

An Ancient Creed for the Present and the Future

With this issue of Outlook the Wesleyan Covenant Association begins a 12 part series on the Nicene Creed. Dr. Bill Arnold, Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary and WCA Council member, introduces the series by reflecting on the creed's role in the history of the church in general and the Methodist movement in particular, and why the WCA has adopted it as a doctrinal standard.

by Dr. Bill Arnold

Since its inception in October 2016, the Wesleyan Covenant Association has acknowledged Methodism's deep roots in the soil of orthodox Christianity. We aim to profess and proclaim nothing other than the ancient Christian faith "that was once for all entrusted to the saints" of the earliest Church (Jude 3; NRSV), which Wesley called "the primitive Church."

As an association of lay and clergy United Methodists from around the globe, we affirm the four Doctrinal Standards of the UMC: (1) the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church, (2) the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, (3) the Standard Sermons of Wesley, and (4) Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament.[1] All of these standards affirm or assume the historic teaching expressed in the Nicene Creed.[2] Thus, the WCA has adopted the Nicene Creed as a Doctrinal Standard upon which these others are based. In launching this twelve-part series, our goal is to clarify the specifics of what we believe, and to serve a teaching role related to our orthodox heritage.

The denomination we love and serve, The United Methodist Church, is occasionally described as a *via media* expression of Christian faith, a middle way between two extremes. This is sometimes referred to as the Methodist Middle or Methodist Centrism. We agree with this characterization of our history, but only in a particular sense. Too often this middle way centrism is misused, leading to widespread misunderstanding. Here is what we mean by Methodism's middle way in world Christianity.

John Wesley's predecessors in the faith, the English Reformers of the 1500s, were like other Protestant Reformers who rejected the Roman Catholicism of their day. On the other hand, they were also not at home in the Calvinism and Lutheranism that was emerging at that time. They therefore became instruments of God in creating a middle course – something entirely different, affirming the best of Catholicism and the best of Protestantism in a new expression of orthodoxy. We believe Wesley's predecessors two centuries before him, men like Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker, Nicholas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer, were instruments of God's grace in creating what eventually emerged as the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Two centuries later, the leaders of the Wesleyan revival of the 1700s were heirs of this Anglican middle way. John Wesley himself has rightly been credited with bringing together East and West, combined with the Pietism of his day, into a third way between Pelagian optimism and Augustinian pessimism. Wesley was a conjunctive theologian. He left us a treasure of theological reflections, in which he developed his "practical divinity" balancing holiness and grace in a way that we believe captures the heart of biblical faith. Standing today in this Wesleyanism, birthed in the anglo-catholic tradition of the middle way, we believe the United Methodist Church's Doctrinal Standards beautifully articulate "the living core of the Christian faith" as revealed in Scripture (*2016 Book of Discipline*, page 82, paragraph 105). While we embrace our tradition as finding a middle way, we also affirm that our Doctrinal Standards nevertheless anchor us in traditional, orthodox Christianity. Finding the Methodist sweet spot is not then simply finding a middle compromise between any two conflicting opinions. The true *via media* is not a polite decision to overlook each other's disagreements on core ethical and social convictions.

Some have incorrectly said that The United Methodist Church "is not a creedal church."^[3] In response, we ask, what exactly a non-creedal church would be? What kind of *ecclesia* has no creed? Such a statement is self-contradictory and untenable. Moreover, the Wesley brothers were themselves Anglican clergymen, who certainly presupposed the authority of the Nicene Creed. More importantly, the faith of the ancient Israelites was creedal (Exodus 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 6:4; 26:5-10; Jonah 1:9), and that of the first apostles was also creedal (Philippians 2:6-11; Ephesians 4:4-6). We believe the Nicene Creed and the UMC Doctrinal Standards are more than mere historical relics of our past. They constitute the living core

of our faith, rooted firmly, we believe, in the revelation contained in the Old and New Testaments.

It seems only natural, therefore, for the early Church to express the core of biblical revelation in such creedal expressions. We believe this faith is revealed in Scripture, properly interpreted and taught by the early Church, and rightly summarized in the ancient ecumenical creeds. These early summary statements of Christian faith are “ecumenical” (or “whole”) and “catholic” (or “universal”) because they express the beliefs of the greatest number of Christians, in the most places, throughout the most time of Church history. This core of our faith was reasserted by the Reformers and affirmed by the Anglican Church, through which and in which John and Charles Wesley launched the revival movement we know as Methodism. We believe the best and most faithful expressions of our Wesleyan tradition for over 200 years have been firmly grounded in the Nicene Creed (see [here](#), [here](#), and *UM Hymnal*, page 880).

The United Methodist Church finds itself at a crossroads. We in the WCA believe now is the time to reclaim and restore the ancient Nicene Creed in a new expression of classical Wesleyanism. As a bridge to our ecumenical partners in orthodox Christianity around the world, we embrace the Nicene Creed as the foundation of our Doctrinal Standards. We believe this is the Methodist sweet-spot, the true theological centrism that reconnects our movement to our roots in the anglo-catholic stream of Christian orthodoxy found at the heart of classical Wesleyanism. This, we believe, is the taproot of our theology, the living core of ancient Christian faith, which the world so desperately needs today. The WCA affirms as central to our faith this single most important ecumenical creed in the history of the Church Universal, the Nicene Creed.

[1] *2016 Book of Discipline*, pages 65-77, paragraph 104.

[2] In particular, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, written at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) and clarified at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) essentially defines orthodox Christianity, and combats heretical and false teachings.

[3] J. Richard Peck, [here](#).

The Same God Throughout the Ages

by Rev. Dr. Jerry Kulah

At the October, 2016 inaugural gathering of the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) in Chicago, I was one of several African United Methodist leaders who addressed the gathering. We made a presentation about why we (clergy and laity) were attracted to the WCA. We noted that, we had perceived the WCA as a *“movement committed to spreading scriptural holiness across the nations as John Wesley commanded us to do; and that it [was] committed to upholding all of the traditional teachings of Scripture as we do in Africa”* [1].



We were pleased to learn that in addition to The United Methodist Church’s Doctrinal Standards, the WCA also affirmed the Nicene Creed as a core statement of the faith. This Creed, crafted by the First and Second Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea in 325AD and Constantinople in 381AD), is a full expression of Christianity’s belief in the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed was aimed at refuting Arianism in defense of the Trinitarian Theology of the Church. Since then, it has remained foundational to preserving biblical orthodoxy over the centuries.

Arianism was a heretical Christological teaching by Arius and his followers that denied the deity of Christ, claiming that *“the Son was the highest creation of God and thus essentially different from the Father”* [2]. The Nicene Creed corrected this error by affirming that *“Christ is of one substance with the Father, begotten, not created and that the Holy Spirit is together worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son”* [3].

