

Presentation to Synod 2025 on the Nicene Creed

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Thank you for the invitation to be here at Synod, and for the opportunity to make this presentation on the Nicene Creed, a creed that sits at the heart of the ecumenical church. As the *Basis of Union* says: “The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by her use of the confessions known as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed” (paragraph 9).

Let me offer an introductory comment that might help explain why this conversation about the Nicene Creed is worth having even in the midst of a busy Synod, with other very important agendas.

It seems to me that the central issue for people of faith is: what is the nature of God’s relationship with the world – God’s providence – and how is that expressed in the world, and what does God’s care mean for human political economy or, to put it another way, love of God and neighbour?

This is not simply a theological argument, an abstract conversation about the meaning of words. What matters is how creeds and other statements shape our social imagination, or what Peter Matheson calls the “architecture of our faith” – the metaphors that shape our world.¹ That is, people can confess the same words, but see God’s providence and grace in very different ways for the way they live.

Let me offer you an illustration. Martin Luther was concerned for the grace of God, and a providence founded in God’s absolute sovereignty, all focussed on sin and disorder. God’s grace was expressed through forgiveness of sin and the life of the Church. It was also expressed in the role of the state in stopping disorder, and in society as a place of hierarchy and proper order.

The ordinary people, who Luther clashed with often, also believed in God’s grace. But they believed that they lived in a time when God’s grace was breaking into the world, transforming life now, overturning hierarchy and forging new and inclusive communities of equality.

So, I think the central question for you and I who live in Australia in 2025 is: what do the claims of the Nicene Creed contribute to the way we see God’s grace touching the world? And what does this mean for discipleship and church?

¹ Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Fortress Press, 2001), particularly chapter one.

When most of the church's bishops met at Nicaea in 325CE – at the direction of, and with financial support from the Emperor Constantine – they were wrestling with the same issue: what is the shape of God's grace in the world? The Creed that emerged from that Council has helped to shape the sense of where God's grace touches life and who bears that grace in the world.

So, two questions. First, what we can learn from the way the Creed was constructed? And second, how can we receive the Creed in ways that help us discern a sense of God's providence and grace that sustains our struggles to love God and neighbour?

Why Nicaea?

The potentially divisive issue facing the Church at the beginning of the 4th century was whether God's providence was expressed in Jesus in such a way that he could be called "Lord" – because he was truly God.

One part of the Church, seeking to protect the otherness and sovereignty of God said Jesus could not be God. Their suggestion was that Jesus was a lesser God who mediated between heaven and earth, a view usually labelled – though possibly unfairly - as Arianism.

The other part said Jesus really was God. The crucified, suffering one really is God, and brings God's life to the world. Only if Jesus really was God could he offer salvation.

The Emperor who, to be fair, was a champion of religious tolerance and had bishops as advisors as he wrestled with faith, really needed unity in the recently re-unified Empire. He needed the Church to sort the matter out – for its sake and his. So, Constantine called the council, provided transport and accommodation for over a thousand people for three months, and had an active interest in what occurred.

First issue

Here is the first issue of importance for us. In the early days of the Church, the central question was: how can people faithfully follow Jesus, and live a Christian life that is opposed to empire and its claims about God? That is, how do Christians shape a counter-cultural identity as you follow Jesus who is "Lord"?

By the time of Nicaea, the church had shifted its social location. Now it was trying to respond to the questions of an educated community about whether Christian faith was reasonable. So, the question at Nicaea was not the shape of discipleship, but defence of the church's claims about God within a wider society.

So, to ponder: whose questions about life and about Jesus shape our talk about the good news? That is, who are we trying to be relevant to? Is our interest primarily to shape disciples or to defend the reasonableness of faith?

Second Issue

Part of the shift in social location of the church had to do with a shift in the way the church understood itself and those who told its story. There was a tension between two senses of church. The first was a more charismatic sense of the church, with leaders recognised for their life with God (e.g., they had been through persecution). The second was an emerging sense of the church as a public institution which was being invited into a new, and less fractious, relationship with Empire and so could avoid persecution.

When the Emperor called the bishops to convene a Council at Nicaea, he was throwing his weight behind the bishops and this emerging sense of the church.

Institutions give more weight to unity. Authority rests in the ability to interpret the tradition, so the tradition must be agreed and clear. It is harder to remain open to personal and charismatic voices. I say that as a past General Secretary.

So, to ponder: How do we make more space for the charismatic leadership within the church? How do we stop doing what we mostly do - institutionalise such leadership - and learn to exist in a better sort of tension between institution and charisma?

Third issue

The third issue has to do with how our identity and location in society are shaped by our sense of God's providence. The bishops who met at Nicaea largely assumed that God is the absolute sovereign who is the primary cause of all things, and who works through people to enact God's will. Both the Church and the Emperor understood themselves to be agents of God's providential life. Indeed, the Emperor understood himself to be the bishop of the world beyond the Church.

That mutually beneficial relationship and shared understanding of God's sovereignty and providence allowed the church to see the world in terms of hierarchy and power. Later, this understanding of power would be used by church and empires to impose Christian faith and social order on newly "discovered" world – hence the Doctrine of Discovery and its foundation for laws that made it okay to invade Australia.

