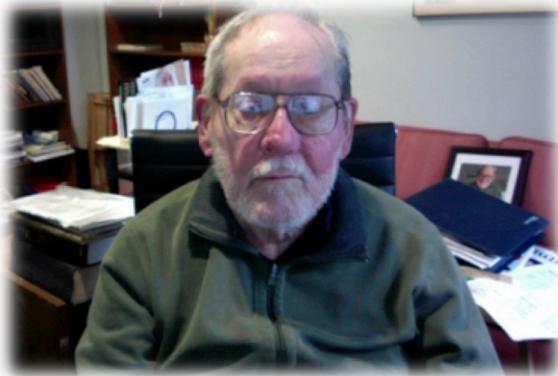


## How and why and when to recite the Nicene Creed The Rev'd Dr. Warner White



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**Stumbling over the creed? Is that a reason for omitting it from regular Sunday recitation? - And, if we recite it, how? What does our action mean?**

*First we worship, then we understand.*

A new American Book of Common Prayer should not require recitation of the Nicene Creed at every Sunday Eucharist, say Richard Fabian, Ruth Meyers and others – It is not needed: the Great Thanksgivings of the Book of Common Prayer celebrate our Trinitarian faith in robust, joyful language. It is sectarian, causing discomfort to newcomers and the unchurched. It uses arcane language of the fourth century, a stumbling block for many.

(See Fabian's letter of 2009 in

[http://www.anglicanism.org/admin/docs/to\\_creed\\_or\\_not\\_to\\_creed.pdf](http://www.anglicanism.org/admin/docs/to_creed_or_not_to_creed.pdf).

Meyers is quoted in *The Living Church*, November 1, 2015, p. 7ff.)

I accept with joy the first of these three arguments. The Great Thanksgivings of the Prayer Book are indeed robustly Trinitarian. And they do indeed render the recitation of the creed redundant. But I advance “discomfort” and “stumbling” not as grounds for omitting the creed, but as grounds for reciting it.

My opponent is rationalist religion, Abelardian religion, religion that sees understanding as the road to belief. My concern is enquirers for whom language such as “Eternally begotten” and “of one Being with the Father” stands in the way of belief.

We inheritors of the Enlightenment hold rational thought precious. We believe in tolerance for other opinions. We believe in suspending judgment. We believe in objectivity in the search for truth. Thus to recite the creed in the enlightened mode, saying “We believe,” is for us to trip and fall.

This problem is not new. It did not begin with the Enlightenment. We see it played out in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the disagreement between Peter Abelard and Anselm of Canterbury. Abelard tells with approval how his students said “nothing could be believed unless it was first understood.” Anselm teaches the contrary – *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to understand) – and his teaching holds good claim to orthodoxy.

(For Abelard see the first of his letters to Heloise (I.35), *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*; David Luscombe, editor; Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2013 – page 55.

For Anselm see his *Proslogion*.)

Episcopalians frequently observe Anselm's order of events: enquirers tell us that it is our worship that brings them in. “The beauty of your liturgy,” they say, “is what attracts me.” They don't talk about the sermon. They don't talk about a book or a theologian. They talk about our worship. That's first. Second come questions for the sake of understanding.

We Episcopalians brag that you do not have to leave your mind at the church door. But that's not the same as saying that first you understand and then you believe. No. First our enquirers fall down before God in worship. Then follows understanding.

But what about the stumbling? Isn't the stumbling a hindrance to belief? Shouldn't we do what we can to prevent the stumbling?

No. It is important for enquirers to stumble, to discover that even as they are coming to belief, their customary mode of thought does not work. They need to become fluent in story and image and myth. They need to develop symbolic thought. It is no accident that the Eastern Church calls the Nicene Creed *The Symbol of Faith*.

If new believers do not learn to think in symbol, they will stumble over more than the creed. They may, for example, seek some sort of “scientific” explanation for the creation myth, and adopt a pseudo-science such as creationism. And modern biblical investigations, in which the bible is examined objectively and scientifically, may shake their faith. How can you believe in Jesus as the Son of God, if at the same time you are committed to a method of investigation in which conclusions are always tentative?

New believers need to learn that the test of biblical story or image or myth is not found in thought, but experience. I believe in Jesus Christ not because someone has proved facts about him, but because I worship him and in him find my savior. The creed is about the divine-human experience of believers. It is not the result of impartial enquiry.

“OK,” says an objector, “the creed is not to be understood according to modern rational methods, but it was constructed, nevertheless, by the rational methods of an earlier age, using the 'arcane' language of the fourth century.” Yes. That's true. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and others do use the rational methods of their age. They reason very closely, carefully defining technical terms for describing the Trinity. But there is a striking difference in the way they draw conclusions.

