

✠ I teach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good afternoon.

If you're a Christian, what does that mean?

Does it mean that you're simply a good person? Or, that you *try* to be a good person? Or, at least perhaps, that you may want *someday* to be a good person? These things may be true about Christians, but chances are very high that many people of many faiths would want to make this claim about being a good person. In other words, if we asked 1000 people if they wanted to be a good person, and 99% or even 100% said, "Yes!", we wouldn't be able to say conclusively that all or *any* of these people are Christians. Perhaps half are Christians and half are Muslim; Perhaps 90% are Christian and 10% are atheists. We simply cannot tell if someone is a Christian by asking the question: "Would you like to be a good person?"

Well, why not? Is there some question that we could ask that tells us whether someone is a Christian or not?

I guess we could just ask, "Are you a Christian?" And, that would give us a better answer than simply asking, "Are you a good person?" But it doesn't quite tell us, yet, what a Christian is.

A Christian means something *specific*. A Christian, as the word implies, as the word took on its meaning sometime after 33 and before 41 (between Pentecost and the reign of Claudius, 41-54 AD, Acts 11:28) after Pentecost in Antioch implies, a Christian has *something* to do with Christ. Christians were those who were *about* Christ. And this finally gets to the heart of the matter — *Who is Christ?*

Let us return to a conversation Jesus had with his disciples.

[13] Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" [14] And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." [15] He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" [16] Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." [17] And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." [20] Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (ESV) He asked them who people thought he was? His disciples responded: "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets." His response: "But who do you say that I am?" To which Peter gives his confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16:13–20)

The answer to this question — *Who is Christ?* — is what separates the Christian from the Jew, and the Christian from every non-Christian. And notice, not everyone who *claims* to be Christian answers this question in the same way. Some people will answer that Christ was *simply* a good moral teacher. Jesus is good, is moral, and is a teacher — but believing that the Christ was *simply* a good moral teacher is not enough to make someone a Christian. For Christ is not only good, but the Good Himself, not only moral, but the fountain of Virtue, not only a teacher, but indeed the source of all Wisdom. And still, there is more to say.

Indeed, the question of *Who is Jesus the Christ?* was the central question of Nicaea, and whether we realize it or not, remains the central question today, and the central question until the end of this age. We are in the year 2025, which means that there have now been 1700 years of reciting the Nicene Creed, of which a first version was drafted at the Council of Nicaea in 325, the first of seven ecumenical councils of the Church. The Creed we recite — during Lent and Easter and Christmas — was formalized by the second of the seven ecumenical councils, the Council of Constantinople in 381 (1644 years).

What I don't want us to walk away believing is that Christians were in limbo about who Christ was until the Council of Nicaea or until the Council of Constantinople. That simply is not the case. Some will say that Nicaea made up the beliefs we have about who Jesus is, who God is, who the Trinity is. But the word *Trinity* came about much earlier, at least from Tertullian (160-225 AD). No *new* belief came about at Nicaea; rather, the Church met as 318 bishops and drafted a united creed of what the Church has always believed. The Council of Nicaea wrestled through how to put our faith into words, such that it made the answer to the question: *Who is Jesus?* clear.

From Peter's confession onwards, the followers of Jesus have always had a creed — we have always had an answer to the question of *Who is Jesus?*

Peter's Creed: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

From this confession springs forth the whole of our faith. From this starting point to *Who is Jesus?*, the apostles and authors of the gospels fill out a fuller picture of *Who is Jesus?*

We'll look at the four gospels, the creeds of the New Testament, and the creeds of the earliest church. From there, we'll look at a single controversy that arose — the heresy of Arianism — which is what the Council of Nicaea gathered to decide against. And what we'll see is that from Peter's confession through the rest of the New Testament through the Creed of Nicaea, there is a consistent, reliable answer to *Who Jesus is?* When we get to the Creed of Nicaea, we'll see that the bishops used wisdom to make clear what had already been passed down through the ages to the question of *Who is Jesus?*

### **From the Gospel of Matthew**

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matthew 1:1)

Matthew is doing something very powerful here. He begins by assuming that Jesus is the Christ — Christ is not merely a name, but the title of fulfillment, just as Peter had confessed. In answering who Jesus is, Matthew writes that he is the son of both David and Abraham, which means that he was eligible to inherit the blessings promised to both David and Abraham. There was no way for Jesus to be *the Christ* unless he was the son of David and the son of Abraham.

