understood to be God, what does that do to monotheism? How can the Father and the Son be differentiated while maintaining monotheism?

How could Christians find the right words to articulate the concepts about God, Jesus and the Spirit that were inherent in the Epistles and the Gospels? In all times (including our own), the language of Faith has to evolve so that it will be relevant to the hearers of the Word.

## **Early Formulations and Evolution of the Baptismal Professions of Faith**

In Paul's Epistles (written from 47-65 CE), the focus is on Jesus' identity and actions. He refers to Jesus as “*Kyrios*” or LORD, the same Greek word that was used in the Septuagint (the “LXX”) as the translation of YHWH, and which Jews now translate as *Adonai*.

In the Hebrew Bible, we find the Creator God described sometimes as Father; and the Spirit of God is sometimes identified with Wisdom.

The Gospel of John identifies the “*Logos*” (“Word”) with the Christ. Jesus of Nazareth is presented as the Son of God whose death “unleashes” the Spirit.

## **Reasons for the early development of “creeds”**

The earliest creeds were Baptismal affirmations.

There was a model for the creed in the Jewish Shema (Dt. 6:4-9; Dt.11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41) (Exhortation to obey the One God and the Commandments)

### **Council of Nicea (325 C.E.)**

Called by Constantine to address the lack of uniformity in Christianity, in particular a dispute in Alexandria (the cultural capital of the Roman Empire) between its Bishop (Athanasius) and the priest, Arius.

Arius denied the full divinity of Jesus. His theory started with Father as the source of unity and all that is, rather than the source being the divine persons unified by divine nature.

### **The First Council of Constantinople (381) modified the Nicene Creed**

Because of theological confusion that continued after the Council of Nicea, political authorities wanted a higher level of uniformity.

The clarifications made at Constantinople emphasized the eternal “procession” of 2nd Person and the Second Person’s divine origin. It also expanded the statements regarding the Holy Spirit to make clear the equality of the Holy Spirit’s divinity.

The Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) approved the Creed developed at Constantinople I, and also adopted further language about the simultaneous humanity and divinity of Jesus.

### **Apostles' Creed**

Name given to one form of the Roman Creed in the late 4th century.

Rufinus added “descended into hell” in 404 CE. The phrase “Communion of Saints” was developed from Gallican Synod of 394 and refers to the fellowship of all holy persons.

The Apostles’ Creed became the standard creed used at Baptism in the West by the 12th Century.

### **The Pious fiction of the origin of the Apostles' Creed**

Each apostle contributed one statement to the Apostles’ Creed. This story was prevalent from 400 to 1450.

The earliest references to the Apostles’ Creed are 380 and 404.

**COMPARISON OF  
THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPLE CREED (BCP 358)  
AND APOSTLES' CREED (BCP 66/120)**

***Code to Differences between the Creeds***

- (1) Regular Print = **Only** in Original Creed from the Council of Nicea (325)
- (2) Italics = **Additions** made at the Council of Constantinople I (381)
- (3) Brackets [ ] = **Deletions** at Constantinople from the Creed adopted at Nicea
- (4) Later Added Words { } = the "**Filioque**"
- (5) Bold Face = In **both** the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed
- (6) In Parentheses **and** Bold Face = **Only** in Apostles Creed

We **(I)** believe in one **God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth**, and of all that is, seen and unseen.

**And in** one Lord, **Jesus Christ**, the **(his) only** begotten **Son (, our Lord)** of God, begotten from the Father *before all ages*, [that is from the essence/substance of the Father], God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same essence/substance/Being as the Father, through whom all things were made, [things in heaven and things on earth].

For us and for our salvation, he came down *from heaven: (who was conceived) by the power of the Holy Spirit*, he became incarnate *from (born of) the Virgin Mary* and was made man.

*For our sake, he was crucified (suffered) under Pontius Pilate, (was crucified, died) and suffered death and was buried. (He descended into Hell/to the dead.)*

**On the third day, he rose again (from the dead) in accordance with the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father. (from thence) He will come again in glory to judge living and dead, and his kingdom will have no end.**

We **(I)** believe in the **Holy Spirit**, *the Lord and giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father {and the Son}. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.*

We believe in one **(the) holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, (the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,)**

*We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*

We look for **the resurrection of the dead (body,) and the life (everlasting) of the world to come. Amen.**

## GENERAL DISCUSSION OF THE NICENE CREED

The Nicene Creed can be a unifying force for Christians, but it is *not* the ONLY instrument of Christian self-definition. Creeds exist in “creative tension” with other elements of Christian identity such as Scripture and Tradition.

The “heart” of the NCC is that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God, and The Christ. This in turn, leads to the development of the Trinity, in the sense that we learn of the Trinity through the salvific work of God. This is known as the “Economic Trinity” in that the “Economy” or “Plan” of Salvation reveals the Trinity to us.

A profession of Faith is always a personal, subjective, and communal commitment. The content of our Faith Statements cannot be verified by facts observable by all persons. Faith deals with realities that cannot be measured, and Faith is itself a specific lens by which a person looks at (and knows) reality.

“Faith does not know a different world from the one measured and calculated by science, but it knows this world differently.”

Creeds cannot be accepted uncritically, unthinkingly, or literally.

The experience by believers of Jesus as **The Resurrected One** is the fundamental difference between Judaism and Islam (on the one hand) and Christianity on the other.

A NCC becomes an *authentic* profession of Faith when one finds that the truth of one’s own experience corresponds to the words of the NCC as understood by each of us. We each declare that the NCC is true *for each of us* — *not* that it represents a universal truth.