This Creed became so vital in preserving biblical orthodoxy that it became the primary guide for authenticating the canonicity of books of the New Testament – that is determining what books would be included in the New

Testament. As Church historian, Ken Collins points out, “*at the time that the Church issued the official canon of the New Testament, it customarily compared writings to the Nicene Creed to determine if they were orthodox*” [4]. It is therefore indispensable to our understanding, interpretation and practice of New Testament Christianity.

My attempt here is to share a few thoughts on the creed’s initial statement of faith, expressing the church’s scriptural understanding and belief about God: “*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*” My purpose is to contribute to some of the specifics of what we believe about this one God of Creation of the heavens and the earth, who still rules in human affairs. In spite of the cultural diversities and pluralistic societies within which the church exists, we must heed this same God in our quest to discover the true meaning of life.

This section of the Creed makes a collective, universal declaration of the Christian church’s belief about the nature and functional role of God in all creation. It reveals that the God of the Holy Bible is one Supreme Being who is responsible for everything that exists; visible and invisible. He is the same God that has existed throughout all ages. This God who possesses matchless power (Deut. 4:15; Isa. 40:10; 1 Tim. 6:13a, 15-16), is everywhere present (Psalm 139:7-10); is all knowing (Genesis 15:13-15; Exodus 3:7-9), and has a unique relationship to humanity as their Father.

The oneness of God reminds believers that he is immutable (Psalm 33:11; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17), unchanging, and unchangeable. What he declared in the past for humanity’s good remains true today. His nature never changes throughout all eternity (Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 41:4b; Hebrews 1:11-12). He is the same loving and caring God who lavished his mercy and love upon humanity, expressed in the giving of his one and only Son for our redemption (Romans 5:8). No other deity in human experience claims these unique attributes. The African Christian’s perception of this God is that he is the owner and controller of the whole world, including mankind. “*It is he who made us (male and female), and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture*” [Psalm 103.3b]. He alone deserves our worship and total obedience.

Without adequate knowledge of this God, as contained in Scripture, the church risks being ruined by the waves of contemporary cultural

Christianity with all of its attractions and appeal for adaptation, as, seemingly, is the case with contemporary United Methodism. Prevailing realities confirm that many no longer ascribe to the entire Holy Bible as the authentic word of God. We cannot ascribe to differing cardinal doctrines and claim to be one church, or attempt to fulfill our common mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The way forward is to return in humble submission to this One God, and acknowledge this Lord reigns over our lives and his church.

[1] “Statement of Introduction.” African Delegation To The WCA, delivered by Dr. Edwin Momoh, Conference Secretary, Sierra Leone Annual Conference.

[2] J. I. Packer, Ed. *New Dictionary of Theology*, P.179. Intervarsity Press, Leicester, England.

[3] Ted A. Campbell. *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*. P.42, Nashville: Abingdon Press.

[4] Rev. Kenneth Collins. www.kencollins.com/bible/bible-c1.htm. 2018.

Rev. Dr. Kulah is the Dean of Gbarnga School Theology at United Methodist University in Gbarnga City, Bong County, Liberia. He is also the General Coordinator of the UMC Africa Initiative and a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association Council.

The God of Self-Giving Love

by David F. Watson

“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.”



The early Christians made a remarkable claim: the God of all the universe—who had called all things into being, chose Israel from among the nations, raised up and brought down judges and kings, and spoke through the prophets—had become one of us. As we read in John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1, 14). Note that John does not say that the Word inhabited flesh, nor does it say that the Word simply appeared to be flesh. Rather, the Word—God’s divine wisdom, creative fire, sustaining power, ordering reason—*became* flesh and lived among us. A more literal translation of the Greek would be that the Word set up a tent to live among us. The tent, as we know from Exodus, was the place where Moses would go to meet God on behalf of the people. Now that Christ has come, human beings have encountered God in a new way, a more direct way than was ever available before.

The early Christians were monotheists, just as the Jewish people from whom they received so much of their tradition. Yet they also believed that Jesus was the divine Son of God. How is it, then, that if there is only one God, both the Father and Jesus Christ his Son can be divine? Wouldn’t this mean there are two Gods? Or perhaps God the Son is somehow “less than” God the Father, possessing some attributes of the divine but nevertheless not fully God. If these questions make your head hurt, you aren’t alone. It took the Church until 451, through four ecumenical councils, to hammer out well-formed doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation.

One way of understanding the relationship between the Father and Son in the early church came to be known as “adoptionism.” Proponents of this position held that Jesus became the Son of God at his baptism. In other words, rather than claiming that Jesus was and had always been God the Son, these Christians claimed that Jesus was “adopted” by God the Father.

The debate became much sharper and more complex in the fourth century with the emergence of Arianism. The Alexandrian presbyter Arius and his followers believed in both a heavenly Father and a heavenly Son, but they claimed that the Son was not eternal like the Father. Rather, they believed, the Son was created by the Father. The catchphrase of the Arians was, “There was when he was not.” In other words, there was a point at which the Son did not exist, and was brought into being by the Father. The Son, the Arians believed, was a perfect creature of God, but a creature nonetheless.

Arius’s bishop, Alexander, strongly opposed this teaching. He argued that the Father and the Son were both eternal. The Son was not a creature, but, like the Father, was the creator (John 1:3; Hebrews 1:2). The Father and the Son, moreover, were not two distinct beings, but somehow shared one essence. Alexander’s successor in this debate, Athanasius of Alexandria, became one of the most pivotal figures in the tradition that we now call Christian orthodoxy. It took two ecumenical councils to settle this matter and establish what the orthodox position would be moving forward: the First Council of Nicea (325) and the First Council of Constantinople (381).

What we now term the “Arian controversy” gave rise to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (more commonly known simply as the Nicene Creed). The statement specifically about Jesus, which we call the Second Article of the Creed, insists that Jesus is, in fact, God, and not a created being. The Son of God is eternal, not temporal. Jesus was not an angel, a spirit, or a man with special powers. He is God, the incarnate Son who has come forth eternally from the Father. In fact, the Creed specifies that the Son and the Father are *of one substance or being* (Greek: *homoousion*). Why does this matter? It matters because, were the Father and the Son not of the same being, then we would have to affirm either (a) that there are two gods, or (b) that the Son is not actually divine in the way that the Father is.

