

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*“VERY GOD OF VERY GOD”
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF C.H. SPURGEON’S USE OF THE NICENE CREED*

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Introduction

In recent years there is evidence of an ever-increasing desire for Baptists to identify a “rootedness” in the Christian tradition.¹ According to Lewis Ayres “The four decades since 1960 have produced much revisionary scholarship on the Trinitarian and Christological disputes of the fourth century.”² Though the desires to identify in the Christian tradition or the disputes among some may instigate palpable controversy, the activities are nonetheless valid and worthwhile. A modicum of the controversy may stem from the familiar phrase that is often repeated by Baptists, “We have no creed but the Bible!” Kevin Vanhoozer describes this mindset as a “naïve biblicism” that emphasizes “*solo scriptura*” instead of the proper emphasis of “*sola scriptura*,” that was established during the Reformation.³ Vanhoozer insists that the Bible, though authoritative, does not negate the use of creeds, preaching, or other means of extra-biblical knowledge and truth. Instead, it is appropriate to ask of Baptists, “What proper role should creeds play in the life of the Christian?”

Tom Nettles identifies the emphasis Spurgeon placed, by employing the Nicene Creed, on Christ as the redeemer: “But let us also bear in mind that he [Christ] was, in the Nicene phrase quoted frequently by Spurgeon, ‘very God of very God’. His perfect humanity did not lower his perfect deity.”⁴ Spurgeon himself declares, “The witness of our church must be one and

¹ Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, 2020, 1.

² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, (Reprinted. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 11.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 410.

⁴ Tom J. Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*. (Geanies House, Fearn, Rossshire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2015), 232.

indivisible. We must have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. And yet dear to our hearts is that great article of the Nicene Creed, the ‘Communion of Saints.’”⁵

Thesis

In the recorded sermons of C.H. Spurgeon there are several key phrases that echo the Nicene Creed. Furthermore, Spurgeon positively and specifically identifies and employs aspects of the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed throughout his sermons. This paper will argue that the creeds, specifically the Nicene Creed, are critical to Spurgeon’s Christology, and are expressed consistently in his sermons. This paper will further argue that Spurgeon demonstrates the essential use of creeds for Baptists. These creeds affirm that the roots of Baptist theology agree with the Christian tradition.

History and Significance of the Nicene Creed

A concise and accurate description of the Nicene Creed is given by Justin Holcomb as he summarizes the two councils that met in Nicaea in 325 and 381 to settle a “century of debate over the nature of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Though the explanation of Holcomb is accurate, the issues addressed by the council are more complex than Holcomb’s explanation covers. For instance, though Arianism was a prominent factor in the council meetings, the Nicaean “canons concern many organizational issues far beyond the crisis over Arius.”⁷ Lewis Ayres further explains that detailed minutes of the meetings were not kept,

⁵ *NPSP*, 5:603.

⁶ Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils, Know Series*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 33.

⁷ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. 87. Ayers includes the following statement in his footnote: There is still much to be learnt from H. -J. Sieben’s *Die Konzilsidee der Alten Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1970), ch. I. His discussion of how, in Athanasius’ writing, Nicaea goes through various stages on the road to its full status as ‘ecumenical’ council, from being a universal judgment against Arius towards a sufficient summation of the

but those records that do exist have some remaining pieces of the information that enable the reconstruction of the debates.

Arius, an Egyptian priest, insisted that the Son was preexistent to his incarnation but was “the first and greatest of the Father’s created beings.”⁸ In other words, Arius considered there to be a point in the order of creation that the Son was not in existence. The majority of bishops who attended the council of Nicaea were intent on having the theology of Arius condemned.

Athanasius, one of those bishops, clearly understood what was at stake in the Arian controversy.

In the *Contra Arianos* he writes:

Therefore . . . it is said of the Son ‘thou remainest’, to show his eternity; for he is incapable of destruction . . . , ‘he did not exist before his generation’ is a statement alien to him; it is proper to him to exist always, and to ‘remain’, together with Father . . . He is proper to the Father’s substance and one in nature with it. For that reason the Son himself said not ‘my Father is *better* than I’ but ‘*greater* than I’; greater, that is, not in size or in virtue of duration but because of his begetting from the Father himself; in fact in saying ‘greater’ he again shows that he is proper to the substance of the Father.⁹

Athanasius mentions several essential topics contradicting Arius: the generation of the Son, the eternality of the Son, and the substance and nature of both the Father and the Son. For these kinds of defenses Athanasius is described as securing the “final triumph of the Nicene Faith” while defending the “formula of the *homousion*, that if Christ is God, then he must be God in the same sense as God the Father is God; divinity in one substance.”¹⁰ Describing the divinity of

Church’s faith, is an excellent point of departure for a wider consideration of the status of Nicaea in a range of writers through our period.

⁸ Matthew Y. Emerson, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*. 84.

