

## ARTICLES

## Canon to Creed and Back Again

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The Council of Nicaea (325) stands as one of the most consequential events in Christian history. The creed it produced is, as J. N. D. Kelly observes, “one of the few threads by which the tattered fragments of the divided robe of Christendom are held together.” Yet what exactly is the Nicene Creed, and how should it be understood? This article addresses these questions by clarifying what the creed is not, what it is, and what it contains, along with its theological implications. Central to this inquiry is the early Christian notion of the canon of truth, especially as developed by Irenaeus. Far from curtailing thought, the canon makes theological reasoning possible by enabling the believer—like someone assembling a mosaic—to situate each passage of Scripture within the coherent whole of Christian truth. The canon of truth is not a body of inherited doctrines existing independently of Scripture but an articulation of a governing hypothesis shaped by particular historical circumstances. It names the presupposition required to perceive in Scripture the image of the King, the Christ revealed through the gospel. Accordingly, the creed does not stand apart from Scripture and liturgy but functions as the rule that enables faithful participation within the Christian tradition.

The Council of Nicaea in 325, the anniversary of which we celebrated last year, is for many reasons one of the most significant events in the history of Christianity. It was, for instance, the first time that the emperor had intervened in the affairs of the Christian church on such a large scale, facilitating what would thereafter be known as the First Ecumenical—that is, worldwide—Council. In addition to a number of practical matters, it also addressed the question of the date for the celebration of Pascha, the central feast of the Christian faith. And, of course, it produced the Nicene Creed, which became the most important statement of the Christian faith thereafter. Although it was eventually supplanted by the creed promulgated by the Council of Constantinople fifty-six years later, the Constantinopolitan Creed is regularly and simply called the Nicene Creed, for such is the significance of Nicaea. It is this Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that is, as J. N. D. Kelly put it, “one of the few threads by which the tattered fragments of the divided robe of Christendom are held together” (Kelly 1972, 296).

But what is it, and what is it about? There are three points I would like to make: first, what it is not; then, second, what it is; and then finally what it contains and its implications.

## What the Creed Is Not

It might seem strange to start with what the creed is not. But this is important; after all, the Council of Nicaea was not (at the time) the First Ecumenical Council—not till there was a second! More importantly, given the subsequent history of creeds, confessions, and articles of faith, and also given the way in which theological discourse gained its own momentum, resulting in an ever more abstract and abstracted discourse, such that today systematics or dogmatics is its own discipline within the broader umbrella of theology, distinct from (and even unrelated to) scriptural exegesis or liturgical theology—given all this, what those gathered together at Nicaea thought they were doing is not necessarily the same as it might appear to us centuries later. When settling upon the creed, with the word *homoousios* added to a prior baptismal creed, the fathers of the council were not setting down a series of theological propositions that could be used as building blocks for systematic theology: they were not developing “trinitarian theology” in the way that, for instance, Richard Hanson proposed that the “trinitarian doctrine” elaborated in the fourth century was “a solution, *the* solution, to the intellectual problem which had for so long vexed the church” (Hanson 1989, 156, italics original). Rather perplexingly, however, he also concluded his mammoth tome *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* by concluding that “the expounders of the text of the Bible are incompetent and ill-prepared to expound it. This applies as much to the wooden and unimaginative approach of the Arians as it does to the fixed determination of their opponents to read their doctrine into the Bible by hook or crook.” He continues by saying that the exegetical practices of the early Christians (for instance, treating an isolated verse as if it spoke about Christ, apart from its historical context) were simply wrong, even if they were “only reproducing the presuppositions of all Christians before them, of the writers of the New Testament itself, of the tradition of Jewish rabbinic piety and scholarship.” Indeed, he states in the prior sentence: “The very reverence with which they honoured the Bible as a sacred book stood in the way of their understanding it” (Hanson 1988, 848–49). For Hanson the doctrine of the Trinity was an “intellectual problem” the resolution for which, as determined in the fourth century, can be separated from the exegetical practices by which it was attained. This is a clear example of the methodological fallacy that Quentin Skinner described as “the mythology of doctrines,” that is, the presumption that our way of organizing or classifying our understanding of a discipline and its component elements, our “paradigm,” is essential to the discipline itself, as some kind of eternally fixed constellation of themes in which every previous writer has also worked or were (unawares!) working towards (Skinner 2002). The Council of Nicaea, however, was not called to establish the doctrine of the Trinity; it was rather called to respond to a particular problem that had come to a head in Alexandria in the conflict between the bishop Alexander and the presbyter Arius concerning the true divinity or otherwise of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this controversy was primarily an exegetical matter; according