“Well,” one might ask, “what if the Son is not divine in the way the Father is? What if the Son is just a powerful creation of the Father? Why would that matter?” Let’s think through the implications of these questions. Orthodox Christian doctrine holds that God came to us *personally*, out of love, to teach us how to live and to save us from our sins. God had sent prophets and angels before, but this time God came in person. We believe that God entered into all that it means to be human: birth, the passing of years, joy, love, friendship, betrayal, pain, and death. God knows personally what it means to be human. As we read in Hebrews 4:14, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” When it came to the sacrifice necessary to atone for the sins of humankind, God did not send someone else to suffer. God came in person and suffered for us out of love. That is the character of the God we love and serve. This is a God of self-giving love, expressed most perfectly in the Incarnation of the Son in Jesus Christ.

One last point: as the great fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus put it, “What is not assumed is not redeemed.” Humankind has been deeply affected by sin. It affects our thoughts, our attitudes, our words and deeds. It affects what we want and how we go about getting it. There is no part of our life that is not affected by the power of sin. But in Christ, God took on every aspect of human nature, and therefore redeemed every aspect of human nature. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven. There is no sinful desire or behavior that cannot be overcome. We are redeemed—entirely redeemed—by the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God.

The Second Article of the Creed, then, is really about love. It is about how God has come to us in person out of love to give us new life in the present and eternal life in the age to come. Properly understood, the Nicene Creed is an expression of the Church’s conviction that we serve a God of self-giving love, a God who would take on even our flesh, and all that goes with it, for us and for our salvation.

Dr. David Watson is Academic Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. He is also a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association Council.

Through Him All Things Were Made

By Jessica LaGrone

This is the fourth article in our series on the Nicene Creed. You can access the rest of the series [here](#).

Some time ago I was at a conference where the presenter ended a prayer by praying “In the name of the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Amen.” My head popped up to see if anyone around me had noticed or reacted to the substitution used for the names of the Trinity, but the room seemed to continue with business as usual.



The use of “Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer” as a substitute for the Trinitarian formula is nothing new. Karl Barth objected to this change by insisting that “God Himself cannot be dissolved into His work and activity [for us]” (*Church Dogmatics*, I/2, pp. 878-879). God is bigger than anything He has done or will do. God is personal, not simply functional, and to reduce the ways we address God to functions denies the Personhood of God as well as His desire to know us personally, not simply functionally.

Those substituting these roles for the Trinitarian formula usually do so with an objection to the masculine language used for God. While I don't want to enter the debate about gendered language here (that would take an entirely different set of posts), the Nicene Creed gives us good reason not to engage in a flattening of the Trinity into roles.

The controversies of the time during which the Nicene Creed was developed centered around the identity of the Son of God and whether Jesus should be considered equal with God the Father. The question of whether the Son was co-eternal or was a created being was the tinderbox of the controversy, and the language of the Nicene Creed gave a definitive answer, declaring Jesus “begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.”

As David Watson has shared beautifully [here](#), the Nicene Creed clarifies the Christian belief that “Jesus is, in fact, God, and not a created being. The Son of God is eternal, not temporal. Jesus was not an angel, a spirit, or a man with special powers. He is God, the incarnate Son who has come forth eternally from the Father.”

The Creed goes a step further to clarify that the Son could not have been created, because He was present already at creation, and was Himself creating, because it was “through Him all things were made.”

For some of us, this idea of Christ as co-creator disrupts our childhood pictures of God creating, which may include images of a wizened old man with a long beard waving his arms about over the cosmos as they came into being. Now that I think about it, my own images there may come more from the old wizard in the animated version of *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* in *Fantasia* than from any truly Biblical teaching.

Assuming that God the Father creates is usually an easy truth for us to grasp, but limiting that enormously important act to one person of the Trinity isn’t an adequate witness to a Biblical understanding of God. A description of God that divides up roles as if they’re chores to be accomplished leads to the assumption that each person of the Trinity can only function in a certain way: The Father creates, the Son redeems, the Spirit sustains. Here is where the Nicene Creed pushes back in full force, declaring of Jesus that it is “through Him all things are made.”

This language comes to us directly from John 1:3: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” It’s also echoed in Colossians 1:16 “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.”

These and other verses help us affirm the presence and agency of Christ in the act of creation. The Creed will go on to affirm the Holy Spirit as “The Lord and Giver of Life” – reminding us that that Spirit of God *hovered* over the waters of creation (a verb that has echoes of a bird brooding over a nest as it hatches new life). As Marilyn Micks puts it in her work on the Nicene Creed, *Loving the Questions*, “All of God does whatever God does” (p. 32).

The presence and power of the Son in creation affirms Christ’s love for all of creation. It not only confirms the sovereignty of God the Son, but also the dignity of creation itself. If ALL things were made through Him, then we can look at the creation that surrounds us and declare with God that it is very good. We can believe wholeheartedly that we have never laid eyes on a person who is not God’s handiwork and a recipient of the love and craftsmanship of the fullness of the Trinity. When we witness the deep dysfunction in the current state of our world, we can remember that understanding the full Trinity as Creator sets up the understanding of the fullness of God in the act of Redemption as well, since He made and loves the work of His hands.

It’s no accident that God has chosen the most personal and familial of relationships to reveal Himself and help us understand how intimately He wants to relate to us. While no human word will ever completely capture the nature of God, rather than rejecting the words God uses in Scripture to reveal Himself, we should ask why they are used and what they can tell us about the God who made us and loves us.

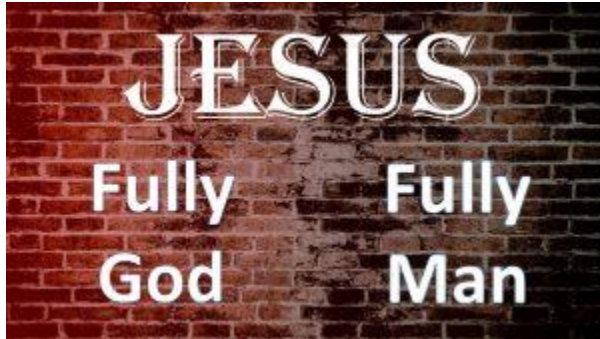
In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Jessica LaGrone is Dean of the Chapel at Asbury Theological Seminary. She is also a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Council.

The Beauty of the Incarnation

by Andrew C. Thompson

“For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”



How can the God who created the heavens and the earth become a part of his creation?