The “test” of a Creed for a person or a community is to ask: What kind of life does it aid and support?

Professing a Creed does *not* equal a statement of the *entirety* of one’s Faith, anymore than reciting the rules of baseball captures the excitement of the game.

Being a Christian is not simply a matter of having certain attitudes and dispositions. It is a matter of living according to a specific view of the world and maintaining allegiance to the essential practices of a community that seeks to live according to the essentials of the community’s vision of reality.

The words of a Creed must be taken with “a grain of salt.” All religious language claims more than it can demonstrate, define, or even fully understand. Moreover, the language of the NCC is compressed, even cryptic.

Whenever we speak of God (including in Creeds), we use language that only partially expresses a perceived truth about God. We also need to recognize that all our statements about God are (by definition) inaccurate. Just because we have words about mysteries doesn't mean we have captured the full reality of those mysteries.

Even though Creeds express propositions that we cannot fully explain or define, the denial of these "critical theological concepts" can lead to the distortion or loss of other truths. For example, the Creed asserts that God is our "Maker," but does not define **how** God is our "Maker." If we deny that God is our "Maker" (however understood), however, it changes our relationship to the world, and the consequences of this denial would change our understandings of ourselves, our relationships with others and with the world, and with God/the Sacred.

One question we will ask as we "unpack" the Creed is: "What would be the effect of denying or removing this statement?"

# **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPLE CREED**

## **Part 1 – We believe in**

Why is it “We” and not “I” as in the Apostles’ Creed?

What does it mean to “believe in” something?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Faith is different from “belief.” Faith in God is an existential response of the whole person characterized by trust, obedience, and loyalty. When a person has Faith, it changes the way the person lives and thinks about other realities.

Belief is a cognitive element of Faith and is both a condition for Faith and integral to Faith. There are two kinds of belief: belief *in* something or someone (this is more like “trust”), and belief *that* some fact or idea or proposition is true.

To “believe in” is to place deep trust in someone or something and includes a change in one’s behaviors and outlooks on the basis of that trust.

Each of us “believes” slightly differently, and none of us individually believes as fully as the community.

## **Part 2 – one God**

What do we mean by “God”?

What are the implications of saying there is only “one” God?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

If you really believe in God, it means you are prepared to stake your life and the way you live on that Faith Statement.

The language of the Creed and of the Scriptures is not sufficient to “define” God. Both the Creeds and Scripture rely on metaphors. Metaphors necessarily and simultaneously present positive (ketaphatic) statements and negative (apophatic) statements.

The Hebrew Scriptures recognize the mysterious quality of God when God is reported to say to Moses “I am becoming what I am becoming.” (Ex. 3.14)

## **Part 3 – the Father**

Is this a good metaphor for God? Would “Mother” be as good?

Apart from the patriarchal situation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, why was “Father” chosen?

What is the word “Father” seeking to convey about God?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Patriarchy existed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, as it had previously, in part because the father’s seed was (based on an incorrect understanding of biology) seen as contributing *all* the “life force” to new life. Mothers were “mere receptacles” for gestation and there was no appreciation of the mother’s contribution of the egg to the process. A mother’s womb was like “Mother Earth” and received the seed that had all the elements of the new life (plant).

The father was the “natural” head of the family and tribe. The father’s role was to create and nurture his people.

The downside of patriarchy is that it elevates men above women. If God is “male,” then males are gods. This diminution of women (sexism) is most powerfully revealed in the denial (by some Christians) that the Incarnation of God could have been a female. They claim the Incarnation necessarily had to be a male.

“Father” in the Creed is a metaphor. Even though God may be “Father” in some sense (as creator), God is not a “father” in any sense in which any of us have known human fathers. This is the “is/is not” aspect of all metaphors.

### **Part 4 – the Almighty**

What do we mean by this?

How does it fit with the idea of free will? Do we have free will?

What about the “Problem of Evil”? How can God be all-good, all knowing and all powerful when bad things and tragic events occur to people?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

There are references to God’s power in Psalm 58.5 and 67.11 and to the “Lord Almighty” in 2 Cor. 6.18.

“Almighty” conveys the fact that God is the “Ruler of Everything” and there is no place or situation where God is not both present and relevant. God has the capacity to do something “fresh” in all circumstances.

Intercessory or Petitioning Prayer seems to be based on the idea that God is all-powerful and can influence future events.

An alternative understanding to prayer would see prayer as seeking to hear the voice of God that helps us understand how to see ourselves, others, the world (and even God) as *God* would have us see them.

God's freedom may be most evident in God's grant of freedom to humans.

God's knowledge, power and goodness are also metaphors in that they are not the same as our understandings of human knowledge, power, and goodness. (Ketaphatic/Apophatic)

Liberation Theology and Process Theology see God as all-good, but not necessarily as all powerful in that humans need to be active in the world to bring about the Kingdom of God. Does this compromise our sense of God's mystery and majesty?

"Open Theocracy" asserts that God is all good but raises a question about the meaning of God's being "all knowing." This notion says that God can know *everything that is*. But even though God exists in the Eternal Now, God can't "know" something that doesn't exist yet, and the future doesn't exist yet. Therefore, God doesn't "know" what we will do in the future when we are faced with choices.

## **Part 5 – maker of heaven and earth**

What does it mean to say "God" is the "maker" of heaven and earth?

Does this require a belief in "creation *ex nihilo*"?