The end of Matthew is famous, often called the Great Commission:

[16] Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. [17] And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. [18] And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20, ESV)

Pay attention to the details. What claims does Jesus make? What sorts of things to do the disciples do? Jesus is *worshipped*. Jesus claims all authority in heaven and on earth. And he commands that we are to be baptized in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are to be baptized in *his* name — for he is the Son.

Who does Matthew say Jesus is? Matthew says that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, worthy of worship and possessor of all authority in the universe.

### **From the Gospel of Mark**

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1, ESV)

Mark answers *Who is Jesus?* immediately that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. And then he spends the rest of the gospel revealing that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus is the Son of God.

In the earliest copies of Mark's Gospel, he ends with the scene with the women at the tomb:

[6] And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. [7] But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:6–7, ESV)

When we are reminded that the Christ was to rule the throne of David forever, it’s hard to make a better case for this than Jesus, who after being crucified, rose from the dead. The implication is clear — Jesus is alive *forever*.

There is also, however, a longer ending to Mark, an ending that isn’t found in the earliest manuscripts, but which nevertheless includes the following:

[19] So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. (Mark 16:19, ESV)

## **The Gospels of Luke and John**

When we turn to the Gospel of Luke, we hear from the angel of God:

[30] And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. [31] And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. [32] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, [33] and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:30–33, ESV)

And, at the end of Luke:

[50] And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. [51] While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. [52] And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, [53] and were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:50–53, ESV)

When we turn to the Gospel of John, we get magisterial prose:

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. [4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1–5, ESV)

And, at the end of the Gospel of John:

[25] Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25, ESV)

This is the sort of thing we should expect Jesus, *as the Word from the beginning*, to do — to do an unwritable, unrecordable amount of things in his ministry on earth.

So, from the gospels, we answer the question *Who is Jesus?* with the following:

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,  
the one who is God and who was with him from the beginning,  
the Word and the Light and the Life, through whom the world was made,  
the heir of Abraham and of David, the one who was crucified, risen, and ascended,  
who holds all authority, who is worthy of worship, who has sent his apostles to proclaim him.

Just from the words of the authors of the gospels, we have put together a beautiful answer to the question: *Who is Jesus?* Just from these words, we have already put together a creed. And so, it will be no surprise to learn that we will see creeds not only from the gospels, but throughout the rest of the New Testament. Because again, these creeds are an answer to *Who Jesus is?* and that’s what the New Testament (as well as the Old!) chiefly concerns itself with.

## Creeds in the New Testament

From throughout the New Testament, we arrive at the idea of a *baton handoff*, as in a relay race. Jesus passed the baton of who he was to the apostles, and the mission of the apostles was to *bear witness* to who Jesus was and to pass that on to fellow disciples, and those disciples took this baton and handed it off, and so on, until this present day.

Notice this language of handing off the gospel from Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

[1] Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, [2] and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

[3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. [6] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. [8] Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. [11] Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (1 Corinthians 15:1–11, ESV)

The gospel, the answer to the question *Who is Jesus?*, is the baton we have received, and the one we seek to handoff to disciples among us, who will then pass this baton to the disciples after us.

What's important for every New Testament author — from the authors of the gospels to Peter and Paul — is that Jesus is the Christ. Indeed, the whole of the Old Testament is about the coming of the Christ — the one who is *anointed* to fulfill all of the promises of God. Every single time that we see the title “Christ,” we must understand that this title was given or earned precisely because Jesus fulfilled all these promises *according to the Scriptures*. In other words, there is continuity between the Old and New Testaments, because both testaments are Scriptures about *Jesus*. In the New Testament, we find that everything that was written about the Christ, has come to fulfillment in Jesus. This is why Paul stresses that Christ's death for our sins, that his burial, and his resurrection, were all according to Scripture. All of this was what *the Christ* had to fulfill.

Another important connection in the New Testament is that Jesus is Lord. Here this creed from Romans:

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9, ESV)

That Jesus is Lord means, of course, that he is in charge and holds all authority over us. But, this is another connection that links back to the Old Testament and to God. The word “Lord” in the New Testament is the word given in the Greek for YHWH in the Old Testament. And so, when the authors of the New Testament use the word, “Lord,” there is an unmistakable and undeniable connection to the divinity of God. More plainly, the word “Lord” also means “God.” The word “Lord” is something, as you'll recall, that shows up in the Nicene Creed.

Another creed that climaxes with the confession that Jesus is Lord is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians:

[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he

humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11, ESV)

Here, there is a double climax. First, the one in whom we put our hope and faith and trust is the one who went to death — death on the cross. And second, this very one who went to death on the cross is, in fact, *the Lord*. This is a stunning confession that places side-by-side Christ’s death for us and his divinity.

