

We're in the midst of a 6-week sermon series about the creeds. Today we focus on the sections about Jesus Christ.

On the back of the bulletin is a handout showing the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. You might want to look at it. It's a little hard to see with all of the expansions that are shown. But each creed has 3 paragraphs, one each for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And the middle paragraphs about the Son are the longest. The paragraphs about Jesus Christ make up 51% of the Nicene Creed and 65% of the Apostles' Creed.

Because these sections are such a large portion of the creeds, I was toying with devoting multiple Sundays to them, but then the series would have been too long. So I'm going to try to talk about these paragraphs in one sermon today (with just a little carryover next week as well).

I have also mentioned that looking at the creeds in their final form is a bit like listening in to only one side of a telephone conversation. You can hear some things, but you miss what they're responding to. Every phrase and sometimes every word is there because some fringe group in the early church believed the exact opposite. That will come into play today.

And you can pretty readily see what the two biggest controversies were if you look at the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds side by side.

The Apostles' Creed more or less predates the Nicene Creed even though it wouldn't be locked into its final form until centuries after the Nicene Creed.

But if you look at the Apostles' Creed in the section about Jesus Christ, you can readily see what the first controversy is. It may be a little surprising to 21<sup>st</sup> century folks. I made a passing reference it 2 weeks ago.

There is some bizarre myth that floats around our world that the early Christians thought Jesus was just a regular human being. And that it was later generations of the church, centuries later, who "invented" the idea that Jesus was somehow divine.

What's bizarre is it's completely backward. The early church emphasized Jesus' divinity. It wasn't until the centuries that some Christians regarded him as something less than God, just a regular guy, a teacher, but not the Son of God.

So when 21<sup>st</sup> century folks say that the early Christians only thought Jesus was a regular human—that's not the case. It's not what they proclaimed in scripture. And it's not the way Christian history went. The early Christians were very firm in their belief that Jesus somehow shared oneness with God.

And that comes through in scripture. The New Testament is replete with references about Jesus sharing oneness and identity with God.

Philippians chapter 2:

"Christ Jesus (was) in the form of God, (but) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, (and was) born in human likeness."<sup>1</sup>

Ephesians chapter 1:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world."<sup>2</sup>

Hebrews chapter 1:

"In these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (This Son) is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."<sup>3</sup>

1John chapter 1:

"We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life."<sup>4</sup>

John chapter 1:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."<sup>5</sup>

All of these early Christian writings proclaim that Jesus is somehow God. In fact, that's one of the two bedrock beliefs of early Christianity. Jesus was somehow God. And Jesus was somehow raised from the dead, which I'll say more about next week.

All of these early writings proclaim that the man, Jesus of Nazareth is also the Christ, more specifically the Cosmic Christ, who was with God in the beginning, who was God, who was shared God's nature and imprint and being.

That was NOT a later idea. The early Christians did not think Jesus was just a regular man. He was also somehow God walking amongst us. God was intimately present, somehow, in this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

In fact, the first great controversy in the early church didn't deny Jesus' divinity. They took that as a given. Instead, they denied Jesus' humanity. There was an early fringe group that said Jesus was so divine that any attribute about him that seemed human must have been just a

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<sup>1</sup> Phil 2:5-7

<sup>2</sup> Eph 1:3-4

<sup>3</sup> Heb 1:2-3

<sup>4</sup> 1John 1:1

<sup>5</sup> John 1:1-2, 14, 18

façade, a costume. Jesus might have "appeared" to be human, he might have "seemed"<sup>6</sup> to be human, but he was really just a God in disguise. He was never really born, because gods couldn't be born. He never really died, because gods can't die.

So if you look at the Apostles' creed, this is what they're trying to push back against. Yes, Jesus is God's only Son, our Lord.

But he was also born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered.

He was crucified.

He died.

He was buried.

The earliest forms of the Creeds emphasize these events in Jesus' life to remind us that Jesus lived a real human life, in addition to being somehow part of God's nature from before the creation of the universe.

Later on, there would be a group that emphasized Jesus' humanity, but that was centuries later. The early Christians were locked in on his divinity.

But people sometimes ask why the creeds skip over so much of Jesus' life. He was born, then he suffered and died and was raised. Why doesn't it mention anything else?