Is there another acceptable way to understand the creative activity of God?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Creation is an ongoing process in which God is revealer, savior, sanctifier, and judge (a "judge" is one who makes all things "right").

The Old Testament saw God as Creator and as the one who shaped all events in human history, even to the point (for example) of "hardening Pharaoh's heart." Do we share that view?

For a Christian, saying "God is Creator" is a perception of the dependence on God of all reality and all that is still coming into being. Creation describes a *relationship*, not an act.

God's continuing creative activity is shown to Christians most dramatically in the Resurrection.

"In the beginning" could be understood temporally, but it may be better understood in terms of perceiving God as the "relational cause" of all that is.

Creeds and theology are not concerned with "how" questions, but much more with questions of "why" and "what impact does this have on us as humans?"

Seeing all creation as having "ontological dependence" on God is *not* an answer to "HOW" the universe came to be. Instead, it addresses the universe's *relationship* to the Creator. It leaves open creation's substantive cause (what a thing is made of) and its formal cause (what its essence is). The relationship to the Creator does have an impact on its "final" cause (what its purpose or goal is).

## **Part 6 – of all there is, seen and unseen [visible and invisible]**

Why was this included? What does it add?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

This creedal statement was made in opposition to dualism (and particularly Gnosticism) that asserted that spirit is good and matter is evil. Gnostics asserted that God created spirit, but a "lesser" God created matter.

This statement rejects the idea that matter is not good, and particularly rejects the notion that sexuality is not good.

## **Part 7 – We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ**

What does it mean to believe in a "Lord"?

What does it mean to believe in only "one" Lord?

What are the implications of calling this Lord "Jesus Christ"?

"Christ" is a title, not a name. What does it mean for us?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

"Lord" is first used by Paul to describe Jesus. For Paul, "Lord" = "*Kyrios*" which is the same word used in the LXX for "YHWH". This is a clear statement that Jesus is God and shares in the life, ruling power and life-giving functions of God. It is an assertion that Jesus is the source of the Spirit by which we now live (1 Cor. 12.3).

It is a commitment that, like Jesus, we won't see our lives as a "bargain" in which we love (or do good deeds) because of what we expect we will get back. We are affirming that we will love fully and without conditions and trust that our lives will be more profoundly joyful than we could imagine.

"Christ" is not a name. It is a title, meaning "the anointed one." In the Hebrew Scriptures, there were many anointed ones: kings, prophets, priests, and even Cyrus of Persia was seen as God's anointed instrument. (Is. 45.1)

We assert that Jesus of Nazareth was "The Christ" — the awaited Messiah, even though he did not fulfill any of the customary expectations of the Messiah that were prevailing in the First Century.

## **Part 8 – the only [begotten] Son of God**

Why is Jesus described as the "only" Son of God?

What does it mean to be the "Son of God"?

Is Jesus' sonship different from others who are "children of God"? How? Why?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Our claim as Christians is that God is fully present in the human, Jesus of Nazareth, in a manner and fullness that has not been realized in any other person.

The Scriptural "evidence" of this understanding during Jesus' life is sparse and reflects later (post-Resurrection) understandings. Paul in Rom. 1.3 refers to Jesus as "declared to be the Son of God ... by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ Our Lord."

In Acts 3.22, Luke refers to Psalm 2.7 ("You are my son") and Peter states in Matt. 16.16 "You are the Son of the Living God."

In Jesus' lifetime, other titles appear to be given to him such as rabbi, prophet, king, Son of Man. These were understandings derived from the symbolism of the Hebrew Scriptures. They do *not* show a unique ontological relationship to God.

Paul makes a distinction between Jesus' Sonship and ours in Gal. 4.4-7: "... God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ... So you are no longer a slave, but a child...."

Luke Timothy Johnson, p. 119: "...a simple (but infinitely difficult) truth: that Christ came from and returned to God in a way that no other human has or will or

could, because when he came from God, he remained what he had been and when he returned to God he returned to his own place.” Do we agree with this formulation?

## **Part 9 – eternally [before all time] begotten of the Father**

What does “eternally” really mean? How can we try to grasp it?

What does it mean to be “begotten”?

What does “of the Father” mean here?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

“Begotten” is derived from the Greek word “*gennēthenta*” meaning having its origin from within.

In John’s Gospel, we have language of God “giving” and “sending” his Son. Is this not a “How” explanation of the perception/belief that Jesus of Nazareth was/is God?

“Begetting” is not physical, and is a term used to convey the idea that the Second Person of the Trinity had eternal co-existence within the life of God, an existence that preceded the Incarnation.

That the *LOGOS* became flesh (John 1.14) adds a new dimension.

## **Part 10 – [God from God, Light from Light], true God from true God**

What does this add?

What does “true” mean here?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

According to Gen. 1.3, light is the first thing created. For people dependent only on sunlight and fire for light, the importance of light cannot be overestimated. These phrases make the identity of the Son with the Father unmistakable.

Light is a frequent metaphor in Scripture for the presence of God.

Calling Jesus “True God” is consistent with calling Jesus “*theos*” in six passages in Scripture, but most of these attributions are questionable. The one that is unmistakable is in John 20.28 when Thomas exclaims “My Lord and My God.”

In this regard, it is important to remember that the experience of the Resurrection did not follow from the ministry of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels. Instead, the stories in the Gospels followed from a reflection on Jesus' life and ministry as seen through the lens of the Jesus Followers' perceived experience of the Resurrection.

## **Part 11 – begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father**

Why was begotten added?

Isn't it repetitive?

What does "one Being" mean? What IS God's "Being"? How do we know?