That question speaks directly into the heart of the Christian teaching on the Incarnation: the remarkable fact that the eternal Son of God, through whom all things were made, has taken on the flesh of man in the person of Jesus Christ. The Nicene Creed tells us very clearly why God would want to do such a thing—“for us and for our salvation.” The creed’s teaching on the Incarnation thus reveals to us the relentless, never-ending pursuit that God has undertaken to find his wayward children and bring them home. There is great beauty in Christian doctrine, and nowhere is doctrine more beautiful than in the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Christians through the ages have not always found it easy to believe in the Incarnation. That was particularly the case in the early church. On one end of the spectrum there were those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was just a man (even if a specially anointed man) who was “adopted” by God to be the Messiah at the moment of his baptism. At the other end of the spectrum were those who held to a Docetist (from the Greek *dokein* “to seem like, to have the appearance of”) position, contending “that Christ was totally divine, and that this humanity was merely an appearance” [1]. Adoptionism saw Jesus Christ as human but not divine, while Docetism saw him as divine but not human. The problem for the early church was that neither of these positions seemed to do justice to the biblical witness. The Gospel of John tells us both that the “Word was God” (1:1) and that

the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). Colossians tells us that “by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth” and that “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:15-19). Yet the First Letter of Peter insists that “Christ suffered in the flesh” (4:1), which is something only a man could do. So how are we to reconcile the fact that the Bible speaks of Jesus as both human and divine?

The creed took its final form in A.D. 381, and it gives us the true teaching about Jesus in summary form: that the Son of God is indeed “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,” but that nevertheless he “came down from heaven” and “by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Later, the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) would further elaborate on this dual nature of Christ, teaching that Jesus Christ is “at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man.” He has “two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” which have come together “to form one person and subsistence [or *hypostasis*], not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ” [2]. He is the God-man, and his two natures are perfectly united so that he is both fully human and fully divine.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is beautiful in itself, but its beauty is not limited to itself. That is because the Incarnation was undertaken by God for the purpose of salvation—this is what the creed affirms, and there is a logic to why God had to take on flesh in order to redeem all flesh. The Letter to the Romans tells us that “none is righteous, no not one,” for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:10,23). And the cry of the psalmist is rightly applied to us all: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5). Since the Fall, the whole creation has been subject to death because of sin, and the effects of sin upon the human race are such that our corruption is total. We are so weighed down by the guilt and power of sin that we have lost our ability to know God and the things of God. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world therefore is God’s design to cancel sin’s guilt and break sin’s power. In his great work *On the Incarnation*, the fourth century church father St. Athanasius shows us how the saving work of the Incarnation begins to bring healing to us:

For seeing that men, having rejected the contemplation of God, and with their eyes downward, as though sunk in the deep, were seeking about for

God in nature and in the world of sense, feigning gods for themselves of mortal men and demons; to this end the loving and general Saviour of all, the Word of God, takes to himself a body, and as man walks among men and meets the senses of all men halfway, to the end, I say, that they who think that God is corporeal may from what the Lord effects by his body perceive the truth, and through him recognize the Father [3].

We needed the Son to take on the material form of a human being because our sin-damaged souls were no longer capable of perceiving true divinity. Indeed, the assumption of the flesh by the Son of God was fully necessary. All of creation came under the dominion of sin after the Fall, and so there was nothing within the created order untouched by sin's disease. Only the Creator of all could act as the Great Physician to bring redemption and healing from sin. The eternal Son of God therefore assumes the fullness of humanity so that by his divinity he can fully heal that which has been fully corrupted. "For that which he has not assumed he has not healed," St. Gregory of Nazianzus says in his *First Letter to Cledonius*, "but that which is united with his Godhead is also being saved" [4]. Or as St. Athanasius puts it in a phrase that sums up the power of the Incarnation for our salvation: "He was made man that we might be made divine" [5].

The creed's teaching shows us the beauty of the Incarnation—both in itself and in the saving work it inaugurates. When St. Augustine reflected on that beauty, he was moved to confess, "He who for us is life itself descended here and endured our death and slew it by the abundance of his life." He then went on: "First he came into the Virgin's womb where the human creation was married to him, so that mortal flesh should not be for ever mortal." The Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ was born, died, and rose again; and he has ascended into heaven. Yet he has not left us. "He went away and behold, here he is," St. Augustine says. "He has gone to that place which he never left, for the world was made by him; and he was in this world, and came into this world to save sinners" [6]. This is why we confess the creed: because it teaches us who God is, and who God is for us. He is our Savior and Lord.

[1] Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 46.

[2] Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56.

[3] Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, ¶15, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 69.

[4] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter to Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius*, in *Letters on the Apollinarian Controversy* in the New Advent Fathers of the Church website. Online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3103a.htm> (accessed February 6, 2018).

[5] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, ¶54, in Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 107. I am using here the translator's alternate "...be made divine" rather than "...be made God," in Athanasius' phrase to avoid confusion as to his meaning. See n.79 in the original text.

[6] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ¶IV.19 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 64.

Dr. Andrew C. Thompson is the senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Springdale, Arkansas. He previously served as Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Wesleyan Studies on the faculty of Memphis Theological Seminary.

Crucified, Suffered, and Buried

By Walter Fenton

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.



When you read the Nicene Creed slowly, almost devotionally, it can be jarring to move from those soaring lines about Jesus as Lord, eternally begotten, light from light, one Being with the Father, creator, and incarnate by the power of Holy Spirit to... *crucified, suffered, and buried*. In almost the blink of an eye we move from one who is transcendent and very worthy of our worship to the tragedy and mystery of suffering and death in this life and in this body.

It is not hard for us to understand why the creed included this sentence about Jesus' crucifixion, passion, death and burial. These events are at the very heart of the Gospels. All the Gospel narratives slow considerably as they linger over the details of the mockery, suffering, and cruelty Jesus endured. And there was always considerable agreement as to the when, where, who, and how of Jesus' death. By the fourth century, Christians knew the story so well and had known it for so long that it was possible to poignantly summarize it in just once sentence with those piercing verbs: crucified, suffered, and buried.

But why the suffering of the only Son of God, the eternally begotten? In the creed that crucial question and its awful, powerful, joyful, and mysterious

answer is summed up in the sentence's first three words: "For our sake." And again, these three terse words are as rooted in Scripture as the other three.

Clearly, the letters of the Apostle Paul had so deeply burrowed into the hearts and minds of Christians that they knew those three words captured the why of Jesus' death. He teaches us many things about our Lord and Savior, but he often appears consumed with telling us about Jesus' death for us. He declared to the Galatians, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." He reminded the Corinthians that he "decided to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." And he perhaps sang to the Philippians that "though [our Lord] was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

Paul is so anxious to tell us about Jesus' death so that we might know life, and know it abundantly and eternally. As he writes to the Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

But of course, Paul was not alone in proclaiming Christ crucified. As he explains to the Corinthians: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what *I in turn had received*: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried...."

He surely heard the story of Christ's suffering, death, and burial from eyewitnesses, and with them, he came to confess that Christ did indeed "die for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" and "for our sake." This confession goes to the very heart of our faith, and it has the power, as our liturgy of Holy Communion puts it, "to liberate us from our slavery to sin and our fear of death."