We moderns reason in terms of truth and falsehood. The Trinitarian Fathers reason in terms of piety and impiety. They are engaged in a struggle with a rival piety, Arianism. Their concern is to describe the two pieties accurately and to show that the one is pious and the other impious. Thus, in their arguments the words *piety*, *impiety*, *religious*, and *irreligious* occur

repeatedly. A common form in their argument is what may be called *reductio ad impietatem* — showing that the Arian position leads to an impiety. For example, in opposition to the Arian contention that there was a time when the Son was not, Gregory of Nyssa argues that since the Son is the Light of God, if there was a time when the Son was not, it follows that the Father was once in darkness — an obvious impiety.

(*Against Eunomius*, Book II.2) Similarly, Basil of Caesarea counters the Arian assertion that the Son is “after the Father” by saying that this is to use a human measure (time) for the Godhead — a breach of true religion. (*De Spiritu Sancto*, Chapter VI.14)

When the church met in council at Chalcedon in 381 and ratified the Nicene Creed, it was saying, *This is our piety*. And so it remains. When we recite the Nicene Creed we are describing and subscribing to a piety.

For an example, let's look at the first paragraph of the creed —

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

What does it mean to commit yourself to this article of piety? It is, of course, mostly metaphorical. You cannot pin it down as true or false by some empirical test. But you can pin your faith on the God it describes. You can trust in him. To do that is very different from declaring the truth of propositions.

But “arcane” fourth-century terms such as “eternally begotten of the Father” and “of one Being with the Father” have another function in addition to affirming piety. They are meant to distinguish Trinitarianism from Arianism. This is probably where most of the “discomfort” and “stumbling” occur. It's one thing to adopt metaphorical thought. But are we also expected to adopt fourth-century modes of thought?

I suggest two responses. We can play along with the Fathers. We can learn what they are trying to say and assent to it, without adopting their mode of thought.

But even more helpful, I think, is for us to understand the “arcane” terms as *rules of interpretation*.

Consider Jesus' saying, “The Father is greater than I.” (John 14:28 NRSV) The passage is subject to two interpretations. Arians understood it to mean that the Son of God is of lesser divinity than the Father. The Nicene Creed, as *rule of interpretation*, tells us that the passage does not concern Jesus' divinity, but his humanity.

Similarly, when Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus “the firstborn ... of all creation,” there are several possible interpretations. For Arians “firstborn” means the first created being. The creed, on the other hand, tells us to understand “firstborn” in some way that does not make Jesus a creature. So we take “firstborn” to be metaphorical. Athanasius, for example, takes “firstborn” to mean that the Word has condescended to be a “brother” of creatures.

*(Orations against the Arians, II.62)*

And thus we read any statement concerning Jesus.

(For an extended example of this kind of reading see *Trial at Aquileia* in Study Two of *How those Christians Fight* on my website: <http://www.warnerwhite.org/?p=360> .)

The reader may object that this kind of interpretation is eisegesis rather than exegesis. Yes, clearly the creed as *rule of interpretation* does not seek the original intent of the writer. Instead it reads each passage in the light of others and fits the passages together to paint a fuller picture than any one passage attains by itself.

When I look at Colossians 1:15-20, for example, I see a writer who is mostly, but not entirely, on his way to the doctrine of the Trinity.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to

have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15-20 NRSV)

I see a writer who is struggling to express the divinity of Jesus and his relation to creation. And I see similar struggling in other passages of scripture. The Fathers looked at these passages and in the light of their own piety filled in the picture the various writers were trying individually to attain. The Fathers' understanding is that of the community, rather than of the individual writers.

I have been reciting the creed every Sunday since I was a child. Quite unconsciously over the years, as a consequence, I have been reading the various passages of scripture concerning Jesus in the light of the creed. This habit has been so ingrown that in writing this paper and making myself a list of passages that I thought clearly concerned Jesus' humanity I at first included John 14:28 ("The Father is greater than I"). It was several days before I recalled with a jolt that Arians interpreted it as concerning Jesus' divinity. My habit illustrates, I believe, how the creed functions as *rule of interpretation*.

Thus credal "arcane" language turns out in practice not to be so arcane after all.

One final suggestion that takes seriously my guiding aphorism, *First we worship, then we understand*. Perhaps the creed should not precede but *follow* worship. What would it be like for us to conclude the Eucharist by raising our hands wide and high, singing the Nicene Creed in thanksgiving!