Three reasons:

#1. Yes, the early Christians thought Jesus' life and teaching were important. But they were regarded as important because he was somehow the Son of God who was incarnate and born as a real human being, and because he suffered, died, and was raised from death. Thus they thought the two most important things about Jesus were the fact that he was God made human, and that he had died, and then was raised. If those things aren't there, then Jesus is just another human teacher. If those things aren't there, then Jesus is not Lord. His teachings are important only because he is God as well as human, and because he did die and was raised.

The #2 reason the creeds skip over most of Jesus' life: The creeds are not complete. They are a summary, a thumbnail sketch of what's most important in scripture. But they don't replace scripture. If you want to know about the rest of Jesus' life, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John can tell you all about it.

And #3 reason only his birth and passion are there: These things are mentioned in the creeds because they remind us that Jesus did truly live and truly die as a human being.

But pendulums swing. The first great controversy was about whether Jesus was human in addition to being divine. Centuries later, there would be the opposite question. Was Jesus really divine?

So if you look at the Nicene Creed compared to the Apostles' Creed, you might notice that there's more about Jesus. In fact there's a long section about how he's

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<sup>6</sup> They were called "Docetists" from the Greek word for "seem"

"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.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven."

This is in response to the later controversy. There was a different fringe group running around in the 300s. In fact, of all the fringe groups in early Christianity, this one was the largest. They thought that Jesus was a real human being. And they thought Jesus was divine, or at least, *mostly* divine. But they also thought Jesus was not quite equal to God. A divine being? Yes, more or less. The greatest of all God's creations? Yes, certainly. But truly God? Well... not quite.

Their famous slogan was, "There was a time when he was not."

They would say that at some point in the past, maybe even before the creation of the world, God created the Christ, the Son. But he wasn't equal to God. And he wasn't part of God from the beginning.

And if you think this was an esoteric debate held in rarified theological ivory towers, think again. This was a debate amongst common Christians at the ground level.

St. Gregory of Nyssa writes about this controversy as part of daily life in Constantinople. He says,

"Every part of the city is filled with such talk; the alleys, the crossroads, the squares, the avenues. It comes from those who sell clothes, moneychangers, grocers. If you ask a money-changer what the exchange rate is he will reply with a dissertation on the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you inquire about the quality and the price of bread, the baker will reply, 'The Father is greatest and the Son subject to him.' When you ask at the baths whether the water is ready, the manager will declare that 'the Son came forth from nothing.'"<sup>7</sup>

A large part of the reason that the original council of Nicaea was called in 325, and the council of Constantinople was called in 381, was to deal with this question. And they settled on the words we now call the Nicene Creed. Jesus is equal to God. Jesus is truly God from the very beginning. Jesus is of one being with the Father.

Yes, he lived a real human life. And yes, he was really God.

But why should we care? What has this 4<sup>th</sup> century controversy got to do with us?

Plenty, if you think about it.

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<sup>7</sup> *Oration on the Deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, 46:557

What does it mean for us that Christ is eternally begotten?

It means that in Jesus Christ, God is with us. And God is with us, even in tough times. It means that in Jesus, God has shared our human condition, including sharing human pain and death.

If Christ wasn't of the same substance as God, then he'd be a second, lesser God, some sort of demi-god. Knowing Christ would not be knowing God.

But that's not what scripture tells us. Jesus Christ was with God in the beginning. He was God. And in him, God took on flesh and lived in our midst. And in knowing Christ, we know God.

It is a paradox, but it's an important paradox. Is Jesus human? Yes, really human. Is he God incarnate, is he equal to God? Yes he is.

God from God, light from light, true God from true God.  
And yet truly born, truly died, truly raised.

And these are both so important.

One ancient theological statement said it this way:

"That which is not assumed is not redeemed."<sup>8</sup> Or you could translate it: "That which is not taken on is not healed."

In other words, Jesus had to be fully human and fully divine to save human beings. If he wasn't God, he wouldn't have the power. If he wasn't human, his power wouldn't do us any good. If he was only half human or half God, he could only half save us.

But God shared our human life so we could share in his divine life.

God became one of us, so that we might become one with him.

Jesus Christ. Truly God. Truly human.

And because of that, we are truly saved, and truly healed.

And that is truly good news.

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Critique of Apollinarius and Apollinarianism*, Epistle 101