Yet another creed of the New Testament is found in Paul’s first letter to Timothy:

[16] Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated by the Spirit,  
seen by angels,  
proclaimed among the nations,  
believed on in the world,  
taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16, ESV)

### **The Creed of Colossians 1**

Finally, let us turn to the creed found in Colossians 1:

[15] He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. [19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15–20, ESV)

This is resplendent prose, glorifying Jesus for who he is. This hearkens back to John’s Gospel, where he lets us in that Jesus is the Word, the Light, the Life, and the one through whom the world was made. In no uncertain terms, Paul reiterates that everything that has come to be, “all things were created through him and for him.” And yet, at the same time, there is a sticky phrase, “the firstborn of all creation.” How we respond to this phrase does have the power to lead us astray. Indeed, many throughout the history of Christianity have taken to something like this phrase — the firstborn of all creation — and allow themselves to be led astray by it.

### **The Problem of Heresy**

The problem, that we have at last come to, is this: Was Jesus created? Or, has he always been? Every single *wrong* answer to the question *Who is Jesus?* has dire consequences — wrong answers may indeed mean the difference between heaven and hell, between life forever with Jesus and life forever without Jesus.

When we reflect for a moment, this makes sense. We cannot believe that Jesus is *not the Christ* and expect things to go well for us. We cannot believe that Jesus did *not* rise from the dead, and then expect to participate in the blessing of the resurrection *with him*. And ultimately, the same is true for whether Jesus was created or not. Because this fundamentally boils down to the question of whether Jesus is God or not. If Jesus is truly the Son of God, he cannot have ever been created, or he would be something *other than*, something *less than* God. But everything we confess, everything that we believe from the whole of the New Testament tells us that Jesus is worthy of *all worship, all glory, all praise*. Jesus cannot be *less than* God. So long as Jesus is who he said he is, so long as Jesus did what the apostles said he did, Jesus is God, full stop.

Nevertheless, the Jews do not believe Jesus is the Christ; the Muslims do not believe Jesus is God; the Mormons believe that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three, separate gods, and the Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that Jesus is God.

Neither the Muslims, Mormons, or Jehovah's Witnesses fundamentally believe something *new* — each of these are heresies that have been taught and believed since the earliest days of Christianity. And as we have already seen, from the gospels, from the creeds of the New Testament, none of these beliefs are consistent with what the apostles have handed off through the ages. We have received what the apostles handed off to the disciples, and what they handed down through the ages, to us. We have the good and true answer to the question *Who is Jesus?*

### **The Creeds Throughout**

Not only in the Gospels and in the New Testament, but also throughout tradition there has been a passing down of a creed, a core answer to the question *Who is Jesus?*

Throughout, it seems, the whole of church history there has been an understanding of a *rule[r] of faith* or a *measure of faith*. Let me put some clothes on this idea, using Scriptural imagery. Saint Paul writes that those who are newborn in the faith drink milk; but those mature in faith sustain themselves on solid food. Those who are in the faith *demonstrate* their faith — in word and in deed. And so, there are two things going on here: there is a proportion of faith, to which each of us is allotted and in which each of us are to grow. And, there is a rule, measure, *standard* of faith.

The Creed we regularly recite, *The Apostles' Creed*, is quite ancient in origin. Its based on an older creed, called the *Old Roman Symbol*, and we have evidence of it from at least 180 AD in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*:

...this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race...

Notice that this creed is already trinitarian in nature: one God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. And, if we reflect for a moment again on the Great Commission, we see that the scaffolding for a trinitarian formula was present there in the baptismal formula: "baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Indeed, there's something to be said that these creeds were precisely what converts confessed prior to, or at baptism. The beginning of the Christian life in baptism is triune — in the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The concept of the Trinity, rather than being some late invention of Christianity, was instead given linguistic form as controversies about the answer to *Who is Jesus?* arose and needed to be clarified.

### **The Problem of Arianism**

One of these problems, which I have already mentioned, was whether or not Jesus has always been, or if he has created at some point. Clearly, God the Son was born of the virgin Mary — but we do not believe that God the Son came into being at that moment in time. We believe that God the Son *always was, is, and will be*. But there are some who, throughout history, have made the claim that there was a time when the Son was not.

We call this Arianism. Arianism, from the namesake bishop Arius, holds that there must have been a time when the Son was not, there must have been a time when God created the Son, and though the Son must be in some sense divine, the Son also in some sense rank below God the Father, must be *subordinate* to God the Father. Arianism holds that the Son was created and that the Son is subordinate to the Father. In as plain of terms, this means that Arianism ultimately holds that the Son is not *fully* God.