Why was the controversy that led this being added?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The language "not made" is intended to oppose Arianism which claimed that the Son was created and that there was "a time when the Son was not." If there were a time when the Son was not, the Son would be subordinate to the Father. This would (or could) move toward ditheism (two Gods).

There were numerous passages in Scripture that supported Arius' position that Christ was subordinate to the Father (Prov. 8.22, Ac. 2.36, Rom. 8.29, Col.1.15, Heb. 3.2, John 17.3 and 14.28).

The Council at Nicea saw it as critical that the Son was not simply an improved version of other human beings. It was important that the Son was *qualitatively* (i.e. essentially) different from other humans, and not just *quantitatively* different.

If the Son was not fully God, then salvation (however understood) did not come from and through God.

One of the ways of showing this difference between the Son and other humans was to emphasize that the Son was "begotten" and not created.

## **Part 12 – Through him all things were made**

What does it mean if the Son is the one through whom all things were made?

How does this square with the phrase that the Father is the "maker" of heaven and earth?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

In Greek philosophy, the *LOGOS* is the ordering principle, that which makes everything different from everything else that is. The *LOGOS* is also the ultimate source of order in the created world.

These phrases in John are intended to convey the understanding of the Johannine Community that the Incarnation was not an afterthought — that it was always part of the over-all plan of Creation.

## **Part 13 – For us [men] and for our salvation**

What is “salvation”? How do we understand what it means to be “saved”?

Is it a future event or something that happens in this life? Or both?

Is “for us” different from “for our salvation”? If not, why are both phrases used?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Although the word is translated “men” in many versions of the Creed, the Greek word is “*anthropos*” meaning “human” and not just males.

The statement in the Creed that God sent the Son to this tiny planet for our salvation is an extraordinary claim.

In God’s acts, we see God’s selfless love (*agape*) and gain an understanding that the mystery of God is love.

When we look at Jesus and his life, death and resurrection, we do *not* learn what we are as humans. We learn what God is and how God acts.

Or do we learn what it would mean to be “fully human?”

Salvation — a possible definition: the present-time communal sharing of God’s life of love to the fullest extent we can.

An alternative understanding — “Salvation” is living as fully human a life as we can.

The signs of Salvation are freedom, the boldness to confront opposition without fear, and peace. Salvation is not a future event. It includes the removal of all that prevents full reconciliation here and now.

Salvation is not merely a matter of correcting mistaken ideas or fixing social structures. It is not simply a human matter.

Christian doctrine says that because God became incarnate, we can fully share in the life of God. (Gal. 4.4: we become “adopted sons [children] of God.”)

Do you agree that salvation (sharing in the life of God) had to be accomplished that way?

## **Part 14 – he came down from heaven**

What does this mean?

Where or what is heaven? Is it a place? Is it a state of being?

How do we know that Jesus came down “from heaven”?

What are the implications of this phrase for us?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Jesus “broke the boundary” between the “conditions” we call “heaven” and earth. Jesus is of “divine origin” (heaven). He was truly human when he was on earth. Is the Second Person of the Trinity still (today) fully divine and fully human?

Phil. 2.7 speaks of *kenosis* — emptying out oneself and taking the form of a slave.

## **Part 15 – by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man**

Who/what is the Holy Spirit? What is the basis for the existence of the Holy Spirit?

How does the Holy Spirit exercise power? How do we become aware that the Holy Spirit is exercising power?

What does it mean to be “incarnate”? Why was this word chosen? Why not just say he had a body?

What are the implications for us that God became incarnate?

Does this phrase require us to believe that Mary was a biological virgin at the time of Jesus’ conception and birth?

Does it mean we have to believe in the “perpetual biological virginity” of Mary?

How else might the phrase “Virgin Mary” be understood?

What are the implications that Jesus of Nazareth was “made” and not “begotten”?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The literal translation of the Greek is: “and being made flesh out of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin and becoming human.”

The word for “human” is (once again) *anthropos*, so the Incarnation is not God becoming a “male” as such, but God’s becoming a human being. The particular gender of Jesus was male, but it could (in theory) have been female.

The literal Greek does not speak of the “power” of the Holy Spirit and does not use the term “born” — though that is how human beings come to be alive.

It is important that the Holy Spirit and Mary are shown as being equally involved in the “being made flesh.”

Mary’s Hebrew name was Miriam, the name of the sister of Moses and the prophetess who also spoke for God.

In Gal. 4.4, Paul simply says that Jesus was “born of a woman” without attributing virginity to her.

By the time of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew (85 CE), the Virgin Birth motif was part of the understandings of the Jesus Followers. There can be little doubt that those present at Nicea also accepted the biological virginity of Mary.

Does this require us to accept the virginity of Mary if we accept the Creed?

One suggestion is that this is a “HOW” question and it is neither possible nor important to know the biology of Jesus’ conception and birth. Sex (as between Joseph and Mary) could also be “holy” and the conception and birth can still be understood as “out of the Holy Spirit.” If one believes Mary was a biological virgin, that is ok, but it’s also ok to believe she conceived in the “normal” way and the Holy Spirit was present and involved in the conception.

The “biological virgin theory” asserts that God had power to place a sperm in Mary’s womb. The “non-biological virgin theory” asserts that the all-powerful God, at the moment of Jesus’ conception, caused this fertilized egg to be Jesus of Nazareth, who was later understood to be the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. It is not for humans to decide the manner in which God can and cannot work.