to Constantine, indeed, it was provoked when Alexander, probably in an attempt to consolidate his position and authority as bishop of Alexandria, asked the presbyters in Alexandria to provide an interpretation of a passage from the Law, most likely Proverbs 8:22–25 (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 69.1–2).

## What the Creed Is

My second point: what the creed in fact is. One should begin by noting that in responding to the problem at hand, the fathers of the council adopted what was probably the local baptismal creed, sharpening, by the addition of the word *homoousios*, one of its key points regarding the nature of Christ's relation to the God and Father (to which I will return). Thus the background of the creed, as a creed, is in baptism: the elements of the faith were taught to those preparing to enter the church during their preparation as catechumens, and at baptism they were then expected to say the creed themselves. It was a practice of tradition, handing over, and return, handing back: *traditio et reditio*. This baptismal background means that the context of the creed is conversion, a turn from living according to the world to living according to the gospel.

The word “creed” comes, of course, from the Latin word *credo*, “I believe.” In Greek, however, it is usually termed the *symbolon*. Here the word “symbol” does not mean something that represents something else, a mark of absence. Rather, coming from the verb *sumballein* (to put together), the term “symbol” originally referred to “one half of an object—usually a piece of cloth, wood, or pottery—that is deliberately split in two and then allocated to the parties to an agreement”; as such it came to refer to an “agreement” and then “a token that allows entry” (Struck 2004, 78, 80). Gathering representatives of churches throughout the inhabited world for the first time, the Symbol of Nicaea is their agreement in an inherited shared faith, one that would enable each to recognize others as part of the one body.

There is one further element in the background of the creed that must be noted, and that is in the earlier idea of the “canon.” Although we use the word “canon” to refer to the “list” of the books of Scripture (a usage that only dates from 1768),<sup>1</sup> the word does not (and cannot) mean “list.” Besides the mention of “canon” in Galatians 6:16 (“all those who walk by this rule [*canon*]”), we only have two brief mentions of the word “canon” before we find it fully developed with Irenaeus of Lyons in the late second century and then slightly later with Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria.

The first mention is in 1 Clement, written to those in Corinth, among whom strife had arisen in matters of leadership. Clement of Rome urges them: “Let us put aside empty and vain cares, and let us come to the glorious

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<sup>1</sup> A point made by Pfeiffer (1968, 207).

and venerable rule [*canon*] of our tradition, and let us see what is good and pleasing and acceptable in the sight of our Maker. Let us fix our gaze on the Blood of Christ and let us know that it is precious to his Father, because it was poured out for our salvation, and brought the grace of repentance to all the world” (7.2–4). It is not exactly clear to what this canon refers, though the parallel with fixing our gaze on the Blood of Christ suggests a Paschal (or perhaps eucharistic) reference. The second mention we have is definitely in a Paschal context. When in the last decades of the second century Victor of Rome tried to quash the practice of celebrating Pascha on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, Polycrates of Ephesus wrote back to him, mentioning a number of names of those in Asia who had kept this practice (e.g., Philip, Polycarp, and Melito) going back to John, “who lay on the Lord’s breast and was a priest wearing the petalon” (that is, the golden leaf worn by the high priest of the temple when entering the holy of holies). Polycrates then asserts that “all these kept the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel, never swerving, but following the canon of the faith” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.4–5, translation modified).

