

We're in the middle of a sermon series on the creeds. In the past 2 weeks I've focused on God the Father and God the Son. Today I want to mainly focus on God the Holy Spirit. But before I do that, there is one thing I want to tackle from last week that I didn't have time to address.

Last week I said that there were two bedrock beliefs in the early church. For some reason, there's a modern myth that both of these things were added to Christianity centuries later. But the evidence of scripture and history says otherwise.

One of these early bedrock beliefs is the idea that Jesus was somehow divine as well as human. If you read through scripture and history, you get the sense that the early Christians weren't exactly sure how he was divine as well human. They couldn't fully explain it. But they proclaimed it anyway because they felt they had to. They knew that in the person of Jesus Christ they had somehow experienced God's presence somehow tied up with this extraordinary human being. I talked about that issue last week.

But the other early bedrock idea in the early church was that Jesus was executed, but then was raised from the dead. Again, this wasn't something they could fully explain. They knew as well as we do that dead people usually stay dead.

But they were adamant that they had had an experience of the risen Christ in their midst. This wasn't a later addition. This was from the beginning.

The bedrock scripture is from 1Corinthians 15. Paul is writing about 20 years after the Resurrection. But he's referencing back to what he was taught when he first became a Christian. And that would have been within a year or two of the Resurrection.

Paul goes to great lengths in 1Corinthians 15 to establish the fact that Christ has been raised. For him it is a rock solid established fact. Paul says to the church, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."¹

And there were hundreds of eyewitnesses Paul says. He tells us that the Risen Christ appeared to Peter and the rest of the 12 disciples. Then he appeared to more than 500 of his followers, most of whom are still alive when Paul is writing.² 'Christ has been raised from the dead,' Paul is saying; 'That's a fact. And if you don't believe me, check it out with the hundreds of eyewitnesses still running around.

The fact of the Resurrection was a central claim of the early church from the earliest times.

Now you could dismiss that claim as crazy. You could make an argument that the early Christians were delusional or that they were being deceptive. But you cannot say that the

¹ 1Cor 15:3-4

² 1Cor 15:5-6

idea of the Resurrection was made up centuries later—it was there from the beginning. And what's more, it is central to the Good News of Christianity.

One great Roman Catholic biblical scholar says this:

"Paul saw clearly that if Jesus was important only for what he did during his mortal existence, (then) he was of no value to the Corinthians who gathered in his name. Jesus may have been a good teacher or a powerful prophet, but if he was not resurrected... if he had not overcome mortality, he could not lead others to a share of life greater than the merely mortal. If Jesus is not raised, Christianity is simply another cult or ethical society, and not a particularly attractive one."³

And he continues:

"If the resurrection is excluded... then Christianity is a delusion and a waste of time. But if Jesus is raised as Lord, everything changes radically."⁴

It was the core bedrock belief of the early church that Jesus was somehow God as well as human. And it was a core bedrock belief that he had died and was raised from the dead.

Thus the attention given to the 2nd paragraph of the creeds focusing on Jesus incarnation and resurrection is not just because it was important to the later church. It's because it was important to the church from the beginning, and it was an idea worth defending and proclaiming.

Plus they believed that they somehow continued to experience God's presence in their midst, even after Jesus had been raised, and even after he ascended into heaven. They believed God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit was still present in their hearts and in their midst.

Which brings us to the 3rd paragraph of the creeds. You might want to look at the back your bulletins. I printed text of the 3rd paragraph of the Nicene and Apostles' Creed in parallel.

In the Apostles' Creed, the 3rd paragraph says simply, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." And then it adds a few other things, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." So the Holy Spirit is mentioned almost by title, and then the creed moves on to other things.

The Nicene Creed says a bit more. But that's in its final form from 381. In its original form in 325, it was even shorter than the mention in the Apostles Creed. The original 3rd paragraph of the Nicene Creed was only 5 words, in both the original Greek and in English translations.

There was a medium length 1st paragraph that started, "We believe in one God..."

There was a longer 2nd paragraph that began, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ..."

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creeds*, p. 180.

⁴ Ibid.

But then came the 3rd paragraph. In its original form it simply read, "And in the Holy Spirit." That's it. That's the original form.