There is scriptural authority for saying Jesus had brothers and sisters, and some scholars even assert that Thomas was Jesus' twin brother. (That would *really* wreak havoc with the "biological virgin" notion.)

The presence and power of the Holy Spirit are the effective presence and power of God among human beings.

The Incarnation shows the vulnerability (!) of God. This does not mean that God can be *essentially* impaired (that is, God will still be God), but it does mean that we can reject God's love for us by us.

Jesus is the gift from God and also the reception of the gift from God by humans. He is the "Yes" of God to humans and the "Yes" of humans to God (2 Cor.1.20). He reflects the glory of God as God's image and he reflects God's glory to humans so we can be transformed and share in God's life (salvation) (Col. 1.15).

## **Part 16 – For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate**

What does "for our sake" mean here? Is it different from "for us and our salvation" in Phrase 13?

Why was "under Pontius Pilate" put in? What does this add?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Only three humans are mentioned in the Creed: Jesus, Mary, and Pilate.

Mary accepts the claims of God on us and gives birth to the embodiment of God's presence. Pilate stands for the values of the World and rejects the claims of God and kills God's messenger.

Mary is young, female, poor, Jewish, and pregnant out of wedlock. Pilate is mature, male, wealthy, Roman, part of the power elite, and married.

Seeing the Incarnation as a whole, the birth, death and Resurrection are all "for our sake" and "for our salvation."

Ancient biographies looked to the manner of death as a showing the quality of one's life. Crucifixion was an ignominious death, but the Gospels emphasize that Jesus was "righteous" and in right relation with God. Paradoxically, then, a blessing for all humankind comes from the one who was "cursed" because he was hung on a tree (Gal. 3.13 relying on Dt. 21.23).

One way to think of the "reconciliation" which Jesus is understood to have effected is to reject the "expiation" model by which humans are reconciled

*upwards* to satisfy a demanding God to “atone” for our sins. Instead, one can think of reconciliation with God as an act *by God towards humans* in which the Godself suffers death in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This act enables us to realize how close God is to us. It did not bring us closer to God — we were always in an intimate relationship with God. We just didn’t fully realize it. No longer can humans think of God as being apart from humans — God has suffered everything that humans can suffer, including death. This gift from God enables us to know that we can share in the life of God.

Christ “died for our sins” in the sense that humans seem to be inherently uncomfortable in the face of true goodness. The persons of the First Century who were in power certainly felt this discomfort. “Sin” is our own self-destructiveness.

Understandings of “Reconciliation” and “Redemption” (like all theological understandings) are “myths” and are not capable of being “tested” in the scientific sense. Nevertheless, different understandings of myths and theological truths can profoundly influence our orientation towards the Sacred, towards ourselves and towards others.

## **Part 17 – he suffered death**

The original Greek merely says “he suffered and was buried” without mentioning death.

What does this phrase add? Why is it included in most translations?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Jesus’ death means he fully accepted the human condition in *all* its finitude.

Jesus did *not* will his own death. He was violently seized by the authorities and put to death.

Jesus’ suffering also opens the possibility that suffering (which we tend to consider a “bad” thing) can be a circumstance for growth. That is, Jesus’ suffering shows that suffering is not *intrinsically* bad. Healthy people are not masochists, and do not seek out suffering and pain, for this is a distortion of the Good News. Suffering is the pain caused by change, and one’s attitude towards suffering can be influenced by one’s belief in the mystery of God’s goodness.

Jesus’ suffering is a powerful statement of God’s voluntary solidarity with humans. The Crucifixion says, “This is what the price of unrestricted love looks like in the world.”

## **Part 18 – and was buried**

What is the importance that Jesus was buried?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The burial was a further statement that Jesus was really dead and that he remained in the tomb for a time.

### **Part 19 – On the third day, he rose again**

Is it important that it was on the “third day”? What is the source of this term?

Why is “again” added?

Note that this is active voice — he rose, not he was raised. What are the implications of this?

How do we understand the Resurrection? Did Jesus have a physical body after the Resurrection? Was it the same body he had before he died? Paul speaks of a “spiritual body.” Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?

Does it matter how we understand the Resurrection? Why?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

There are scriptural variations regarding the Resurrection. Not only do the four Gospel accounts vary with each other in their details, sometimes the Resurrection occurs “on” the third day, and sometimes “after” the third day.

Some scriptures say: “He rose” and others say, “He was raised.” The references are about equally divided.

“Three days” was an idiomatic expression (like “I’ll be there in a minute”) that meant “a short time.” The Gospel accounts agree that the Crucifixion was on the day before the Sabbath and that the women went to the tomb on the first day of the week.

Paul is very emphatic in 1 Cor. 15 that the Resurrected Jesus appeared to him in the same way as to the other disciples. Paul speaks of the Resurrection as “destroying death” (15.26) and as an ongoing event (15.3) in which Jesus shares in the life and power of God.

Resurrection may be thought of as a new form of existence of the life-giving spirit, so that Jesus is the “New Adam,” the “firstborn of the new humanity.” (Rom. 8.29)

The Resurrection is *more than* the vindication of a human being unjustly killed. Paul sees it as the *return* by Jesus to his position as Son of God (Phil. 2.6-11).

Unless one believes in the Resurrection, Jesus is only a moral exemplar.

Rowan Williams: “The Resurrection shows the sheer toughness and persistence of God’s love. When we have done our worst, God remains God.”

He continues: “Just as people met unconditional love in the person of Jesus before the Crucifixion, they still do after the Resurrection.”

“The Resurrection displays God’s triumphant love as still and forever being the shape of Jesus who continues to make God present to us...Jesus is a living person.”

