

# WE BELIEVE



## Part One: What's a Creed?

# I. What's a creed?

- **A “statement of the essential articles of religious belief”/** “Any statement of convictions, principles, etc.” (American Heritage Dictionary)
- **A “statement of our basic beliefs about God”** (Catechism, BCP 851).
- **Necessary for Christian unity** (Lambeth Quadrilateral, BCP 877).
- **Versus “confession”** (a denominational statement, e.g., the Lutherans’ Augsburg Confession, the Reformed Westminster Confession).
- **Anglican theology:** “Lex orandi, lex credendi” and “Three-Legged Stool” of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

## II. Why have a creed?

- **To say what you believe.** When you are convinced of something, you feel moved to say it. *Saying* what you believe helps you *understand* what you believe (“getting a hold of it”; “making it your own”)
- **To share your beliefs.** If you think you have something valuable, you want to pass it on. To “keep the faith”
- **To have a “test for membership.”** Who’s formally “in” and who’s “out”? What rights/responsibilities go along with membership? Makes joining significant.

### III. Where did our creeds originate?

- **Shema** (“hear”)—the ancient Jewish summary of belief:

“Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

**Jesus said that this was “the first commandment”** and that the “second” was like it—love your neighbor as yourself. Everything the Jews believed in—their Law and the teaching of the Prophets—rested on those two commandments (Matthew 12:28-34).

## Where did our creeds originate? (continued)

- **Apostles' Creed**—By 200 CE, Christians in and near Rome were probably using a Latin creed similar to our present AC. There was a legend that each of the apostles contributed a clause to it, giving it its name. The AC was used especially at baptisms (and at daily worship to remind us of our Baptismal Covenant).
- **Pop Quiz:** What's the most obvious difference between The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed?

## Where did our creeds originate? (continued)

- **Nicene Creed**—By 300 CE, as the Church spread out, Christians were using Greek creeds similar to our present NC. This creed got its name because it was adopted at a gathering of church leaders in Nicea in 325 CE. (The form we use today was developed from the Nicea statement and finalized around 450 CE.) The NC expanded the AC by adding thoughts on who Jesus Christ was/is and on the work of the Holy Spirit. It was used at the Eucharist.

## Where did our creeds originate? (continued)

- **Athanasian Creed**—later in the 4th century CE, Athanasius developed this creed to emphasize Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as equal to God the Father. Athanasius was deeply involved in the controversy which led to the adoption of the NC. Still used sometimes in Anglican churches.

# IV. A Very Short History of the Nicene Creed

## Context

**Constantine** became the first Christian emperor at his conversion in 313 CE. This event radically changed the relationship between Church and State. Christians, who had previously been only tolerated, or persecuted, depending on the present emperor, were now allowed to be open about their faith. Theological discussions which had been done in secret were now encouraged publicly.

The Church had yet to establish “orthodoxy,” and debates were intense. Constantine sought unity and arranged the First Council of Nicaea.



## Schools/Main Characters

There were two main schools  
Christian thought at the time.



### The Alexandrian School

**Athanasius**, deacon of  
Alexander, bishop of Alexandria

- divinity of Christ
- saving act on cross
- unity of divine/human natures

### The Antiochene School

**Arius**, priest in Alexandria

- humanity of Christ
- moral example
- distinction between  
human/divine natures

## The Problem

- Arius claimed that Jesus Christ was a “creature” (creation) of God, rather than equal with God, eternal like God. Jesus was, however a “supreme creature” among God’s handiwork. Arius believed that titles such as “Son of God” were simply courtesy titles. He referred to Jesus as “**homoiousius**”—“of similar substance” with God.
- Athanasius claimed, with the majority of the Church, that Jesus was equal with, and eternal like, God. Athanasius emphasized salvation based on Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, and argued that a “creature” cannot save creation. Both the scriptures and liturgies in current use regarded Jesus as “savior”; therefore he was God incarnate. For that matter, Arius’ ideas bordered on polytheism. Even worse, to worship a “creature” would be idolatry. Athanasius referred to Jesus as “**homoousius**”—“of the same substance”

## The Solution: The First Council of Nicaea

- Took place in 325 CE. Probably between 220 and 250 bishops there, not including associates.
- Began with informal conversations between Arians and the orthodox.
- Constantine made a presentation, most likely focusing on unity v. some predetermined theological conclusions.
- The Arian Creed was submitted first and rejected.
- The baptismal creed of Palestinian churches was submitted by that bishop. It used the language of homoousios. It was received as orthodox, but was not the basis for our present NC.
- Most likely, the baptismal creed of the Jerusalem churches became form on which present NC is based. Those who rejected this creed were deposed and banished!
- Focus was the person of Jesus Christ. Concluded simply by stating belief “in the Holy Spirit.”

**Established Church’s accepted thinking on person of Jesus Christ.**

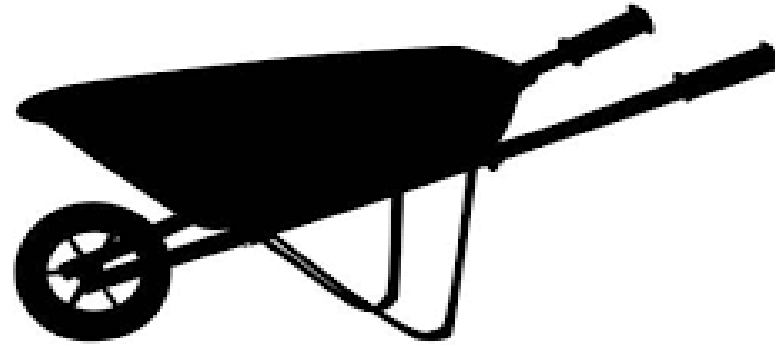
Set stage for development of the Trinity.

**V. What does it mean to**



**“believe”?**

“Believing That” or “Believing In”?



## Types of Believers (The Rev. James Adams)

- **Believer**—accepts ideas as true or real without being concerned about evidence (logic, empiricism)
- **True Believer**—accepts ideas as true or real despite evidence to the contrary
- **Skeptic**—instinctively doubts, questions, disagrees with ideas without evidence.

(The “natural constituency” of the Episcopal Church?

Why the creeds may be a stumbling block for many: being skeptical, and thinking of creeds as solely or primarily “believing that”).



## An Interesting Evolution in our Faith

“Consider this remarkable fact:

In the Sermon on the Mount,  
there is not a single word about **what to believe**,  
only words about **what to do** or **how to be**.

By the time the Nicene Creed is written, only three centuries later,  
there is not a single word in it about **what to do** or **how to be**  
– only words about **what to believe**.

*-- Rev. Dr. Robin Meyers, Retired UCC Pastor*

ANY  
QUESTIONS?

