



## Lesson 8. The Creeds In Lutheranism and Today

### Introduction – Doctrinal Purity

**Acts 20:25-32** “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

- We often say that we want pastors who will teach God’s Word “in its truth and purity.” What do we mean by that? How is that reflected in Paul’s words here?
- Agree or disagree: Attacks against the truth of God’s Word that arise from within the church are more dangerous than those that arise from outside of it.
- After Paul warned the Ephesians that false teachers will arise from their own ranks, he urged them: “Be on your guard!” What are some ways we can *be on our guard* against false teachings today?

### 8.1 Luther and the Creeds in Lutheranism

The Nicene Creed would have been part of the liturgy Martin Luther heard and recited as a young man. When he became a monk, Luther also came to know the Apostles’ Creed, which was used in several of the daily services in his Augustinian monastery. As Luther struggled unsuccessfully to lead a pure life even in the monastery, he came to have a special love for the Apostles’ Creed, which proclaimed to him the forgiveness of sins each time he recited it. This may be one reason

why he chose to include the Apostles' Creed rather than the Nicene Creed in his Small Catechism. On the other hand, while he made many changes to the Sunday liturgy, he retained the chanting or singing of the Nicene Creed, although it was to be sung in German.

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

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

In 1580, a generation after Luther's death, when Lutheran theologians gathered the most important Lutheran theological writings into *The Book of Concord*, the three ecumenical creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed (381), and the Athanasian Creed—were the opening documents in the volume.<sup>2</sup> They were the oldest documents and the most widely accepted by Christians everywhere. Through the inclusion of the creeds, the Lutheran theologians of the 16th century confessed their connection to the teachings of the primitive church and the christological and trinitarian beliefs that are necessary for anyone who wishes to be saved.

1. At the time of his excommunication from the Roman church, Luther burned a copy of the Roman canon law, which contained the decisions of the councils throughout history. Why do you think he did that, since we know that he respected the early creeds that were approved by some of those councils?
2. Why do you think we retain the three ecumenical creeds in our Lutheran Confessions, since the later confessions already cover the teaching of the Trinity and the person of Jesus in great detail?

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<sup>1</sup> An ancient Latin hymn, often attributed to Ambrose or Augustine (3-4<sup>th</sup> Centuries), but exact authorship is unknown.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Concord* includes: The three ecumenical creeds, the (unaltered) Augsburg Confession (1530), The Apology to the Augsburg Confession, The Smalcald Articles, Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, The Small Catechism, The Large Catechism, The Formula of Concord.

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

## 8.2 The Nicene Creed After 1,700 Years

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

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

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

4. From time to time it is suggested that we need a new confession to address present-day disagreements in the church. What are the pros and cons of doing this?
5. In what ways might our congregations and church body properly celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene council and the Nicene Creed?

## **Final Thought and Prayer**

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

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

**NEXT TIME: Teach God's Mighty Deeds to Your Children**