



BULLETIN INSERTS

September 28, 2025 – Pentecost 16 (C)

The Nicene Creed: Week 3

To commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter, bishop of Wisconsin, has written a series of reflections on the Nicene Creed and its relevance for contemporary Episcopalians. Over the coming weeks, we'll share his teachings, written mostly in a question-and-answer format.

Wasn't the message of Jesus about what to do and how to be rather than what to believe. Why does the Creed focus on the latter?

The short answer to this question is that the life and teachings of Jesus were not in dispute. The early church already took the teaching and example of Jesus seriously. They were contained in the scriptures, which were already read in worship every week. The church put love and compassion at the heart of its life and teaching. It organized social services for the poor, hungry, and needy. It founded hospitals. Its teaching reflected the example of Jesus in critiquing wealth and violence. It advocated for hospitality to the stranger and foreigner. The dignity of traditionally marginalized groups like women, children, and the poor was honored in a way unprecedented in the ancient world (though, admittedly, the church did not embrace total equality of women and men). The church surely did not practice all of this perfectly, always, and everywhere. But none of the above was particularly controversial. It was the emphatic teaching of the theologians most often identified with the defense of the Nicene faith, e.g., Athanasius of Alexandria, Macrina the Younger, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, and others. And these teachers understood that the practice of the church is grounded in its belief.

Not everything that was decided by the Council of Nicaea is in the Creed. The Council also addressed issues of church organization and discipline, including penalties for clergy guilty of sensual sin (Canon 2) or greed and usury (Canon 17). Canon 12, reflecting the church's commitment to peace, established penance for those who "having cast aside their military girdles, but afterwards returned, like dogs, to their own vomit." Canon 17 did address a disputed question: to what extent were mercy and forgiveness possible for those who had denied their faith during a recent persecution? Imitating Jesus, the canon declared such people should be "dealt with mercifully."

But those canons did not address the controversy that had led to the calling of the Council of Nicaea. The debate roiling the church was not about Jesus' moral teachings, but rather who Jesus was and how he was related to God, whom he called Father. And, with that, questions about the basic understanding of God. The answer to that question had implications for the salvation of humanity and the restoration of creation. The answer to that question also has implications for why the teaching and example of Jesus should matter more than any other human teacher.