It's an old quip, but it's still a salient one: "The only doctrine of the church with firm factual evidence is the one having to do with humankind's sinful nature." We're all too familiar with it. It so eats at us that we will do almost

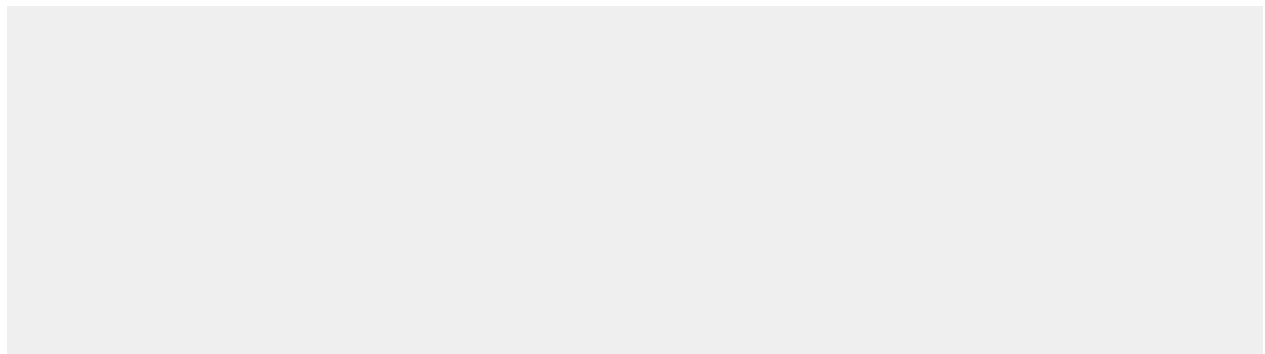
anything to deny it, to excuse it, or explain it away. We wince at the small, and yet still poisonous words we speak out of spite. And we are utterly dismayed by the truly cruel, horrific and systemic sins we commit when we find ourselves driven singularly or corporately by envy, hatred, and revenge. It is no wonder people suffer from a sense of alienation that is manifested in bursts of anger, waves of despair, and the numbness of banality.

Who can liberate us from our slavery to sin and our fear death? The creed proclaims, and the church's people testify in word and deed, that in Christ's death we are delivered from sin, transformed, and reconciled to a just and righteous God.

But our liberation is not accomplished by some act of divine magic. No, as the creed makes plain, it is through the flesh and blood of a man named Jesus, who truly suffered in a particular time and place, and who even now, in his Resurrection body, still bears the scars that won our deliverance.

Our hope and confidence for the future are rooted in Scripture and the great confessions of the church.

Walter Fenton serves on the staff of the Wesleyan Covenant Association. He is an elder in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference.



He Rose Again

By Jennifer Cowart



Years ago my husband was leading a Sunday School class when one of the regular attenders spoke up and said, “I believe all the stuff in the Bible except that one thing about the Resurrection. A guy coming back to life after three days is just too much for me.” My mouth literally fell open; I wanted to say, “What? Are you kidding me? Without the cross and resurrection none of the rest matters. It’s all about the cross and the Resurrection!”

Fortunately, I was not leading the class that day. My husband listened patiently to her apprehensions and then shared with her some of the proofs of the Resurrection from a historical perspective. He pointed her to scriptures of prophecy and promises that we too will be resurrected in Christ. It was a good learning experiencing for me that day to be patient with people in their journey. But, if I’m honest, when I hear someone doubt the resurrection even to this day I still want to yell, “What? The Resurrection underlines the goodness of our bodily creation and is our sure hope for eternal life!”

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say we exist as the Christian Church because of the Resurrection. We serve a risen Lord!

In the first three centuries, the church was oppressed and often forced into secrecy and seclusion. And yet it was also working to clarify, for an ever-growing audience, its foundational confessions of faith, especially concerning the divinity of Jesus Christ.

In 312 AD, Constantine ruled the Roman Empire. He elevated Christianity to favored status. In an attempt to reach some consensus regarding its confessions of faith and to bring unity to the church, Constantine convened a council of bishops in the year 325. They met in Nicaea, an important city

now part of the modern nation of Turkey. Out of that meeting, of course, came the Nicene Creed, a stalwart guide for the church then and now. In short, it is a summary statement of what is most important. The foundational truths of God from which the church must not deviate.

It's important to quickly review what it says about Christ up to this point:

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.
Now consider for a moment, what if the Creed ended here: "He suffered
death and was buried."

Wouldn't that be tragic?

A remarkable story of creation and sacrifice, but that's it. If Jesus had just suffered, and was just buried, there would be no hope. But the story does not end there, and neither does the creed.

*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.*

Read that again – He rose again – He ascended to heaven – and today, right now as you read this – Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Father. That, my friends, is everything!

Jesus was a good teacher. He healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, and turned H2O into Merlot. He was the Creator's only child. He died, and was buried. And, that is all awesome! But what happened next is the climax of the story... so far. Jesus got up from being dead. And He has promised us that, through life in Him, we can do the same. This is the main thing!

In the early church, teachings had become skewed. Understanding and embracing the essential message of Christ needed a course correction. This has remained true throughout the centuries. We all need a compass to direct us toward true North. Without accurate tools we are at risk of a false trajectory that, even when we are well intentioned, will lead us into dangerous territory. With the Bible, the great creeds (both the Nicene and Apostles' Creed) are our faithful guides. Sticking close to them is how we maintain our true course. They are the lights to illumine our path in dark times when we personally and corporately become lost or disoriented (*"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."* Psalm 119.105).

My friend in the Sunday School class was a good woman. She was a regular church attender, she served in a ministry, but she was missing an absolutely critical confession of our faith. Jesus took our sin and chose to die in our places, but then He rose again. That is the promise of eternal life!

The Resurrection of Jesus is one of the cornerstones of our faith. It is not a metaphor or sermon illustration. It is the essence of what we believe. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith"* (1 Corinthians 15:14). Jesus died a sacrificial death and three days later rose again. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Jennifer Cowart is the Executive Pastor at Harvest Church, a United Methodist Congregation in Warner Robbins, Georgia; she also a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association Council

Our Judge and His Kingdom

By Dr. Jeff Greenway



I went to college at two United Methodist institutions. As a Christ-follower, I attended the weekly Sunday morning worship service in the chapel and was involved in various on-campus ministries. I was also exposed to the religious studies faculty and pre-ministry students as I took my liberal arts requirements. During those four years, I was exposed to various streams of theological thought. As the child of an orthodox United Methodist clergyperson, I had been taught the historic doctrines of our faith and held a high view of Scripture. However, I soon learned that what was being taught by each school's religion department and embraced by many of my fellow students did not appear to be the same faith I had been raised to believe and profess.

