

Creeds of the Kehillah ~ Part 16

The Nicene Creed ~ Part 2

In our last post, we began to explore the **Nicene Creed**. In this post, we dig a little deeper into the background of the **Nicene Creed**.

Why Nicaea?

The **Nicene Creed** is the most authoritative common confession of the **Messianic** movement. Like all ancient baptismal confessions, it is presented in three phases or articles corresponding with the three **Persons of the one God** attested in Scripture.

There are two centuries of confessional prototypes before **Nicaea**. Their Christological core is found in Philippians 2:6–11, which confesses: ⁶ *Though He was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God something to be possessed by force.* ⁷ *On the contrary, He emptied Himself, in that He took the form of a slave by becoming like human beings are. And when He appeared as a human being,* ⁸ *He humbled Himself still more by becoming obedient even to death - death on a stake as a criminal!* ⁹ *Therefore God raised Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name;* ¹⁰ *that in honor of the name given Yeshua, every knee will bow - in heaven, on earth, and under the earth -* ¹¹ *and every tongue will acknowledge that Yeshua the Messiah is Adonai - to the glory of God the Father.* (CJB)

This same core confession repeatedly appears in the rule of faith we find in **Ignatius** (107 CE), the **Epistula Apostolorum** (150 CE), **Justin Martyr** (165 CE), the **Presbyters of Smyrna** (180 CE), **Der Balyzeh Papyrus** (200 CE), **Tertullian** (200 CE) and **Hippolytus** (215 CE), all in use and carefully committed to memory more than a century before **Nicaea** (325 CE). All early creedal prototypes follow this same sequence of confession. Scripture itself provides the structural basis for the organization of baptismal teaching.

As early as about 190 CE, **Irenaeus of Lyons** summarized the faith of **Believers** in this memorable way, which anticipates the background of this series: *"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: [She believes] 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."*

This core outline of **Messianic** teaching had already appeared originally in Matthew 28:19–20 in the formula for baptism, where the resurrected Lord concluded his earthly teaching with this summary charge to all subsequent believers. *Therefore, go and make people from all nations into talmidim, immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son, and the Ruach HaKodesh,* ²⁰ *and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember! I will be with you always, yes, even until the end of the age."* (CJB)

Today's **Messianic** teaching still stems from early baptismal teaching. **Messianic** theology came into being to explain **Messianic** baptism. The **Creed** first had a baptismal teaching function that later came to have a doctrinal teaching function - for the defense of the faith, for liturgical life, scholastic, and systematic theology, and for the training of persons charged with teaching the faith.

T.C Oden opines:

"Today, we live amid a flurry of well-publicized efforts to revive ancient heresies. Some are desperate attempts to give even the weirdest ideas some faint aroma of legitimacy: DaVinci decoding, the grail as a bloodline, the sexual relations of the Messiah, the insertion of ideological claims into Messianic interpretation, the new Gnostic elitism. Doting press attention has been given to these highly speculative forms of advocacy that promote long rejected documents and ideas. It has become a profitable media game to defend the poor heretics against the oppressive winners and elitists who wrote the rules of orthodoxy. The truth is the opposite: the most extreme elitism of all false claimants to Christian truth came from the Gnostics, who were contemptuous of the naive consensus of uninformed believers, and who were never even interested in gaining the hearts of ordinary believers. Yet ordinary believers then and now could easily recognize that these later speculations did not match the authenticity, beauty, and clarity of the original apostolic witnesses."¹

The **Nicene Creed** is the first which obtained universal authority. It rests on older forms used in different East communities and has undergone some changes again.

In my next post, we begin to dig into the first article of the **Nicene Creed**.

¹ General Introduction. In G. L. Bray & T. C. Oden (Eds.), **We Believe in One God** (Vol. 1).