It really is Irenaeus in whom we first see the full and proper appeal to a “canon of truth.” He opens his magnum opus, *Refutation and Overthrowal of Knowledge Falsely So-called*, with seven chapters relating the teaching of his opponents (the “Gnostics,” which I won’t recount here).<sup>2</sup> He then continues with a well-known, striking visual image:

Such is their *hypothesis* which neither the prophets preached, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles handed down. They boast rather loudly of knowing more about it than others do, citing it from non-Scriptural [works]; and as people would say, they attempt to braid ropes of sand. They try to adapt to their own sayings in a manner worthy of credence, either the dominical parables or the prophets’ sayings, or the apostles’ words, so that their fabrication might not appear to be without witness. They disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures and, as much as in them lies, they disjoint the members of the truth. They transfer passages and rearrange them, and, making one thing out of another, they deceive many by the badly composed fantasy of the dominical oracles that they adapt. By way of illustration, suppose someone would take the beautiful image of a king, carefully made out of precious stones by a skilful artist, and would destroy the features of the man on it and change it around and rearrange the jewels, and make the form of a dog or of a fox out of them, and that rather a bad piece of work.

<sup>2</sup> A translation of book one of *Against the Heresies* (hereafter, *Haer.*) can be found in Irenaeus (1992); Greek and Latin texts are in Irenaeus (1979).

Suppose he would then say with determination that this is the beautiful image of the king that the skilful artist had made, and at the same time pointing to the jewels which had been beautifully fitted together by the first artist into the image of the king, but which had been badly changed by the second into the form of a dog. And suppose he would through this fanciful arrangement of the jewels deceive the inexperienced who had no idea of what the king's picture looked like, and would persuade them that this base picture of a fox is that beautiful image of the king. In the same way these people patch together old women's fables, and then pluck words and sayings and parables from here and there and wish to adapt these oracles of God to their myths. (*Haer.* 1.8.1)

The terms that Irenaeus uses here—"hypothesis," "fabrication," and "myth"—are all technical terms in Hellenistic literary theory and philosophical epistemology. The most important term for us is "hypothesis." Although this word was sometimes translated as "system," it really means "that which is posited," a "supposition" or "pre-supposition." His opponents, Irenaeus says, have based their exegesis upon their own "hypothesis" rather than that foretold by the prophets, taught by Christ, and delivered ("traditioned") by the apostles. According to Irenaeus, his opponents, rather than taking the words of "the dominical oracles" and seeing them as portraying Christ, have instead adapted the words of Scripture to another hypothesis, that of events within the heavenly realm as imagined by the Gnostics, fleshing out, as it were, their own hypothesis with scriptural words and so constructed their own fabrication. They have disregarded "the order and the connection of the Scriptures," and so distorted the picture of the king, creating instead one of a fox. They have not accepted the coherence of the Scriptures, as speaking about Christ, but have preferred their own fabrication, created by adapting passages from Scripture to a different hypothesis, attempting to endow it with persuasive plausibility.

As that which is posited, a hypothesis facilitates both action and inquiry, and ultimately knowledge itself. According to Aristotle, one of the meanings of the word *archē* (often translated "beginning") is "the point from which a thing is first comprehensible, this too is called the 'beginning' of a thing, for instance, the hypotheses of demonstrations" (*Metaph.* 5.1.2 [1013a17]). The hypothesis, therefore, is the starting point or first principle from which everything else follows. So, in his example, the goal of health is the hypothesis for a doctor; the doctor doesn't determine whether health is desirable, but rather, given that it is, he works out by what kind of diet or exercise it is to be attained and maintained. Similarly mathematicians hypothesize certain axioms, such as that the angles of a triangle together equal two right angles, and then draw out the consequences from this axiom (Aristotle, *Eth. eud.* 1227b). But, importantly, such hypotheses are only ever tentative; if

the goal proves to be unattainable or if the conclusions derived from the supposition turn out to be manifestly false, then the hypothesis in question must be rejected. Nevertheless, philosophers, at least since Plato, have tried to discover the ultimate, nonhypothetical first principles. But, as Aristotle points out, it is impossible to demand demonstrations of the first principles themselves; the first principles cannot themselves be proved, otherwise they would be dependent upon something prior to them, and so the inquirer would be led into an infinite regress (*Metaph.* 4.4.2 [1006a6–12]). And this, furthermore, means, as Clement of Alexandria points out, that the search for the first principles of demonstration ends up with indemonstrable faith: “In point of fact, the philosophers admit that the first principles of all things are indemonstrable. So that if there is a demonstration at all, there is an absolute necessity that there be something that is self-evident, which is called primary and indemonstrable. Consequently, all demonstration is traced up to indemonstrable faith” (*Strom.* 8.3.7.2). While not themselves being demonstrable, the first principles, grasped by faith, are the basis for subsequent demonstrations, are also used to evaluate other claims to truth, and in this way act as a canon.