“The Resurrection is the Second Big Bang... and shows that creation continues.”

## **Part 20 – in accordance with the Scriptures**

Which Scriptures? The Hebrew Scriptures? The Gospels?

Does “in accordance with” mean “in conformity with” or does it mean “as predicted by” or does it mean “according to” as in “as described in” the Gospels?

Does it matter how we understand this phrase? What are the implications of the different ways of interpreting it?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

By any of the multiple expectations of Messiah that were current in Judaism in the First Century, Jesus of Nazareth was a failure.

A good case can (and has) been made that the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures that are customarily used to show that Jesus “fulfilled” the expectations regarding the Messiah are “after the fact” usages. That is, in trying to describe who and what the Resurrected Jesus was/is, the authors of the Christian Scriptures drew on images and symbols from Hebrew Scriptures to try to convey their own beliefs and interpretations about Jesus. They drew on Isaiah 53 (Suffering Servant), Psalm 22 for the Crucifixion, and references to the Day of the Lord in Amos, Zechariah and others.

The bishops at Nicea would have accepted the notion that Jesus “fulfilled” the “prophesies” of the Old Testament. Is it necessary for us to do so?

## **Part 21 – he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father**

What does it mean to “ascend”? Does it imply a physical place?

What does it mean to be seated at someone's right hand?

What is this telling us about the relationship between the Father and the Son?

Is the terminology to be understood metaphorically or literally?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The phrase "seated at the right hand of the Lord" is derived from Ps. 110.1 and was used in Matt. 22.44, Ac. 2.25, and other places. It is the place of power.

The Ascension is described only in the Gospel of Luke and in Acts (which was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke), but the accounts are different. This should keep us from literalizing the story.

Elijah also ascended to heaven (2 Kings 2.10). The ascent of Elijah was needed to complete the empowerment of Elisha. In Acts, the Ascension is a prelude to the sending of the Holy Spirit that empowers the disciples.

"Ascended into heaven" can be understood **not** as being absent from the world, but as being present with the Father. For the Resurrected Jesus to be fully present at the right hand of the Father, he must fully transcend the earthly life.

Rowan Williams: The Resurrection and the Ascension show God is trustworthy.

## **Part 22 – He will come again in glory**

What does it mean to "come again"? What does "glory" mean here?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The idea of the Second Coming grows out of the fact that the expectations about the Messiah that existed in the First Century did not occur. Because of the cognitive dissonance between the belief that Jesus was the Messiah and the fact that these messianic expectations were not fulfilled, the Jesus Followers developed the belief that there would be a Second Coming when the "world would be put right." The coming again reflects the tension of "now, but not yet."

How is the notion of the "Second Coming" different from (but analogous to) the Jewish understandings of the Coming of the Messiah?

"Glory" comes from the Greek "*doxa*" or the Hebrew "*kabod*" and implies "weight" or "presence." Glory is not a matter of reputation or opinion. It is an acknowledgement of God's presence and power and claim upon humans.

## Part 23 – to judge the living and the dead

What does it mean to “judge” in this context?

Who are the “living” and the “dead”? Is it to be understood literally?

Is this the “Final Judgment”?

### Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion

God’s power as judge follows from God’s creative energy. God has a passionate involvement on the side of good as shown in the Resurrection.

We need to distinguish between the belief in the **fact** of God’s judging and the **how** the judging will take place. “Judging” and “Justification” have the same roots, and “judging” may well mean putting all things right (as when a page of type is “justified”) rather than some kind of “punishment” for people who have done “bad deeds.” We have no way to know how God will be a “judge” — which is another metaphor. God is not like the human judges we know.

Many of the “Judges” in the Book of Judges were persons who “put things right” rather than persons who punished some and rewarded others.

God sees into the hearts of all, and God’s “judgment” is a mystery we can never fully understand.

There are numerous scenarios in the Scriptures about “End Times” and there is no clear link that the “End Times” are the time of “Judgment.” Some visions of the end times are apocalyptic which means God is expected to intervene in human history to “make things right.” The Gospels tell us to be ready at all times. We have no basis for understanding when (or what) the “End Times” will be.

The Book of Revelation is only one of 66 books in Scripture and has no more power or importance regarding the Second Coming than Paul or the Gospels. Revelation is a book that gives witness to a conviction and a hope, and the Book of Revelation very nearly didn’t make it into the Canon of Christian Scriptures.

We have no *direct* information about heaven or hell, and although we believe the Resurrected Jesus will restore right relations to the world, we have no way to know **how** God will do this.

## Part 24 – and his kingdom will have no end

What do we mean by “his kingdom”?

What does it mean that it will “have no end”?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The use of “his” to refer to Jesus was done to emphasize further (against Arius) the equality of the Son with the Father.

Paul and the Gospels often use the phrase “Kingdom of God” and it can be understood as the (not yet fully present) rule of the exalted Lord. Matthew (reflecting his Jewish audience) uses “Kingdom of Heaven.”

Unlike the term “Lord,” the title “King” is given to Jesus only in the Gospels of John and Matthew and the Book of Revelation.

“Having no end” sounds like a life in the ever-present “now” (eternity)

## **Part 25 – We believe in the Holy Spirit**

What do we mean by the Holy Spirit?

How does the Holy Spirit affect us?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The Holy Spirit is not only a “power” but is also a “person” (which is another metaphor) with whom we have a relationship that changes and evolves. The Holy Spirit helps us to see the inner richness of God.