One of my classmates was especially antagonistic when attacking my "less-evolved" faith. After graduation, we went to different seminaries, but several years later found ourselves in the same Annual Conference. To my surprise, my former classmate and now clergy colleague had experienced a personal and theological conversion. He now embraced a thoroughly orthodox Wesleyan expression of faith in Jesus. When I asked him what led to his transformation, he said that his experience in seminary had brought him to a place of spiritual and theological crisis. He found the "faith" he had previously embraced was hollow and lifeless. He was dying spiritually and needed more. He came to the conclusion that either Jesus is who he said he is, and did everything he said he would do, or we have nothing to believe in that changes one's life or our world. When I pressed him, he said it was his study of the Nicene Creed and its declarative statements about Jesus that brought him to a place of crisis and belief.

What we believe matters. The Nicene Creed captures the foundational beliefs we hold as followers of Jesus. It is not Scripture, but at the time of its writing, the Nicene Creed brought great clarity to the core of Christian doctrine in the face of heresies that were confronting the Church – like Arianism and Docetism – especially around the nature and divinity of Jesus. It has been embraced by Jesus followers and provided a source of unity that has transcended time, nationalities, languages and denominations for 1,700 years. It reminds us we are a part of something older than our cell phones, and it has stood the test of time and scrutiny. We would be well served to re-examine and reclaim these foundational beliefs in our time.

This series on the creed is being written because many of us believe the United Methodist Church is at a crisis of belief, and is precipitously close to forsaking the faith stewarded from generation to generation for the last 2,000 years.

I write to give focus to one phrase in the Nicene Creed: *“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”*

These twenty words end the section of the creed that gives definition to who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he will do in the redemption of the world. This simple statement makes three declarations:

“He will come again...” reminds us that this world is not all there is. Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, but the present age will come to a definitive end. We live in a fallen creation, and believe Jesus will come again to redeem all of creation into a new heaven and a new earth. He will make all things new.

“He will... judge the living and the dead...” reminds us there is a judgement coming for the life we live. In and of ourselves, we could not stand because of our sin, but because of our belief in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we will be counted among the righteous. Those who are in Christ – living or dead – have nothing to fear. As Charles Wesley wrote in the last verse of “And Can It Be that I Should Gain”:

“No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;

Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.”

“*[A]nd his kingdom will have no end.*” This reminds us that the Kingdom of Heaven is eternal. In his book, *The Day the Revolution Began*, NT Wright reminds us the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was not only for the forgiveness of our sin so that we can go to heaven someday, but rather so that God’s Kingdom might come now on earth as it is in heaven. The crucifixion of Jesus began a revolution establishing the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. However, there is an ultimate Kingdom coming that has no end where “God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4). This is the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

When I was younger, I used to think of heaven in abstract form and populated by nameless people, but the longer I live, the more I see heaven as being filled with people I know and love. Heaven is a real place, inhabited by real people, and a real Savior has prepared it for us. Sin ruined our eternal relationship with God, and Jesus has restored it. Heaven is our destination; our home country, what we were created for, and Jesus came to make it possible for us.

What we believe matters. Our beliefs shape our lives and moral conduct, and determine our worldview and destinies. What we believe is called doctrine in the Bible. Writing to Timothy, Paul said: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). He later urges Timothy to “Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, to convince, rebuke and exhort... For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers who will tickle their ears” (2 Timothy 4:2-3). What we believe matters!

Dr. Jeff Greenway is senior pastor at Reynoldsburg UMC in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. He is also chairman of the Wesleyan Covenant Association Council.

The Holy Spirit is Lord

by Chris Ritter



“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.”

The Nicene Creed contains the most controversial words in all of Christendom. The gradual acceptance of the phrase “and the Son” in the Western Church helped cement the long divide with the Eastern Church by about a thousand years after Christ. In Latin the phrase is *filioque* and it contributed to what is known as the Great Schism.

It is argued by the Eastern Orthodox churches that the addition of *the filioque* alters the careful and studied understanding of the Trinity established by the early ecumenical councils. They also are grieved that such a decision would be made without their input. The West sees it as a helpful and biblical clarification that highlights how Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are profoundly linked. We are not going to solve that debate here.

The reason the *filioque* is so controversial is because it stands in a creed that otherwise summarizes what all Christians have always believed everywhere. It defines orthodox and serves doctrinal and spiritual unity. If we get distracted by one disputed phrase we risk missing the resplendent truth Christians proclaim about the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is God. The creed proclaims the Holy Spirit as Lord. Wait.... isn't Jesus Lord? Naming the Spirit as “the Lord” is neither making the Spirit the same as Jesus nor putting the Spirit in competition

with Jesus. In fact, there is no competition in the Trinity at all. It is, rather, a reference to the revered name for God used in the Old Testament. To call the Holy Spirit *Lord* is to pronounce and affirm the person-hood and divinity of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not an *it*, a *phantom*, or George Lucas' *Force*. First Corinthians 12:11 says that the Spirit distributes gifts "just as he wills." The Holy Spirit is a person... a person of the Trinity. He is God.

The Holy Spirit gives life. The first time we meet the Holy Spirit in scripture is Genesis 1:2 where the Holy Spirit was brooding over the face of the chaotic waters like a hen over her eggs. Creation ensued. When God created Adam in his image and likeness, he breathed into his soil sculpture the breath of life. The word used is *ruah*, a breathy Hebrew word found 389 times in the Old Testament. In John's Gospel, Jesus breathed the Spirit onto his disciples. In Acts, the Spirit came like a mighty, rushing wind. God creates and recreates us through the power of the Spirit. When someone experiences new life in Jesus Christ, it is only because the Holy Spirit has drawn, convicted, and transformed them (John 16:8). Jesus told Nicodemus that we must be born again of the Spirit (John 3).

The Holy Spirit is worshiped. Because the Holy Spirit is God, the Holy Spirit is worthy of worship. Francis Chan has called the Holy Spirit "the forgotten God" because we so seldom make him the focus of our devotion. But our doxology helps us to remember to worship God in his full trinitarian majesty. True worship, Jesus said, is in spirit and truth (John 4). Our worship is impossibly incomplete without the Holy Spirit. Prayer to the Spirit, too, is effective and essential. Perhaps my most common prayer is simply, "Come, Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit has spoken. The Scriptures are inseparably linked with the Holy Spirit. "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The reason the Scriptures are authoritative for us is because they came to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is also the one who interprets the truth of Scripture to us. 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that we cannot discern God's truth except through the Spirit. At the Last Supper, Jesus taught about the Holy Spirit more than any other subject (see John 15-17). He promised that the Spirit would testify about him and guide us into all truth.

Let me close with a brief testimony.