Irenaeus continues his treatment of his opponents’ teaching by subjecting their exegesis of the prologue of John to critical examination, showing, on literary grounds, that it cannot be what John taught, and then he continues by using a further literary example, that of how some people take diverse lines from the work of Homer and then rearrange them to produce Homeric-sounding verses which tell a tale not to be found in Homer (*Haer.* 1.9.4). While these fabrications, called centos, can mislead those who have only a passing knowledge of Homer, they will not deceive those who are well versed in his poetry, for they will be able to identify the lines and restore them to their proper context. Then he says,

Anyone who keeps unswervingly in himself the canon of truth received through baptism will recognise the names and sayings and parables from the Scriptures, but this blasphemous hypothesis of theirs he will not recognise. For if he recognises the jewels, he will not accept the fox for the image of the king. He will restore each one of the passages to its proper order and, having fit it into the body of the truth, he will lay bare their fabrication and show that it is without support. (*Haer.* 1.9.4)

Originally the term “canon” simply meant a straight line, a rule by which other lines could be judged.<sup>3</sup> Epicurus’s work *The Canon* seems to have been the first work devoted to the need to establish “the criteria of truth,” a need which, in the face of the Skeptical onslaught, made it almost obligatory in the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De an.* 1.5 (411a5–7): “We discern both the straight and the crooked by that which is straight; the carpenter’s rule [*canon*] is the test of both, but the crooked tests neither itself nor the straight.”

Hellenistic period to begin any systematic presentation of philosophy with an account of the criterion. Without such a canon or criterion, it was recognized, it is simply not possible to gain any knowledge, for all inquiry would be drawn helplessly into an endless regression. It is exactly in this way that, responding to the endlessly mutating Gnostic mythologies, Irenaeus, followed by Tertullian and Clement, appealed to “the canon of truth” (Osborn 1989).

What Irenaeus means by receiving the canon of truth through baptism is not clear. We do not really know about the practices of catechesis at this time. Later on, there developed the practice of instructing those about to be baptized with the creed, which they would memorize and then say for themselves when they were baptized. Perhaps the idea that the canon, with its three-fold structure, is received through baptism refers to back to the baptismal command of Christ himself (Matt. 28:19) or the practice of asking those to be baptized the three questions: Do you believe in the Father? Do you believe in the Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? This is followed by the fullest description given by Irenaeus of the faith received by the apostles, though whether it should be called a “canon” has been recently disputed.<sup>4</sup> According to Irenaeus,

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith:

in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them;

and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation;

and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one,” [Eph. 1:10] and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, “every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess” him [Phil. 2:10–11], and that he should execute just judgment towards all;

<sup>4</sup> Briggman (2019, 15–16) points out that, while *Haer.* 1.10.1 is “very much a précis or summary outline of the Scriptural narrative: the hypothesis of ancient literary and rhetorical theory,” it is nevertheless not introduced as a “canon” in the way that other substantive statements of the faith, in *Haer.* 1.22.1 and 3.11.1, are. Responding to this, Young (2023, 98), comments that “the distinction between these two things, I suggest, is not in the end convincing.”

that he may send spiritual wickednesses, and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of his grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept his commandments, and have persevered in his love, some from the beginning, and others from their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory. (*Haer.* 1.10.1)

It is striking that all the items pertaining to the work of Christ, which in the creeds from the fourth century onwards appear under the second article, are here given in the third article, as that which was foretold by the Spirit through the prophets. This is so because it is the words of the prophets that provide the material, the tiles of the mosaic, for the apostolic preaching. Yet, despite this connection with baptism, the rule of truth is not given in a declarative form, as would be the creeds used in baptism from the fourth century onwards. Also, unlike the later creeds, for Irenaeus the canon was flexible in its wording: as the verbal expression of the hypothesis, it could be phrased differently in different contexts.

