

# • The Creeds: Apostles' and Nicene Creeds

Lesson # 17 of 27

## Scripture Memory Verse:

"[Jesus asked] "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the

Son of the living God," *Matthew 16: 15-16*

## Lesson Goal & Objectives:

### Goal

- The students will develop an understanding of the importance of stating their faith in the One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- The students will become familiar with the history of our Creeds.

### Objectives

- The students will realize that they have strong belief systems already in place in the introductory activity.
- The students will come to see that what they believe affects their lives spiritually, relationally and practically.
- The students will learn about the history of the Creeds and their role as a statement of Faith for the entire Christian Church.

## Introduction and Background for the Teacher:

The word "credo" is Latin for "I believe." This is where the word "Creed" comes from; the first two words of the Nicene Creed are "We believe." In other words, this is **our** creed, **our** statement of what we believe about the Trinitarian God. The creeds are our confession of Faith. (Note: the word "confess" means to own or to acknowledge. This applies both to our faith and to our awareness of our sinfulness, which is why we can "confess" our faith and "confess" our sins.)

Historically, our Christian Creeds have been hard-won. Putting into words what we believe and know about God proved to be quite difficult, but the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds have become essential documents of the Christian Church.

The Episcopal Church recognizes three Creeds: The Apostles' Creed, The Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. All are ancient creeds, written well over a thousand years ago. The Apostles' Creed begins "I believe" and is the creed used in Baptism services. It was compiled in the first centuries of the Church as a baptismal statement of Faith. The Nicene Creed begins

“We believe” and is considered to be the universal creed of the entire Christian Church, used during Eucharistic services. The Athanasian Creed is included in the back of the BCP in the Historical Documents section on p. 864-865. It is part of St. Athanasius’ treatise explaining the Trinity. *(Look at each of these creeds before you teach the lesson so you are familiar with the differences.)*

The Nicene Creed is the one most familiar to us. It is the Creed commonly shared by all Christian Churches as their statement of faith: the Methodist, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are all united with us in this common confession of Christian Faith.

The formulation of the Nicene Creed was begun (and later completed) in the city of Nicea (modern day Turkey) over a period of time by several councils (that is, assemblies). The first of these councils consisted of an estimated 318 bishops from all Christian churches. The First Council of Nicea, which occurred in 325 AD, is considered to be the first ecumenical council of the Christian Church because it included all bishops and leaders of the Church. Ultimately the Council voted to adopt the Nicene Creed (named after Nicea) as an ecumenical (that is, universal) confession of Christian Faith. *Note:* the final, revised version of the Creed was formally adopted in 381 at the Second Council of Nicea (after several other councils were held in other places), but typically we refer to the “birth date” of the Creed as being at the First Council in 325.

Why do we need a creed? Because even 1700 years ago, there were already “false teachers” who misread Holy Scripture, or who did not fully understand who Jesus Christ was and is: a real human person Who is also truly the Son of God and the Messiah, the Savior. Some thought He was only divine; others thought He was only human. However, Holy Scripture makes it clear that Jesus was and is one Person Who is both fully human and fully Divine.

The main opponent to this Truth at the Council of Nicea was a man named Arius. He believed that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father but rather was merely “created” by the Father at the beginning of Time. In other words, Arius believed that there had been a time when Jesus did not yet exist at all, and that He was “created” by the Father as the First of His creatures. Therefore, Arius taught that Jesus Christ was not truly the fully divine, co-eternal Son of the Father, but some form of a lesser deity. This is not true: we believe that Jesus is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the eternal Trinity. He has existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit from all eternity. Therefore, Arius’ belief constitutes a *heresy*. A heresy is a false doctrine: an idea that does not accurately convey the real Truth of the Christian Faith. Arius was considered an anti-Trinitarian, because he denied the reality of One God consisting of three distinct but co-eternal Persons. However, our Creeds clearly support this Trinitarian existence of one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The creed is an orthodox statement of faith, that is, one of right belief.

So fighting for our beliefs has not been unfamiliar to the Church then or now. However, most of our students probably have never had to fight to protect their faith, so the idea may be foreign to them. On the other hand, some may have needed to stand up for the truth in some way that they can think of and relate to the class. As one little boy in my fourth grade Sunday School class said years ago, “You better stand for something or you’ll fall for anything!” Our individualistic society does not teach students how to stand together for what is right—sometimes they aren’t even taught to think through their own decisions enough to make right choices. They are blessed by the Creed—someone (lots of someones!!) took the time and the energy to fight for what was right, and the result is that we are able to state confidently what we believe, and we can share that confession with our other Christian brothers and sisters.

### **Materials Needed:**

- Download and print the signs found in “Lesson supplement” 17A
- Tape (to attach sheets to the wall)
- Print out copies of the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed for each student.
- Pens, pencils for all students.

### **Opening Prayer (5 min.)**

Collect for Trinity Sunday found on p. 228 of the BCP *(Also allow the students some time to express their own prayers, concerns and thanksgivings).*

### **Review (5min.)**

- What is the Bible, and what can it do for us?
- Identify some “new” you learned about the Bible last week.

### **Introductory Activity (5-10 Min.)**

Post the “What do you believe” signs up around the classroom in random order. Each sign has a popular idea on it. Make sure each student has a pen or pencil, and ask them all to go around the room, read the signs, and write their initials on the signs that they agree with. Without taking the signs down, identify the signs with the most initials — why did most people agree with this statement? Now identify the signs with the least initials—why do fewer people agree with these statements? Ask one of the people who initialed the sign why they agreed with the statement. Help students understand that they need to be prepared to talk about what they believe and why they believe it.

## **Lesson** (20-25 min.)

Small group discussions: break groups down into 2 or 4 total groups. You can assign the scripture passages twice if you need or want 4 groups instead.

Group One: Read Matthew 16:13-18 (This is called “The Confession of Peter”)

- According to Jesus, where does Peter’s belief come from?
- How might God have revealed this to Peter?
- Why is it important to say what you believe, especially about your faith?

Group Two: Read John 1: 47-51

- What’s surprising about this passage?
- What specific part is a ‘confession’ (to know or acknowledge something) or a creedal statement (an “I believe’ statement)?
- Why is it important to say what you believe, especially about your Faith?

## **Reflection** (10-15 min.)

Have students come back together to report their discussion results. Make sure each group has a chance to talk about the third bullet.

At the end of discussion time, you will need to teach a little bit about the history of the Creed. Use the Book of Common Prayer to show them the three different creeds and explain their different purposes. Talk about the importance of writing down what we believe as Christians and the miracle that the Creed is still a statement that Christian Churches continue to be able to be united about. Tell them that their Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist friends have all agreed that this is a common creed for the Christian church in the world, not just in our own denominations.

## **Take-home Activity** (5 min.)

Take home copies of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and compare them. Which one would you rather say on Sunday mornings? Are there parts that you have trouble understanding? What have you learned about your faith by reading them carefully?

## **Closing Prayer** (5 min.)

The Nicene Creed *(Give the students some time to add their own prayers.)*

## **Scripture References**

- Matthew 16:13-18

— John 1: 47-51

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