

Alpha and Omega

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a seven-part series

January 8, 2023

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Revelation 22:13 (NRSV)

¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Genesis 1:1 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

John 1:1 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Colossians 1:15–20 (NRSV)

¹⁵ He [Jesus] 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.

“Maker of all that is seen and unseen”

“Through him all things were made”

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

from the Nicene Creed

This week, we begin a new sermon series titled simply: *The Christ*. We will strive to know Jesus better, to understand more deeply and personally the proclaimed truth about Jesus, who is the Christ. We will do so by looking closely at some of the names given Jesus in the New Testament and the affirmations in the Nicene Creed, the most ecumenical of all the Christians creeds and statements of faith. We Christians are to be unified in the essential truth claims of our faith and the Nicene Creed is the ground to which we turn.

But to begin, it is best that we consider the earliest of the creeds and the pro’s and con’s of creeds in general.

The origin of the Apostles’ Creed

Many Christians have been standing and proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed from the earliest centuries of Christianity. The immediate forerunner of the Apostles’ Creed was known as the Roman Creed, having come from the church in Rome. It was very similar to the creed we say now and would seem very familiar to you.

The creed grew out of the baptismal questions that people new to the faith were asked to affirm. Still today, those being baptized (or their sponsors) are asked to affirm certain statements of faith at every baptism we perform. Here are the baptismal questions from Rome dating back to at least 200AD:

- “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?”
- “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?”
- “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?”

We affirm every portion of every one of these questions whenever we stand to recite the Apostles' Creed.

The pro's and con's of creeds

Not all Christian denominations embrace the historic creeds of the church, though nearly all have some statement of what they believe and none take issue with the Nicene statements. Here are some of the pro's and con's when it comes to creeds:

- Pro's
 - Creeds help us to clarify, proclaim, and protect the essential claims of our faith. Many creeds resulted from heretical threats to the faith.
 - The creeds help us to recognize inadequate or incorrect descriptions of our faith.
 - Creeds carry the tradition that we have received from the Christians who preceded us. Creeds remind us that there is one "cloud of saints," of which we are part.
 - Coming from Scripture, the creeds help provide us with a framework for interpreting Scripture and for teaching the basic Christian beliefs.
- Con's
 - Creeds can be used to exclude and enforce.
 - No creed can substitute for our engagement with Scripture.
 - No creed can be complete.
 - No creed can be final.

The big picture

At St. Andrew, we customarily recite the Apostles' Creed. You'll quickly see that (1) it is Trinitarian, organized around the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and (2) it is narrative, beginning with creation and moving on to Jesus and then the church.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our
Lord:

who was conceived by the Holy
Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the
dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of
God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to
judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

What's missing? A lot. First, you can't call the creed a summary of the biblical story, for where is any mention of Israel or the Law and the Prophets? Second, nothing is stated outright about Jesus' divinity nor about the Spirit's divinity. This would come in the later creeds. For example, in the Nicene Creed of 325AD (drafted to confront the claim that Jesus wasn't truly God) Jesus is "very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father; through whom [Jesus] all things were made." Third, though the creed affirms the forgiveness of sins, nothing is said specifically about how we are saved and there is no mention of grace or faith.

When we say the creed we inevitably read a lot into it. The creed is not meant to cover all the bases, just the essentials. It isn't the place for our "intramural" arguments about justification or sanctification or most of the important issues that we talk about in the church. The creed is meant to unite, not divide.

God and the Trinity

Though the Apostles' Creed is inherently Trinitarian, that doesn't mean the relational nature of God is well-developed in it. The creed comes from a time when that theological work was still underway. Nonetheless, there are a few points that need to be made here.

First, because of Scripture's teachings on Jesus and the fact that the earliest Christians worshiped Jesus as they had worshiped God, the early church had to wrestle with some key questions:

- Is the Father, God? Is the Son, God? Is the Spirit, God?
 - Is each person of the Trinity addressed by distinguishable divine names?
 - Is each person assumed to have divine attributes?
 - Does each person engage in actions that only God can accomplish?
 - Is each person thought to be worthy of divine worship?

In each case, the Church answered "yes." The mystery of the Trinity, one God of one "substance" yet three persons, is the most profound of all the mysteries we proclaim. Yet, it is absolutely essential to who we are and to the Good News we proclaim to the world. And we are led to it every time we answer the question, "Who is Jesus?," as nearly all his disciples have answered it for 2,000 years. We will be spending a lot more time with this in coming weeks.

Daniel Migliore lifts up for us three key Christian affirmations that arise from our belief in the Triune (Three & One) God:

- The eternal life of God is personal life in relationship. God IS love (1 John 4:16b) – this makes sense only because of God's inherent relationality. God's identity is personal relationship.
- God exists in community. Yes, God has a social life! The three persons of God "indwell" each other. God then creates a people to live in relationship with him.
- The life of God is essentially self-giving love.

Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, fully divine and fully human

From the beginning, Christians clung to two seemingly contradictory statements: (1) Jesus was human, born to a young woman from Nazareth, crucified by a Roman execution squad, and (2) Jesus was divine, he was "the Word," "who was "with God," and "was God" (John 1:1).

But how could such a thing be? It seemed like nonsense and some well-meaning folks in the first century set about to make it sensible and reasonable. Various, they made suggestions about Jesus' nature that the Christian community, in the end, rejected as heretical. For a heresy isn't simply a mistake; rather, it comes from within the church and is a distorted, vulnerable, and fragile form of Christianity that cannot sustain itself. Christian heresy retains the *appearance* of Christianity while contradicting its *essence*. Here's a couple of the heresies that arose about the nature of Jesus:

- The *ebionite* ("the poor ones") Jesus: Jesus can be explained with the existing Jewish categories of prophet, priest, rabbi. Jesus was a human who was singled out by God for divine favor much like the prophets of old, even given the power to do miracles.
- The *docetic* Jesus: The denial of Jesus' genuine humanity. *Dokein* in the Greek means, "to appear." Jesus only appeared to be human. Basically, Jesus wasn't really what he appeared to be.