Irenaeus then continues by affirming the universality and unchanging nature of the preaching and the faith:

As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. ... Nor will any one of the rulers in the Churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little diminish it. (*Haer.* 1.10.2)

There are, nevertheless, many points worthy of further reflection within the economy of God as it has actually been arranged. But before giving examples of such, Irenaeus makes this important point: “It does not follow because men are endowed with greater and less degrees of intelligence, that they should therefore change the supposition itself and should conceive of some other God besides him who is the Framer, Maker, and Preserver of this universe, (as if he were not sufficient for them), or of another Christ,

or another Only-begotten” (*Haer.* 1.10.3). For instance, if one were to ask whether God could have created a world in which there was no apostasy or in which human beings did not sin and die, one would in fact be changing the hypothesis, for the starting point of the Christian faith is the crucified and risen Christ. Rather than such counterfactual questions, Irenaeus gives a number of points worthy of reflection: Why, for instance, did God make some things temporal and others eternal? Why was there more than one covenant? Why did the advent of the Son of God take place in the last times, that is, in the end rather than the beginning? All of these can be explored on the basis of “the hypothesis of the truth,” but leading to the exclamation, in the words of the apostle: “Oh! the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Rom. 11:33; *Haer.* 1.10.3).

What are we to make of all this? And how does it shape what we think canons or creeds are? The most important is that the canon is not there to curtail thought, but to make thought possible. That is the very point of a canon. Equally important is that it is by reference to the canon that a believer is able, to use Irenaeus’s image, to restore each passage of Scripture to its proper place in the body of truth, each tile of the mosaic to its proper place depicting the image of the king. The canon of truth is not simply a set of inherited doctrines existing apart from Scripture, but is, rather, an articulation of the hypothesis in a particular situation, outlining the presupposition needed for seeing in Scripture the image of the king, the Christ revealed in and through the gospel, the apostolic preaching “in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4).

But it is not quite accurate to say that we must interpret Scripture in accordance with the canon. What, in fact, would that mean? Perhaps an analogy would help to explain the relation between hypothesis, canon, and Scripture: that of football! If someone has never seen a game of football, they don’t start by reading the rule book, then get on a field with a ball and try to play. Rather, one begins by seeing a game being played, so gaining a sense of the hypothesis of the game, and then getting on a field with those who know how to play. When they have gained proficiency in the game, then it is beneficial to read the rule book (for only now does it make sense), and so become a more understanding player. From time to time, however, a player will do a new move (e.g., hit the ball with their head). To determine whether the new move is in accord with the hypothesis of the game, the experts are gathered together to make a determination, so resulting in a new item in the rule book, but, importantly, the hypothesis of the game has not changed. To apply the analogy, our “game” is, as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the encounter with Christ through the reading of Scripture and breaking bread (Luke 24:13–35). The hypothesis of the Christian faith is the crucified and risen Christ as proclaimed by the apostles in accordance with the Scripture and encountered in the breaking of the bread.

To learn how to play, one must start by playing with those who know how to play, and only then read the rule book (canon/creed). As such, the canon or creed doesn't exist independently of the Scriptures and liturgy, but is rather what enables one to play within the tradition. The hypothesis and canon are there not to exclude or condemn all else, but to facilitate the play, opening up questions based on this hypothesis (as in *Haer.* 1.10.3) rather than another hypothesis, which in turns leads inquirers deeper into the depths of the wisdom of God as revealed in Christ. It is also important to note that these two dimensions of this "game"—the opening of Scriptures in the light of the risen Christ and the breaking of bread—go back to the earliest period, with Paul himself. The only two times that he uses the formula, "I delivered to you what I received," it is expressly with regard to these two elements (1 Cor. 11:23–26; 15:3–5). The clearest and most concise definition of the canon is perhaps that given by Clement of Alexandria: "The ecclesiastical canon is the concord and symphony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord" (*Strom.* 6.15.125.3). The canon of truth is thus not simply a set of inherited doctrines or building blocks existing apart from Scripture, upon which we build our doctrinal systems, but is, rather, the verbal expression of the hypothesis of the Christian faith in a particular situation, outlining the presupposition needed for seeing in Scripture the image of the king, the Christ revealed in and through the gospel, the apostolic preaching "according to Scripture." Moreover, to repeat the point, the canon is not there to limit or curtail thought or reflection; it is, rather, that which makes thought possible: the canon or creed does not set boundaries but establishes the principles upon which we can think. And as such "orthodoxy" is not simply the preservation of a set of teachings (and the condemnation of others), but rather the continuing, and deepening journey into, the mystery of Christ.