By faith I have come to understand that the Holy Spirit was working in my life before I was even born. I believe he was present at my baptism at the altar of Cache Chapel United Methodist Church. I was raised with my grandmother telling me stories of great revivals and miracles she had seen. But the church I attended never seemed to have those things happening. The first time I remember feeling the Holy Spirit was at Beulah Youth Institute in Eldorado, Illinois. At this UM camp I felt a strong tug on my heart toward faith, and I answered.

Throughout my growing up years, I often felt like something was missing, even though I was active in church and our youth group. When I was sixteen I met the girl that would become my wife. She was an on-fire Christian. She even carried her Bible to school with her! As our relationship grew, I continued to see something in her walk with God that I desperately needed. A small group of us sought intentional discipleship at the home of a dear older saint named Mina Jo. She often taught us about the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit. I remember sitting cross-legged in her living room asking those gathered to lay their hands on me and pray that I would be filled with the Holy Spirit. It was a personal Pentecost.

Since that time I have met countless Christians who bear witness to the same basic experience. Our lives are weak and rudderless without the infilling, guiding work of the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit comes life, power, freedom, and purpose. I later learned that the Methodist movement started as an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and that another Great Awakening propelled American Methodism and scriptural holiness across the land.

We need this renewal again so desperately. One of the things I appreciate greatly about the Wesleyan Covenant Association is a renewed focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. What we wish for the church we wish for first in our own lives: Come, Holy Spirit!

The Re. Dr. Chris Ritter is the Directing Pastor of a multi-site ministry in the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference that includes Geneseo First United Methodist Church and Cambridge UMC.

One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

By Beth Caulfield



The most diverse gathering of people I have ever encountered participated in a Bible study program in Paris. We came from six continents, claimed many different primary languages and were almost as many skin colors. We came from a global variety of Protestant denominations and Roman Catholic churches. We had economic statuses that ranged from homeless to the world's elite. We included nannies, government officials, political refugees, housewives, retired grandparents, business men and women, professional musicians, fashion models, a CIA agent, an ex-prostitute and that is just what I remember.

I was part of the group for three years and remember it as one of, if not *the* most, faith-enriching experiences of my life. What made this so special was not simply learning about other cultures, worldviews and experiences, (although that was indeed stirring). The exhilarating and faith-bolstering experience we enjoyed when we gathered to study the Scriptures together, was that *in spite* of our differences, we knew and were encountering the *same* Jesus Christ. Our "God talk" left us all marveling not only at what we learned from each other's differently crafted lenses on the Bible, but also at how we recognized God's enlightenment in each other's understanding of the Scriptures as we shared with one another. It was the Bible and our commitment to it that opened us up to one another and drew us closer to Christ in a most marvelous way.

I confess I have spent much energy trying to replicate that special experience. I believe it was indeed a foretaste of the glory divine described in Revelation 7 when a great multitude from "every nation, tribe, people and language" will stand before the throne worshipping God and the Lamb.

This “Coming Great Church” is indeed ushered in when “*we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church*” and strive together for it. A key to achieving this eventual reality is uncovering and holding fast to the meaning of this phrase and the overall intent of the Nicene Creed from its beginning.

The Church’s creedal tradition developed over the centuries in response to heresies such as Gnosticism, Marcionism, Docetism, and Arianism. Over a number of decades in the fourth century the Nicene Creed fostered a widespread unity in the church that was grounded in the truth of Scripture.

The creed uses careful language when it states “*we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*” First, these statements affirm the *Church* is essential. While the Church has never been a pure or perfect instrument, the creed acknowledges it is the chosen instrument to which all belong who believe in Jesus the Christ and seek to follow him as Savior and Lord. Furthermore, the Church is purposefully communal and intended to fulfill Christ’s mission. We should never ignore or refuse to challenge its inadequacies and its complicity in evil, but we must also embrace the witness of its story and the testimony to it in the Scriptures.

Unity is emphasized by first declaring our need to be *one* Church. This imagery corresponds to the oneness of the Trinity. Such oneness is diversity-in-communion. It does not demand uniformity. It does, however, affirm Paul’s message that each should be “thinking the same way, having the same love, being united and agreeing with each other,” (Phil 2:2). The Scriptures provide the anchor for such oneness.

The call to be *holy* means the Church must witness to the power and presence of the risen Lord Jesus. We should embody a difference from the world that can be seen and replicated. The struggle with this call to holiness is perhaps the greatest cause of disunity within the Church.

We confess that the Church is *catholic* in that it is worldwide or universal. It is neither bound to the authority of the Roman Catholic papacy, nor is it merely a federation of local congregations. It is a reminder of the Church’s unity in orthodoxy despite varied locations, languages, ethnicities, races, or denominations.

The Church is to remain *apostolic*, both in a traditional *and* a prophetic sense. The apostolic tradition insists on continuity with the teachings and morals of the apostles as revealed in the Bible and in the traditions and interpretations of the living Church. Yet tradition *is* to be tempered by the prophetic. Prophetic apostolicity means striving for renewal that comes through the continued work of the Holy Spirit. Holding the traditional and prophetic understandings of an apostolic Church in tension by continually looking to the Scriptures is essential.

The Nicene Creed remains a key confessional statement particularly in cultures where faith concerns are characterized as personal pursuits rather than as communal commitments and shared practices. Affirming “*one holy catholic and apostolic Church*” reminds us that we are members of a body of believers extending across time and many lands.

Today, for most of us, our dominant cultures certainly do *not* conform to the teachings of orthodox Christianity. Many Christians today have more in common with displaced or immigrant communities that need strategies and methods for survival in our varied local contexts. This reality heightens the value and power of the Nicene Creed’s relevance for us. As we struggle to remain faithful amidst the swirling winds of eclectic ideas and doctrine, the Nicene Creed’s orthodox statements offer comfort, hope and clarity. For just as my experience in Paris taught and reminds me, the creed teaches and reminds us all that *we are not alone in our orthodox faith* but indeed part of “*one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*”

Reverend Beth Caulfield is Campus Pastor of Sharptown North Church in Woolwich Township New Jersey. She is a founding member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins

By Joe DiPaolo



After coming to personal faith in Christ as a 19-year old, I remember talking to my old junior high band director who was also a pastor. I shared my excitement about my new-found faith, and asked if I should be baptized again, since I had only been baptized an infant, and wasn't sure that it "counted." I remember his answer: "That raises the interesting question: can God be working in your life before you are even aware of it?"

Of course, the answer is yes. I had been baptized as a child, raised in the church, taught about Jesus, and surrounded by a community that sought to nurture me in the faith. Though I walked away in junior high, God never stopped working to call me home. In time, and through the agency of other believers, things finally "clicked:" I gave my life to Christ and embraced the meaning of the ceremony I had undergone as a child.

