

# Commentary: Why add Nicene Creed to our confession?

June 5, 2024

We will try to answer questions posed by Eric Black, editor of the *Baptist Standard*, regarding our hope to add the Nicene Creed to our Baptist Faith and Message.

When one of our number mentioned adding the creed to the confession, we immediately said, “Yes!”

Let us share with you our heart for the glory of God.

## ‘Why this motion, and why now?’

Black asked, “Why this motion, and why now?”

We believe it is right, good and necessary to add the creed to our confession now. Next year is an important trifold anniversary.

The year of our Lord Jesus Christ 2025 marks the centenary of the Baptist Faith and Message, the quincentenary of the modern recovery of believers’ baptism, and the 1,700th anniversary of the initial formation of the Nicene Creed.

These three events remind us of the providential utility of the creed for two necessary activities—teaching the faith to believers and protecting the flock from false teachers.

# What about Baptist heritage?

“What is your response to those who say Baptists do not descend from the [Great Tradition](#)? What of our Anabaptist heritage?” Black asked.

## Heresy

First, in A.D. 325, long before the advent of Roman Catholicism and while believers’ baptism still was evident, bishops primarily from the East gathered at the Council of Nicaea to examine the teachings of Arius.

They found the heresy of [Arianism](#) so distorted the person of Jesus Christ and so undermined Christ’s work they were compelled to craft a memorable summary to remind believers of the biblical truths about our only Lord and Savior.

In affirmation of the prophecy of Paul that “heresies” or “factions” must arise to demonstrate who God’s “approved” teachers are (1 Corinthians 11:19), the battle to protect the hearts and minds of believers against those false teachers who diminish the one true God goes on.

[Arianism](#), [Marcellianism](#), and many other Trinitarian and Christological heresies and errors continue to assail the church. We see them in many forms today, including Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses, two groups chillingly adept at trapping untaught Southern Baptists in their webs.

## Anabaptists

Second, in 1525, the first Anabaptists submitted their consciences to the lordship of Jesus Christ and began recovering the baptism of believers only. These precious men and women subsequently suffered exile, torture and death from Magisterial and Romanist authorities alike.

Some assume the Anabaptists were anti-credal because they excoriated the

evil compulsion of conscience by confessional states. However, major early Anabaptist leaders like Balthasar Hubmaier, Leonhard Schiemer, Pilgram Marpeck and Peter Riedemann wrote commentaries on, developed lengthy confessions from and heartily affirmed the classical creeds.

Moreover, the three largest groups of Anabaptists—Swiss Brethren, Mennonites and Hutterites—were led to affirm classical theology in response to inroads made by Socinians—or Unitarians.

Hans de Ries—the Anabaptist leader upon whose confession John Smyth, the first English Baptist pastor, wrote an approving commentary—struggled long to bring Mennonite doctrine into orthodoxy.

The Anabaptist way of using the creeds to define doctrine should encourage Baptists who appreciate the Anabaptists to adopt the Nicene Creed.

## **Trinitarian**

Third, Southern Baptists always have confessed the biblical doctrine of the Trinity expressed in the Nicene Creed.

In 1925, the Baptist Faith and Message article on God summarized the robust, biblical trinitarianism of the Nicene Creed. The article was amended in 2000 explicitly to exclude [modalism](#).

After that amendment, the article, while still orthodox and accurate, still was “most underdeveloped,” according to “the dean of Southern Baptist theologians” James Leo Garrett Jr., of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Baylor University.

This underdevelopment sadly enabled some to “tamper with the Trinity,” in the language of Millard Erickson, also of Baylor and Southwestern.

The Baptist Faith and Message certainly is true in what it outlines about

the Holy Trinity and the one Lord Jesus Christ, but we no longer can presuppose the underlying biblical doctrines of the Trinity and Christology are understood rightly.

Southern Baptists should make explicit our robust affirmations of the Trinity and the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must teach the fullness of the Christian faith and warn against errors and heresies that contradict essential dogmas of the Christian faith, both current and future.

## **‘Will you still make the motion?’**

In light of pushback since the proposed motion was reported, “will you still make the motion? If so, will the motion be modified in any way?” Black asked.

### **Yes**

We have seen no substantive proposal that would prompt us to alter our plans. Some have proposed we follow a different process than what the Southern Baptist Convention has used previously. Some may intend thereby to lock up the creed in a committee.

Others are innocently and understandably nervous about a hasty adoption of a change in the confession. We hope to put the minds of the latter group at ease.

The process of democracy always is dynamic, and that naturally makes us uncomfortable. However, Baptists must never surrender democratic governance, and we have yet to adopt a different process.

If we follow the current rules fairly and in good spirit, we believe God will guide the Southern Baptist Convention providentially to the truth we should all affirm. We believe Southern Baptists ultimately will agree that long-established Christian orthodoxy is absolutely necessary.

Ascribing to our one Lord God the honor, dignity and majesty true believers owe him is worth going through the Baptist process of democratic deliberation. Baptists have shown they will respond with appropriate urgency on issues of importance. There can be no more important issue than the untrammelled and unqualified lordship of Christ.

## **Modified motion?**

As for proposals to modify the motion, we would remind our brothers and sisters the Nicene Creed reached its primary form almost 2,000 years ago. As such, we believe there should be no modification whatsoever of the substance of this creed, the most widely accepted confession of the faith in Christian history.

It is wise to heed the witness of the Spirit in the voices of true believers across space and time, as they honored and expounded Holy Scripture.