### **What the Creed Contains**

So, what does the creed contain? To be provocative, it does not, as we often think today, promulgate a Trinitarian theology in which the one God is three persons! This was strikingly driven home to me when a few years ago my firstborn son reported back a conversation that he had had with the religious instructor in his Jesuit high school. The instructor began the class discussion by saying that the subject for the day was why we say that the one God is a Trinity. My son protested, "I don't." Rather perplexed, the instructor asked him what he meant. To which my son replied (or at least so he says), "Well, I don't know about you, sir, but I follow the Nicene Creed which says, 'I believe in One God Father Almighty and one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God.'" Although repeated frequently, we often don't listen to the words of the creed! If, indeed, the one God were the Trinity, it would no longer be possible to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son *of God* (Jesus Christ is not the Son of the Trinity)! The creeds follow the same pattern established by Paul: "for us there is one God the Father ... and one Lord

Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 8:6), now with the further specification, determined in the context of the fourth century controversies, that as Son of God, Jesus Christ is *what* (not *who*) it is to be God: he is true God of true God, of the same *ousia* as the Father; he is *what* it is to be God, yet other than the one of whom he, as *Son of God*, is the Son. And because he is the Son of God, the one God is Father; and as it is through his Son and the Spirit that God creates, the next term identifying this God is “almighty” then “maker.” The opening clause of the creed—“One God Father Almighty Maker of heaven and earth”—is a carefully coordinated series of descriptors based upon the grammar of Scripture.

As mentioned earlier, the spark that ignited the controversy leading to Nicaea was Alexander asking the presbyters of Alexandria how they would interpret a passage from the Law (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 69.1–2). Almost certainly the passage in question was Proverbs 8:22–25, where Wisdom (i.e., Christ) says of herself, “The Lord created me the beginning of his ways for his works,” and then a few verses later, “before the hills he begets me.” In brief, Arius took these two verbs—“create” and “beget”—and applied them univocally to the one Christ, so that Christ ends up being “created” (“but not as one of the creatures,” Arius adds) and “begotten” (but not as one of the other things begotten), and so Christ ends up somewhere in between the one true God and creation, an intermediary figure. Athanasius, following Origen and the earlier tradition, takes these two verses as applied to Christ as human and as divine distinctly rather than univocally: as human, he is created, the beginning of the ways of God, with the purpose clause “for his works”; whereas as divine he (the same one) is begotten (in the odd present tense, “before the hills he *begets* me”—the eternal begetting of the Son is not an act in the past), and this affirmation has no purpose clause. It is the pattern of words provided by these verses from Proverbs that structures theological grammar thereafter: the one Lord Jesus Christ *is* the Son of God *become* the Son of Man for our salvation. And as such, the one Christ is the mediator between God and humans not by being somewhere in between, but by being both in one. This controversy continues through the following centuries when others, after the Council of Constantinople, begin taking the divine and human aspects of Christ as being two separate subjects; but that is another story—it is a continuing christological and exegetical debate (not the development of doctrine).

The significance of this focus upon how the one Lord is both true God of true God, and yet human as we are, is that Christ does not show us *what* it is to be God in any other way than through his human nature and existence: by his death as human, trampling down death by death, he shows us what it is to be God. For it is only after his Passion, with the Scriptures now opened, that the disciples and apostles finally know who he is, and so looking back, they can now see his whole life in this way: by his service, for instance, in washing the feet of his disciples, he shows us what Lordship is—strength in weakness.