God reveals the Godself gradually over time. This revelation comes through our experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is God’s symbol for reaching humans.

Grace is always the gift of the Holy Spirit. The “power” of the Spirit is the power of knowing and loving. The Holy Spirit is the ever-active agent of change.

The Spirit is “Holy” because the Spirit’s source is God.

## **Part 26 – the Lord, the giver of life**

How can the Holy Spirit be “Lord” if the Son is Lord? Are they both “Lord” and this a statement of their equality and identity (that is, they share the same “nature” or “substance” or “Being”)?

How can the Holy Spirit be the “giver of life” if the Father is the “maker” and the Son is the one through whom all things were made?

How is “life” understood here?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

“Life” here is the sharing of God’s life of love through the Resurrection of Jesus.

God who creates life is the “giver of life.” (2 Cor. 3.16-18)

John refers to the Holy Spirit as the “Paraclete” which means advocate or comforter.

### **Part 27 – who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]**

How is “proceeds from” different from being “begotten”?

What does “proceeds from” mean?

Why was “and the Son” included in the West and what difficulties does it cause?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Holy Spirit is not "begotten" like Son; otherwise you would have two "sons."

“Proceeds” is linguistically related to the idea of “coming out” of the mouth or “going forth” as the “Word” comes from the Father.

Both the Son and the Holy Spirit are not “made” by God, but are “out of God” and are therefore divine.

The original formulation in the NCC was: "The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son."

The words were changed so that “and the Son” (“*filioque*” in Latin) was added in the West at Third Council of Toledo (589) to counter Arianism (the idea that the Son is not equal to Father) by saying that Holy Spirit proceeds from **both** the Father and the Son.

Since the 11th Century, the use of “and the Son” in the West has been a principal reason for the division between the East and West Churches, although the real “issue” is one of power.

The theological issue is the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Son in terms of the work of salvation. In other words, if the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, what is the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Son regarding salvation?

The Church in the East emphasizes the fact that ultimate ground of being is the

Father from whom both the Son and the Holy Spirit proceed.

Part of the problem was the high-handed adoption of the *Filioque* by the Pope in 1014. The “*Filioque*” was not adopted by an ecumenical council.

In many ways, the “*Filioque*” goes too far for a Creed, because it is proposing an answer to a “**how**” question. Creeds overstep their proper roles when they try to answer questions about the “mechanics” used by God.

The 1978 Lambeth Conference recommended deletion of “and the Son” from the NCC.

## **Part 28 – With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified**

What does it mean to be “worshiped”? To be “glorified”?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The Holy Spirit receives the same homage as the Father and the Son.

To “worship” means to give service to. “Glory” is discussed above.

To give “glory” to the Holy Spirit is to acknowledge that in the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ *and in us* we see the work of God.

The grace that comes to believers is the gift of the Holy Spirit and is a share in the divine life and a participation in God’s glory.

The “Power of the Holy Spirit” is a way to express the presence of Jesus’ personal transcendent transforming power among believers.

## **Part 29 – He has spoken through the Prophets**

What does it mean that the Holy Spirit is a “he”? This seems inconsistent with the Book of Wisdom where Holy Wisdom is a “she” (Sophia) and is present at Creation. (Wis. 7.22ff)

What does it mean to “speak through the Prophets”? What is the source of this?

### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

Prophets are persons who have experiences of the Sacred and express those experiences as speakers on behalf of God. Hearing others’ expressions of God is one of the ways in which we become aware of God.

Prophets see deeper meanings in reality and when they speak, somehow God is speaking through them. This is the work of the Spirit.

The writings of Scripture are open to new significance and meaning as God the Holy Spirit continues to act in the world. God is an ever-creating God.

Christians came to understand who and what Jesus was/is by considering the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures. By the work of the Holy Spirit, we are able to come to our understandings about God through (among other means) the Scriptures.

We also perceive the presence of God/the Sacred in creation.

Prophecy challenges all persons (believers and non-believers) to recognize the presence of the Living God in the community of faith.

The Church's mission is to be faithful and prophetic witness to the world of the reality of God's claim upon the world. Prophets can speak at any time, even "on the subway walls." [with gratitude to Simon and Garfunkle]

The Creed itself is an instrument of prophecy in that it calls us to grow into the mind of Christ, to adopt Jesus' attitudes and dispositions and his pattern of radical obedience to God and radical self-giving to others.

### **Part 30 – We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church**

Is this descriptive or aspirational?

What does it mean to "believe in" this?

#### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

The Creed is normative and aspirational, not descriptive.

The "Church" is God's *collective* instrument for transforming the world — even with all its faults and flaws, just as we are each an instrument for transforming the world with our own faults and flaws.

It is good to think of the Church as a spiritual reality of communion in which the Spirit leads us into the heart of Jesus' prayerful relationship with the Father. The Church is best thought of as something *other than* an "institution."

The Church is the continuation of the Incarnation, the embodied presence of the Resurrected Christ in believers through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God's laboratory for communal life in God in which all should work to release the gifts of *others* in the service of the Lord.

Salvation — living in the life of God — living a life as a “full human being”—is not an individual experience. It requires reciprocal and life-giving *relationships* as an expression of God’s reciprocal and relational life as revealed to us in the Trinity. We are not “saved” individually. We are “among the people God is saving.”

Paul tells us that the life of the Spirit, the life of salvation, is not simply a life in which rules are kept, but one in which we act to enable each other to live fully.

For the Gnostics, salvation was an individual matter and was a matter of “knowledge.”