At the request of ecumenically minded Baptist scholars, we have placed brackets around the *Filioque*—Latin: “and the Son.” This will encourage Baptists to do their own homework in the Bible and arrive at their own conclusions about the exact form of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit (See John 15:26). These brackets also indicate we believe both the Eastern and Western editions of the Nicene Creed are acceptable.

We also decided to use the lower-case of “virgin” in reference to Mary so as to accommodate the consciences of our brethren concerned about the message it might send about popular Romanism.

While we accepted those two modifications, we believe neither is substantive.

## **‘No creed but the Bible’**

We recognize some are arguing, “we have no creed but the Bible.” While that sentiment certainly is evident in Southern Baptist history, it always has

been a minority position that belongs more with the Campbellites than with the Baptists.

Baptists who use this admittedly pithy motto typically are arguing for *sola scriptura* or *suprema scriptura*. We affirm their claim. But Liberals, [Unitarians](#), [Subordinationists](#) and [Kenoticists](#) have used the same motto, hoping thereby to accord themselves opportunity to modify the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We deny their claim.

Yes, you should be alarmed at how some recently have begun treating the confession as a creed in a legalistic manner. Southern Baptists wisely draw a distinction between creeds and confessions. “Creeds” describe central teachings of the universal Christian faith. “Confessions” are much broader and distinguish various Christian individuals, churches and groups.

On the one hand, Southern Baptists must reaffirm the Preamble of the Baptist Faith and Message as a good description of the purpose and limits of our confession.

In accordance with the Preamble’s traditional five qualifications, we believe confessions are variable, multiple and non-binding upon churches or individuals, except where a church or association deems a particular doctrine necessary for membership.

We are Baptist Confessionalists, as McKinion and Yarnell recently argued in [Baptist Press](#). Ross Shelton shared helpful thoughts on these matters in the [Baptist Standard](#) in October 2019.

On the other hand, we contend the confession now should provide a definition of its most basic teachings through defining its existing terminology of “creeds.”

We believe the Nicene Creed defines well two of the nonnegotiable dogmas of the Christian faith—the Trinity and Christology. We would encourage

individuals, churches and associations to examine these two teachings of the creed to see if they indeed are true and significant. We believe you will agree they are. We view the creed as right, good and necessary toward that end.

## **Confessional and creedal**

Let's preserve our Baptist distinctives by being confessional with our confessions. And let's preserve Christian orthodoxy by being credal with the creed. We honor your liberty of conscience to come to your own conclusions about both the confession and the creed.

We would encourage all those interested in the biblical basis of the Nicene Creed to review the [video recently posted](#) at the Center for Baptist Renewal by Matthew Emerson of Oklahoma Baptist University and Luke Stamps of Anderson University. Four Southern Baptist scholars therein demonstrate the biblical basis for the Nicene Creed in its structure, articles and clauses.

We believe you will agree with us and with prominent Baptist leaders like W.A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas. He defined "creed" as "an expression of doctrinal belief, what the Bible teaches." Criswell also praised publication of the Nicene Creed: "Now isn't that a magnificent statement to be universally published as the orthodox faith?" Amen, pastor.

## **For the glory of Christ**

We are passionate for the glory of Christ. We are convicted that the Father wants us to proclaim and defend the honor of his Son, our one Lord, Jesus Christ.

Alas, we have seen Jesus Christ diminished by new forms of the ancient

Greek heresies of Arianism and Marcellianism and by the modern German error of Kenoticism. These teachings distort the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord.

We are orthodox Christians. We believe in God the Father. And we believe in Jesus Christ. And we believe in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is our “one Lord.” He is not a second lord with subordinate authority to the Father. He is “God from God” and “true God from true God.”

Maintaining the ontological unity and simplicity of God, we believe the Son is “begotten of the Father before all ages.” He became man, born of a virgin. He died on the cross, and on the third day, he arose from the dead. This is the gospel that saves all who will believe.

Christ then ascended to the divine throne. He will return one day to judge everyone, and “his kingdom shall have no end.”

Maintaining the ontological unity and simplicity of God, we also believe the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father [and the Son].

## **Mission**

Furthermore, Baptists have been a people compelled by mission. There is no meaningful mission apart from the confession “Jesus is Lord.”

We believe the Nicene Creed gives us language to help us when someone on the field asks, “Who is Jesus?”

A casual reading of the creed convinces of the undiminished lordship of Jesus Christ in a way that has been expressible in contemporary language for these 1,700 years. We borrow from the creed even when we do not officially acknowledge the creed.



Like many who have walked the faithful road of Christian confession before us, we always seek to define, articulate and defend the faith once for all delivered to the saints in the Scriptures.

How can we all help ensure we are not reading the Bible like one of the ancient heresies mentioned earlier or some other contemporary heretical group? The Nicene Creed is a faithful articulation of the faith once delivered and indicates how our reading of the text is aligned with its meaning so we may exalt Jesus Christ.

Baptists are not a sect within Christianity. We, in our time, seek to make a meaningful contribution congruent with faithful Christian teaching. Reinforcing our confession with the Nicene Creed carries us further toward a meaningful contribution.

We invite everyone to proclaim the Lord by voting for every motion that will bring the Nicene Creed into our confession and by voting against any substantive modification of the creed itself.

The Nicene Creed is a right, good and just way to glorify Jesus Christ as Lord. It can be used as an effective instrument to teach the true faith and to push back heresy and error, not only now, but far into future generations.

Adoption of the Nicene Creed will demonstrate to a watching world the most important issue for Southern Baptists is not human affairs, nor human glory, but the glory of God alone. Let's adopt the Nicene Creed, for the glory of Christ.

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