A key word used to talk about baptism is *sign*. Like a sign on the street points beyond itself to something else, so baptism points beyond itself to that grace which seeks us before we ever seek God – the love of God at work within us, even before we know we need it – drawing us to God and bending our hearts to God's ways. In Wesleyan theology, we call this *prevenient grace* – the grace that comes before.

As an infant, I knew nothing of this – anymore than I understood then the meaning of the family name I was born into (which may have been a good thing!). But God already had made provision for me, just as my parents had been doing: preparing a room for me, beginning savings for college – all in advance, all before I understood a thing.

In Romans 5:8 Paul says, “*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” Speaking mainly to pagan converts, Paul was telling them that long before they came to know Jesus, he was out seeking them, like the shepherd looking for lost sheep. That is grace. And baptism points to God’s grace.

Baptism also points to our new life in Christ. Article XVII of our Articles of Religion calls baptism “a sign of regeneration or the new birth.” In Wesleyan theology, prevenient grace is followed by *justifying grace* – the work of God which forgives and cleanses us of sin, removes its death-hold on us, and makes us alive to God (which is what regeneration means). In Romans 6:3-4 Paul says, “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*”

That text also suggests that the work of grace doesn’t end with our experience of new birth in Christ. Justifying grace is followed by *sanctifying grace*, as God’s Holy Spirit works within us to put to death all that belongs to the old life apart from Christ, so that we live (or “walk”) in ways that reflect God’s holiness. That, too, Paul says, is something to which baptism points.

But there is one more important point about baptism, and it is about community. In 1 Peter 3, the Apostle draws a parallel between Noah’s ark and baptism. In the early centuries, the ark became a symbol for the church, the Christian community – the “ark of safety,” it was sometimes called. The idea is that we find safety from the troubled waters of life within the people of God and discover there our deliverance from judgment and death. Thus, baptism historically has been the rite of entry into the people of God, making us part of Christ’s church – placing us safely within the ark.

That is one reason why we usually conduct baptisms in worship, and why the congregation has a role in the ceremony. The people make promises

along with parents, for the people of God have a critical role to play in raising children (of whatever age!) to be disciples of Jesus.

There is a reason that the line in the Creed about baptism follows the statement about the “holy catholic and apostolic church.” The decision to follow Christ is not entirely an individual one. Though each person must at some point make that decision for him or herself, still, it a decision which is shaped and nurtured by the web of relationships that surround us as we grow. Community matters. The church is meant to be a place of safety like the ark – a refuge from a corrupt culture; a community where all God’s children find welcome, a home, and a place where the things of God are honored, taught, and celebrated.

I never was baptized again. 1 Peter 3:18 says, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.” I came to realize that just as Christ’s atoning death for us never needs to be repeated, neither does the rite which points to the new life his sacrifice purchased for me. The ritual of baptism does not save – only God’s grace saves; but baptism connects us to the promises and the people of God and is celebrated as a means of that grace. The important thing is that I had experienced what baptism was about: the forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God and new life in Christ.

That baptism – in the Holy Spirit – remains the most important thing for us all!

Rev. Joe DiPaolo is the Lead Pastor at Lancaster First UMC in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association Council.

Fully Alive

By Keith Boyette

“I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”



Perspective matters. We have been sold a bill of goods. Secular culture regards death as an end point. You are born, you live and then you die. The world tells us the most important things happen in the space of the hyphen between your birthday and the day of your death. Make those moments count to the fullest because they are all you have. Do not waste time because once it is gone you are finished.

There is no question that the moments we enjoy in this life are significant; however, the Christian faith embraces a different narrative. We believe God foresees our formation even before we enter into the world. The psalmist declares, “You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born” (Psalm 139:15-16). In fact, Paul asserts God knew us and had plans for us before God created the world. To the Ephesians, Paul writes, “Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ... ” (Ephesians 1:4).

Our physical birth simply initiates the next chapter of our journey. It is an important chapter. It is where we choose whether to place our trust in Jesus Christ – to accept the salvation he has purchased for us. It is the domain of our experiencing the second birth – to be born spiritually – to experience new life in Christ. We are accompanied on our journey through God’s good creation by God. The psalmist declares, “Every day of my life

was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed” (Psalm 139:16). This life is where we get to use the gifts God has bestowed upon us to serve God and our neighbors for making the presence of God known to others.

As this life draws to a close, however, life does not end. In fact, it is only in that moment of transition we become fully alive. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul observes, “For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands” (2 Corinthians 5:1). In fact, Paul declares that this life is primarily preparation for the life to come. “While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it’s not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be *swallowed up by life*” (2 Corinthians 5:4). Life truly begins in that moment of transition. Could this be why John Wesley declared on his deathbed, “The best of all, God is with us.”

Perspective matters. If this life is all we can count on, then everything in this life is raised to supreme importance. However, if this life is part of a larger story that God is writing, then we can live confidently now fully anticipating the future. The Christian life is not focused on the sweet by and by to the exclusion of present realities. However, the Christian knows that what we experience now is not the end of the story.

The Nicene Creed captures this important concept in its affirmation that we “*look for the resurrection of the dead.*” Jesus confronted the religious leaders of his day in their obsession with the present. Jesus taught, “Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God. For when the dead rise . . .” (Matthew 22:29-30). The resurrection of Jesus is the precursor of the resurrection of all who die in Christ. As Paul declares, “[Jesus] is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. . . . [E]veryone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back” (1 Corinthians 15:20, 22-23). As those in relationship with Christ, we can boldly approach the end of earthly life with the confident assurance that our resurrection lies ahead and that re-orientes our perspective – the best is yet to come!

We know that we live in a broken and fallen world, but the Nicene Creed affirms that we are also living in expectation of the *“life of the world to come.”* We look forward to the reign of Christ. Paul teaches us that when Jesus returns, “he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:24). Indeed, the world will have “become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). And the one sitting on the throne will make everything new (Revelation 21:5). The old heaven and old earth will have disappeared. God will make his home among his people. “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever” (Revelation 21:4). God’s creation will be restored to its pristine condition before the fall. Sin will no longer mar creation or God’s image in humanity.

We gather this weekend to celebrate Easter. Good Friday brings us to the cross where we confront the comprehensive brokenness of a sin-sick world and the love of God who in Jesus met us in the desperation of our estrangement from him. We see our helpless estate and the power of God to bridge the chasm that separates us from him. Good Friday ends in a dark tomb where we come face-to-face with our story if we remain separated from God. But Sunday is coming! On Easter, we rejoice in the great news that “Christ is risen! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!” And we rejoice in the reality that that which is not yet will soon be. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Perspective matters!

Rev. Keith Boyette is the president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, and an elder in the Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church.