And this is what led to the convening of the Council of Nicaea.

### **The Council of Nicaea**

The Council of Nicaea was not convened in a neutral sphere. There are politics involved, for the Church does not exist inside of an apolitical, neutral world. The Church lives and breathes in this world, in a particular place (or places), where a particular government operates and has power.

And so, it's worth noting that one of the things that made the Council of Nicaea possible was Constantine's *Edict of Milan*, which gave legitimate status (at last!) to Christianity within the Roman Empire. This meant that the bishops were free to assemble together for the purpose of *uniting together* on disputes and matters of the church.

The Council of Nicaea was the first of the seven ecumenical councils, but it was not the first council of the church. What does this mean? Before this opportunity for an ecumenical council — an entire, church-wide council — councils were conducted *regionally*, and matters and disputes were settled within their own, operating jurisdictions. Now that Constantine legitimized Christianity, and indeed, now that he was a convert (though not yet baptized, I think), he sought for a *united* Church. And quite plainly, without a united church, there would not be a united empire.

And so, the 318 bishops met and decided unanimously on the following creed:

### **The Creed of Nicaea**

We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten begotten from the Father, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, CONSUBSTANTIAL with the Father, through whom all things came to be, both those in heaven and those in earth; for us men and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became man, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead.

And in the holy Spirit.

There are (at least) three things to note.

First, notice what language the bishops use to make it abundantly clear that Jesus is not created. The bishops use the language of “only-begotten” and “begotten not made.” This word “begotten” is doing the work of clarifying how Jesus is the Son and simultaneously never created. There was never a time when the Son was not.

Second, notice what language the bishops use to make it abundantly clear that Jesus is fully God and in no way subordinate to him or somehow different from him. “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” And again, “consubstantial with the Father.” The key word here is “*homoousios*” — “of the same substance, of the same stuff.” Whatever the Father is, that's what the Son is! The Son of God is *fully* God.

Third, as I have been making the case, this Creed and its answer to *Who is Jesus?* is what has been consistently believed by Christians and what has been handed down by the apostles. What Nicaea does is leverage language to mean what we have always believe about Jesus, to mean what the apostles taught and handed down through the ages.

### **Other Things at the Council of Nicaea**

The Council of Nicaea, in addition to formalizing this first version of the Nicene Creed, also ruled on twenty other items. Some of these items included how to treat those who fell away during the persecution of Licinius, who in seeking status as sole emperor, turned against Christians he had previously favored.

### **Canon 11**

“Concerning those who have transgressed without necessity or the confiscation of their property or without danger or anything of this nature, as happened under the tyranny of Licinius, this holy synod decrees that, though they do not deserve leniency, nevertheless they should be treated mercifully. Those therefore among the faithful who genuinely repent shall spend three years among the hearers, for seven years they shall be prostrators, and for two years they shall take part with the people in the prayers, though not in the offering.”

Note that this ruling applies to those who apostatized — who rejected their Christian faith — without even any pressure or seizure. They are to spend three years among the hearers; that is, they are allowed to hear the Scripture and the sermon only, and then they must depart the service. Then, they are to spend seven years as prostrators, which means they are allowed to stay a little longer and hear the prayers. And finally, they are to spend two more years with the prayers.

Those who rejected their faith were to spend a total of twelve years before being allowed Holy Communion again. And, in the meanwhile, they were to join the ranks of the catechumens who were preparing for Holy Baptism. The catechumens would spend a total of three years, first as hearers, then as prostrators, then until the distribution of Holy Communion, before being baptized.

But more on the rest of this at another time.

### **Closing Remarks**

And so, in closing, it's worth noting two things. From the Council of Nicaea, we see that the bishops took the faith to heart. Those who abandoned the faith were not to be welcomed back until they had demonstrated, seriously demonstrated, that they did in fact believe *the confession* of Nicaea. And second, we see that the creed of Nicaea gives sturdy language to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and *never* created.

*He is fully God, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, of one being with the Father.*

But this creed of Nicaea is not the one we recite today. Arianism persisted. More work was needed. And so, the Council of Constantinople was called in 381, and there they finalized the creed we know and recite today.

If you're a Christian, what does this mean? Let's recite one more creed of the New Testament, found in 2 Timothy:

“[11] The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
[12] if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he also will deny us;  
[13] if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Timothy 2:11–13, ESV)

**Amen.**