Despite the efforts of some to "solve" the puzzle of Jesus' true nature, the church continued to proclaim to all who would listen, two truths: Jesus was fully and completely God and Jesus was fully and completely human. It took a few centuries for the Christians to be able to fully articulate their beliefs about Jesus, but from the

earliest days we see in the writings of the New Testament and elsewhere that the believers worshipped Jesus as Lord and God.

But of all the heresies that arose around Jesus, none threatened the unity of the church as much as the proposal of a bishop named Arius from Alexandria – the claim that Jesus wasn't really truly God, that there was a time when Jesus did not exist.

Bishop Arius

Our world was all about Santa Claus just a few weeks ago. The origins of Santa are varied, but many trace Santa back to an actual person – St. Nicholas, a fourth century Christian bishop from Myra in modern-day Turkey who had a reputation for secretive gift-giving. At a large conference called by the emperor Constantine in AD 325 to confront the doctrinal challenge posed by Bishop Arius, it was reported that St. Nick struck Arius right in the face at one point in the proceeding. Yes, one and the same Nicholas. Whether true or not, the story illustrates the amount of heat generated by the *Arian* controversy in the fourth century. John Julius Norwich fills in some of the backstory:

It was Pope Sylvester's ["Pope"/the Bishop of Rome from 315 to 335] misfortune to witness, during his papacy, the appearance of the first of the great heresies that were to split the Church in the centuries to come. This was first propagated by a certain Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, a man of immense learning and splendid physical presence. His message was simple enough: that Jesus Christ was not coeternal and of one substance with God the Father but had been created by Him at a specific time and for a specific purpose, as his instrument for the salvation of the world. Thus, although a perfect man, the Son must always be subordinate to the Father. Here, in the eyes of Arius's archbishop, Alexander, was a dangerous doctrine indeed, and he took immediate measures to stamp it out.

In 320 [Arius] was arraigned before nearly a hundred bishops from Egypt, Libya, and Tripolitania and excommunicated as a heretic. The damage, however, was done: the teaching spread like wildfire. Those were the days, it must be remembered, when theological arguments were of passionate interest, not just to churchmen and scholars but to the whole Greek-speaking world. Broadsheets were distributed; rabble-rousing speeches were made in the marketplace; slogans were chalked on walls. Everyone had an opinion: you were either for Arius or against him. He himself, unlike most theologians, was a brilliant publicist; the better to disseminate his views, he actually wrote several popular songs and jingles— for sailors, travelers, carpenters, and other trades— which were sung and whistled in the streets. Then, a year or two later, Arius— who had hurriedly left Alexandria after his excommunication— returned in triumph. He had appeared before two further synods in Asia Minor, both of which had declared overwhelmingly his favor, and now he demanded his old job back.¹

To sum it up, Arius claimed that “there was a time when Jesus was not.” In other words, there was a time when Jesus did not exist, making him a creature just like the rest of us and not the eternal Word – for there was never a time when God did not exist.

The emperor Constantine's conference, the famed Council of Nicaea, was the first of the great universal Ecumenical Councils called by the burgeoning and now officially-sanctioned Christian churches. More than 300 bishops came to Nicaea in AD 325 to consider the Arian controversy. After much work and debate they drafted and all but a

¹ Norwich, John Julius (2011-07-12). *Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy* (Kindle Locations 372-381). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

couple signed a creed that is still recited in churches worldwide and is printed in our UMC hymnals: The Nicene Creed.² In part, this is what they wrote about the Jesus:

“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.”³

The Creed could not be clearer. No one could possibly misread the claim in the Nicene Creed that, yes, Jesus is God.

“All the fullness of God”

In the New Testament, we find passage after passage that helps us to understand the near unanimity of the bishops. For example, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul composed a hymn of sorts to Jesus, lifting up his unity with the Father. Here is how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Colossians 1:15-17 in *The Message* (the whole Christ-hymn is one of today’s Scripture passages):

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousand years to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” (v. 15) which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus. It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God.

And what is God’s purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the “blood of his cross.” This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus’ death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is so.

Why does this matter?

Our proclamation that Jesus is fully human and fully divine matters because it is the incarnation – God taking on human flesh – that reveals to us who God really is and his relentless pursuit of us and all humanity out of nothing more than love.

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. But Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God’s beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn’t cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness.” (see another Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus gave up the privileges of God so that he might be

² We actually recite the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, for at a later conference in 381, the creed of AD 325 was amended and modified. For simplicity’s sake, we refer to the later version as the Nicene Creed.

³ From the UMC hymnal. “Begotten” isn’t a word we use much more anymore. Human children are begotten of human parents. Puppies are begotten of canine parents. We beget our own kind. Thus, to call Jesus God’s only begotten Son is to make clear that he uniquely shares God’s DNA, to use an analogy.

obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus’ surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul’s point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.” God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).

Thus, those bishops from long ago wisely and overwhelmingly voted down Arius. It is why they wrote the enduring creed of Nicaea. It is why we must be bold and confident when we proclaim to the world the birth of the Christ-child – for in this lies the deepest and most important mystery of all.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *2 Thessalonians*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class. [Note – I’m having a lot of problems with “junk content blocking” of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at scottengle.podbean.com.]