“**One**” is an ideal for all people who truly call on God as “Lord.” There is one invitation to all of us, and in its oneness, the persons who are the Church have an enormous diversity of relationships with God. Unity does not equal uniformity.

“**Holy**” means “otherness.” It does not describe behavior, but the character of the community that is to be *IN* the world, but not *OF* the world. Holiness is the transformation of human beings by the Spirit of God. The Church (as holy) is related to Christ and is called to be a witness to the presence and power of the Risen Lord in the world.

Unfortunately, because some persons define their brand of “holiness” as the “only” holiness, this has led to disunity in the Church. Holiness includes living in unity — a unity that encompasses diverse understandings of holiness.

“**Catholic**” means “throughout the whole.” The Church is universal in extent and inclusiveness particularly to outcasts. It means we must overcome speaking with only one cultural language. It means providing an alternative way of life from the way of life encouraged by “the world.”

“**Apostolic**” means *both* recognizing (a) the connection of the Church to the Apostles (which tends to be conservative), and (b) that the Apostles were radically prophetic speakers on behalf of God who suggested a different mode of understanding one’s relationship with God. In this latter sense, “Apostolic” means being always open to renewal and having the sense that we are “sent” (the root of the word “Apostle”). Power and prestige have no place in an “Apostolic” church.

The most severe threat to the Church is its ability to sustain life together with integrity. This requires the Church to (a) live within tension rather than trying to avoid it; (b) cultivate discernment as a gift of the Spirit; and (c) seek to make the “marks of the Church” work together rather than against each other.

The Church is like a couple that in spite of each other's failings, knows they are sharing a life together that is greater than the life they could have imagined or achieved on their own. The Church is like a marriage that "works."

### **Part 31 – We acknowledge [confess] one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.**

Why the change from "believe" to "acknowledge" [or "confess"]

If there is only "one baptism," what happens to those who don't get baptized?

Are the baptisms in different Christian sects "different baptisms" or are they all part of "one baptism"?

The stated purpose of baptism in the NCC is the forgiveness of sins (plural). Is this the *sole* purpose of baptism? If not, have the additional purposes been "add-ons" since the 4<sup>th</sup> Century?

Are the "sins" only individual "sins" or does the "forgiveness" through Baptism also apply to "collective" or "structural" sins such as racism or patriarchalism?

#### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

It is an "acknowledgement or confession" rather than a "belief" because we have already accepted our own Baptism. Baptism itself is not a self-realization. It is a rite of public initiation in which we are publicly bathed. In doing so, we acknowledge our dependence on others — on the Community of Faith.

The symbolism of Baptism goes back to purification rites and initiation rites.

When adults are baptized at an Easter Vigil Service (as in the early Church), they also share in Jesus' passing over from death to life.

Baptism is a one-time event and one need not be "born again."

In the life of the Church, one moves from slavery to freedom, from fear to boldness, from death to life, from dark to light, and from selfishness to the generous love in the pattern of Jesus Christ as guided by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is "full membership." Clergy have no higher status than the baptized.

In terms of forgiveness of sins, the Creed does not offer a "theory of salvation." Forgiveness is not only the cancellation of the past debt, but also the lifting of the weight of a sinful attitude or disposition that weighs us downward. It is the restoration of relationships.

Since we are all sinners, we need to embody the practice of forgiveness as God forgives. God forgives *us* (“forgive *us* our trespasses”) and not our sins. Similarly, we need to forgive others (“as we forgive *those* who trespass against us”). We need to see in others that they are “more” than their sins and that they are not *defined by* their sins.

### **Part 32 – We look for [forward to or expect] the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.**

Why “look for” instead of “believe in”?

Is the resurrection we “look for” the same as the “way” Jesus rose from the dead — whatever that was? If not, how are they different? How do we know?

What is meant by “the dead” here? What kind of “life” do we look for?

What is the “world to come”? When is this going to happen? Do we know?

#### **Some thoughts and suggestions for consideration and discussion**

This proposition states a hope and a conviction. It is noteworthy that the statement is not a belief in either “eternal life” or “immortality.”

The conviction we hold as Christians is a hope that because God is not limited by space and time and can do that which human beings cannot do, we will (somehow) share in God’s eternal life.

If one literalizes the Book of Revelation, one is left with death, judgment, heaven and hell. Unfortunately, for many Christians, this also involves a return to the Deuteronomic ethic that “eternal life” (a metaphor for “salvation”) is only for those who obey the Law. This construct “fits” very well with the Platonic notion of the “immortality of the soul.”

This literal construction reduces the Mystery of Resurrection (which only God understands) to a mere formula. We have no way to know what resurrection will be for us. We don’t know how in God’s loving mystery, God will “make all things right.”

LTJ: “We do not hope simply for some kind of survival after death as the logical consequence of having an “immortal soul,” or (even sadder) the perpetual repetition of mortal life through reincarnation. Survival is not salvation. Persistence in mortality is not glorification.”

Rowan Williams: “People are rather shocked if you say that Christianity does not believe in the immortality of the soul; but in fact, while the Bible and the tradition talk about “immortal” life, they don’t assume that this deathless existence is

something reserved for a part of us only, as if there were a bit of us that didn't have a future and a bit that did, the solid lumpy bit and the hazy spiritual bit. We have a future with God as *persons*, no less." (Italics in original)

### **Part 33 – Amen.**

We reaffirm what we have said because we need to be humble enough to know that — even though we are staking our lives on it — we might be wrong. It is this trust that sets us right with God, not achievement, performance, or success.