All this involves, as David Bentley Hart has argued, a metaphysical sea change (Hart 2022; 2025). The Scriptures of Israel and the writings of Second Temple Judaism, as with the ancient world more generally, knew of a number of “gods”: “God stood in the congregation of gods” (Ps. 81:1 LXX). We might demarcate the first, singular “God” from the latter plural by capitalization, but this was a typographical convention not yet invented! The heavenly realm above which God presides, in light inaccessible, spatially distinct from the earth we inhabit, was populated by countless powers, principalities, and divinities. Within this world, the one God held an exalted position: “You are the Lord Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above the gods” (Ps. 97:9). Compared to the lesser divinities, the divinity of the Most High, as Hart puts, follows the rule of *primum in aliquo genere*: “the principle that, in every genus, there is one supreme instance that possesses *per se* the true essence of that genus, and that therefore is the prime source and cause of that essence in all its derivative instances” (Hart 2025, 6). For Arius and others, the Word might well be the highest of all these heavenly powers, but not God in the way that the truly transcendent One is the true God. However, with Nicaea’s affirmation that Jesus Christ is “true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father,” any attempt to think of the divinity of Jesus Christ as subordinate to the one true God became impossible. And, in turn, the created order could no longer be thought of as the result of a process of derivation, but as ontologically distinct from God. And this, moreover, entails that the transcendence of the Most High is not taken as the supremacy of a God residing above all that he has wrought yet still part of the total picture of reality, a supreme being among other beings. God and creation are not other to each other in the way in which one finite being is other to another finite being, but rather they are as incommensurable as the infinite to the finite: God is, rather, the “non-other,” to use the later phrase of Nicolaus Cusanus.

The transcendence of the Most High is thus not a spatial separation (God is not somewhere else in the realm of being), but is rather a transcendence compatible with or, even better, manifest in immanence—strength in weakness. And so in turn, creation “was revealed,” in Hart’s words, “as being ‘located’ nowhere but *within* the very life of God *as* God.” Creation is not, he continues, “merely a remote effect of divine power,” but as “a revelation of the divine actuality, as theophany”; it is the work of God as Spirit through the Word, who is himself the perfect reflection of the Father, so that “what causes creation to be, to have form, to live is nothing other than a direct participation in that order of relations by which God is God” (Hart 2022, 102–3). It is this “novel and more rigorous metaphysics of transcendence,” Hart argues, that was “obscurely but irreversibly inaugurated at the council,” something that “was, or would give rise to, an extraordinary intellectual and spiritual achievement.” Although ontologically distinct from the divine, creation nevertheless bears the divine presence and is the site of God’s activity, not by a diminishment of his divinity or divine power but “entirely as the

infinite God present in the finite by an absolute immediacy of act ... at once *superior summo* and *interior intimo*” (Hart 2025, 7–8). Created, not emanated, the world is no longer “full of gods” (as Thales), or itself “god” (as Timaeus); for this term now applies to the one true God, the Most High, together with his Son, begotten not made, and (eventually) to the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests upon the Son, in whom “we live and move and are” (Acts 17:28).

Yet, while banishing all the so-called gods (lesser divinities, powers, and principalities inhabiting the heavens and the world and the spaces in-between) by its affirmation that Jesus Christ is true God of true God, there remains one exception. It is striking that neither the Nicaea nor even Constantinople extended the application of the term “God” to the Holy Spirit, much to the annoyance of Gregory of Nazianzus, who abandoned the Council of Constantinople, which he had been chairing, lamenting that “the sweet and pure spring of our ancient faith ... was being tragically polluted by the briny influx of those of dubious beliefs”; thereafter he refused to attend ever again any council of bishops, “as they do not solve problems, they increase them”—a salutary reminder lest we end up idealizing or idolizing these councils! (Gregory of Nazianzus, *De vita* 1703–9; *Ep.* 130).

It was certainly accepted (at least by most) that the Spirit belongs to the uncreated, divine side of the ontological gulf, and, indeed, the term “God” would consistently be applied to the Spirit soon thereafter. However, that this was not included within the Nicene Creed(s) preserves the scriptural use of the term “God,” where it is not applied to the Spirit. Yet, on the other hand, with the metaphysical sea change in understanding the transcendence of God—as manifest in imminence, strength in weakness—the scriptural use of the word “God” as applied to human beings can be retained, as in the words of the Psalm quoted by Jesus himself: “You are Gods” (Ps. 81/2:6–7; John 10:34). But, importantly, that Jesus says this before the Passion, with the words a little later, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterwards” (John 13:36), picks up the second part of the Psalm verse: “You are Gods, sons of the Most High; but you will die like human beings” (Ps. 81/2: 6–7). While not articulated within the creed itself, the consequence of the creed is that, as Athanasius put it, “he was humanized that we might be divinized,” that is, made “Gods” (*Inc.* 54).

And in this way the creed of Nicaea speaks to our own calling today.

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