"We believe in one God, the Father..."
"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ..."
"And in the Holy Spirit."

That's it. Drop the mic and walk away.

But that doesn't tell us much. So in 381 they expanded this paragraph significantly:
"We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father⁵
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets."

So what do these statements say to us about the Holy Spirit?

Before I dive into that, I want to step back for just a second. It's been said that the Holy Spirit is often the forgotten 3rd member of the Trinity. Our focus is often on the God the Father or on Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is often an afterthought.

Yes, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in scripture. The wind of God or the Spirit of God is mentioned in the 2nd verse of the Bible. And he keeps popping up from time to time.

But there's not as much about the Holy Spirit as there is about the Father and the Son. And there is not the same level of clarity about the Spirit as there is about the Father and the Son.

So what does the Nicene Creed say?

First it says, "We believe in the Holy Spirit." That puts the Holy Spirit on par with the Father and the Son. They are all God.

If we're not sure about that, it continues by saying that he is "the Lord, the giver of life." Those are two other descriptions of God, Lord, and source of life. Again, he is God.

We'll skip over the next line for a moment and jump to
"With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified."

In scripture, only God is worthy of glory and worship. Again, this says that the Holy Spirit is God.

Then, it says, "He has spoken through the Prophets." This is far more important than we might guess.

⁵ This phrase "and the Son", was never part of the original creed, and was added gradually in the west beginning in Toledo, Spain, in 589 AD, but never accepted in the east.

There were fringe groups in the early church who thought that the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament were different Gods. To say that God in the person of the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets is a way of affirming that there is only one God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel, is the same as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And before we're too harsh on this crazy fringe group, I still sometimes hear Christians saying something similar. Something along the lines of, "The God of the Old Testament is a God who is vengeful or jealous or warlike or blood thirsty. The God of the New Testament is a God of peace and love."

But there are not different Gods. And God is not bi-polar. And God wasn't having a bad-hair day in the Old Testament and then got his act together in the New Testament. God is the same God throughout.

Now, our human understanding of who God is undoubtedly grew and developed as we got to know God more and more. I would certainly say that in scripture you can see a growth in human understanding of who God is. And we know God most completely in the person of Jesus Christ. But the God who was made known in Jesus is also the God who spoke through the prophets. They are one and the same.

In fact, Jesus tells us that our spiritual understanding can grow over time through the influence and work of the Holy Spirit. He says in John:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."⁶

Jesus couldn't teach his followers everything they needed to know. The early church, and the church today, still rely on the Holy Spirit to to guide us and help us and teach us.

OK, but there's that line I skipped over:

"Who proceeds from the Father (and the Son)." And as I footnoted on the handout, the words "and the Son" were no part of the original creed. They were added a couple of centuries later in Spain, and eventually got picked up by the other western churches and eventually became part of the official Latin, Roman Catholic version of the Nicene Creed. But in the Eastern Orthodox churches, that new language was never accepted. In fact, these words were one of the excuses for the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicating each other when eastern and western Christianity split in the year 1054. To be fair, they had been growing apart for many reasons, and they were looking for an excuse. Nevertheless, these words were never part of the original Nicene Creed, and they have been controversial.

In fact, in the Episcopal Church, they are now optional. You may remember in the summer of 2016 we used a newer trial form of the Creed that dropped those words. And all of us, including me, tripped over that phrase because we're so used to saying, "and the Son."

⁶ Jn 16:12-13

There are some subtle theological issues here. And there are some nuances between Greek and Latin words being used. But the bottom line is these words and this issue are difficult because you can make a good scriptural argument either way.

Case in point. In John 14 Jesus talks about "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name."⁷

But then in the next chapter Jesus turns around and says, "I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth."⁸

So, does the Holy Spirit come just from the Father, or from the Father and the Son? It's hard to say.

But what we can affirm, east and west, is that the Holy Spirit is Lord, he is God, he is worthy of worship and glory, along with the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit is there to lead us into all truth. He is there to support and guide us. And he is present with us and within us. Come Holy Spirit. Come.

⁷ Jn 14:26

⁸ Jn 15:26