To ponder: The church at Nicaea was trying to negotiate its identity and relevance or mission. How does our desire to be relevant in society challenge our proper identity? For example, when does our desire to have a seat at the table with power cost us too much? Can people who follow the crucified Jesus honour those whose power is destructive?

Much of the good mission work being done in our church stresses cultural relevance. Which is great. But who keeps checking when relevance leads to a denial of identity? How do we recognise when cultural values are not ours?

The Creed and how we receive it

Let's be clear, creeds do not tell us everything about God or what we are to believe. They give us the grammar to be used. They suggest the boundaries within which Christians must talk about God and shape their discipleship, without insisting on one theological interpretation.

So, the Council of Nicaea said that it is right that Jesus is confessed as Lord. A people who affirm that God is one and there is only one God, can also affirm that Jesus is one with God. The creed says that this unity rests in the Father and the Son sharing the same substance; the same "God-ness" if you like. The difference between the persons comes from their relationship to the Father.

Together with the latter Council at Constantinople (381CE) – an issue I will return to in a minute – the church affirmed the triune life of God. Which means that when we think and speak about God we are talking about a diverse community of three persons, bound in love.

And yet the church has most often struggled with that understanding of God. We have preferred God to be One, sovereign and all-powerful; one who models hierarchy and control.

As Rowan Williams says, the Creed raises questions about "the interaction of theology and models of power" that are inescapable.² The Creed is not entirely to blame, but it did leave open the space for the church to be too closely related to empire, and to equate the power of that empire with the power and sovereignty of God. This has meant that the tradition of the church – our tradition – has supported colonial expansion, invasion, slavery, gender discrimination, and an imperial form of mission. All with the intention of making people Christian and ordering the world.

The challenge to receive the document

So, how, do we take this important document, and the flawed theology and social practices it has often made space for, and make it part of our lives in ways that sustain a better sense of God's providence and what it means to love God and neighbour?

² Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. Revised Edition (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 266.

The clue, I think, is that in our tradition the people of the church always need to receive statements of the church, to read and accept them in ways that contribute to their life and faith in their place. This insistence on the need for the assent of the people of God is one of the strengths of the Methodist tradition that is part of us, as it clearly stated in the 1986 Report of its conversations with the Roman Catholic Church.³

Let me return to my earlier comments about the Council of Constantinople. It quickly became clear after Nicaea that everything had not been said. There was little said about the Spirit, and nothing much about the church. Constantinople affirmed the Holy Spirit and the triune nature of God and set out some of the marks of the church. To be received in the church, the work of Nicaea had to be revisited, and further work done that would speak to the church. Strictly speaking, then, what we have is the Nicæan-Constantinople Creed. Further, after years when the debate at Nicaea was hardly acknowledged, the Creed was re-affirmed at Chalcedon in 451CE. There was an ongoing process of reception.

I think that after 1700 years, and for a community that exists in a country where – as our Preamble affirms – God dwelt and was known before Christians arrived and where Christians often supported and sustained invasion and dispossession, reception is a central issue.

So, first, it is possible to re-read the Creed and see how it might offer space for counter-understandings of its claims. There has been some work done in this area by people like Joerg Rieger who – incidentally - will be at UTC in September.⁴

The second task is to ask what else the church might need to say as it receives the Creed. What matters with creeds is both what they say and what they don't say – either because of their context or the challenges they face. The Nicene Creed, for example, omits all reference to the teachings of Jesus, his opposition to Caesar and empire, and its foundation for radical discipleship. It is these omissions that allow space for us to support empire and power.

So, from within our context, what was not said that needs to be said for us to better express our understanding of God and, particularly of discipleship? What do we need to speak about alongside the Creed? What further guidance is needed for what is right Christian practice?

That is one of the issues I have asked you to speak about in table groups.

³ Methodist World Council in Report of the Joint Commission Between the Roman Catholic Church and World Methodist Council, *Towards a Statement of the Church* (1982-1986. Fourth Series, Lake Janaluska, NC: World Methodist Council), 20.

⁴ See, for example, "On the *Homoousia*: The Liberative Potential of the Nicene Creed," *International Review of Mission*, Volume 113, Number 2 (November 2024): 261-279.

Conclusion

I am deeply grateful to this synod for enabling me to attend and present at an event in Geneva last November that started a year of celebration and conversation within the World Council of Churches. So, thank you to all of you – but particularly Jane and Peter.

My final question is: How can we reclaim and receive the Nicene Creed for worship, to enrich the discipleship of the Church, and to question the way we construct identity, relevance and mission?

TABLE QUESTIONS

1. What in this presentation about Nicaea was interesting, challenging or puzzling, or requires further action?
2. In the UCA tradition Statements of faith or theology need to be received by the Christian community and people. Sometimes this requires clarification or further statements that enable a creed, for example, to be embedded in the community.

What would you seek to add or clarify to better enable the Nicene Creed to inform our faith in Australia in 2025?