⁹ Henry Bettenson ed., *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St Clement of Rome to St Athanasius*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 280.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

Jesus in another work, *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius attributes the work of providence to the Son and further attests that the Word is “wholly, in every respect, in his own Father alone.”¹¹

Athanasius further delineates the distinctions between the council’s ruling and the ideas of the Arians by emphasizing the phrases of Scripture that should be employed to properly describe the Son: “that the Son is not from nothing but ‘from God,’ and is ‘Word’ and ‘Wisdom,’ and not creature or work . . . ‘from the essence of God,’ in order that ‘from God’ might not be considered common and equal in the Son and in things originate . . . the Word alone as from the Father.”¹² Philip Schaff notes that the matter concerned the divine generation of the Son over other holy men, “He was ἐξ οὐσίας, from the essence of God . . . really and simply, and therefore by an internal divine act.”¹³ In sum, Athanasius reflects the concrete definitions that were created at the Council of Nicaea in an effort to distinguish and clarify the issues at stake regarding the person of Jesus and his divinity.

The use of the word *ousia*, the language of Nicaea, was designed to demonstrate the scriptural title for the Son. “*Homousious* safeguards the point that the Son’s generation is unlike the generation of human beings”, thus rendering the description of the Son as being created from a time where he was not as impossible.¹⁴ At the time of Nicaea, the words “*ousia* and *hypostasis* were seen as roughly synonymous ways of naming the divine essence shared by the three persons.”¹⁵ The important goal of the Council of Nicaea was to determine the orthodox way in

¹¹ Athanasius, and John Behr. *On the Incarnation, Popular Patristics Series*, no. 44b. (Yonkers, N.Y: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 67.

¹² Athanasius, *de Decritus*. 19.

¹³ Philip Schaff, *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*. (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 509.

¹⁴ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. 141.

¹⁵ Matthew Y. Emerson, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*. 85

which Jesus ought to be described. The phrases that precede the use of *homousious* are those that establish a relationship to the text of Scripture. Terms like “begotten,” “light,” and “true (very) God” are uniquely those found in Scripture describing the person of the Son.

Baptists and Creeds

In an article in the *Criswell Theological Review*, Philip E. Thompson wrote on the history of creeds in Baptist life. Thompson refers to the concept of creeds as a “second narrative,” a term established by historian David Steinmetz to describe the “interpretive work of critical historians.”¹⁶ Why a need for a second narrative? The second narrative “plots the important story through the larger array of detail.”¹⁷ This kind of description provides an explanation of the role of creeds as they serve to summarize, with clarity, the supreme narrative of Scripture.

Furthering his argument of Baptists’ use of creeds, Thompson points to T. Grantham, a General Baptist Bishop, who in 1678 relates the Scripture, given by God, to the creeds.

Grantham writes:

As God hath delivered but one Form of Doctrine to the Churches . . . [S]ith there hath been several Confessions of Faith published, among which that called the Apostles Creed, and the Nicene do seem to be of most venerable estimation, both for Antiquity, and the solidity of the matter, and for their excellent brevity, we do herby declare to the world that we assent to the Contents thereof . . .¹⁸

Grantham is not the only early Baptist to recognize the value of the creeds of the early church. Steven R. Harmon in his article on “Baptist Confessions of Faith and Patristic Tradition” writes, “a number of confessions do employ Trinitarian and Christological formulations from the

¹⁶ Philip E. Thompson, “Creeds in Baptist Life: Seeking an Ecclesiology of the Cross.” *Criswell Theological Review* 18, 1 (2020): 27.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus: Or, The Ancient Christian Religion*, 1678, 59-60.

ancient creeds.”¹⁹ Harmon goes on to reference John Smyth’s (1554-1612) *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles* of 1609 that employs the phrase “true God and true man,” reflecting a reliance upon the ancient creeds.

By 1677 Particular Baptists had developed *The Second London Confession (SLBC)* and revised it in 1689. The *SLBC* was modeled after the Westminster Confession. The General Baptists followed a similar plan in 1679 by developing *The Orthodox Creed (OC)* of 1679. Article 38 is worth noting in context of Baptists’ use of the creeds, especially as the *OC* refers to the three primary Christological creeds of the ancient church.

Of the Three Creeds.

The Three Creeds, (*viz.*) *Nicene Creed*, *Athanasius his Creed*, and the *Apostles Creed*, (as they are commonly called) ought thoroughly to be received, and believed. For we believe they may be proved by most undoubted Authority of holy Scripture, and are necessary to be understood of all Christians; and to be instructed in the knowledge of them, by the Ministers of Christ, according to the Analogie of Faith, recorded in sacred Scriptures (upon which these Creeds are grounded), and Catechistically opened, and expounded in all Christian Families, for the edification of Young and Old; which might be a means to prevent Heresie in Doctrine, and Practice, these Creeds containing all things in a brief manner, that are necessary to be known, fundamentally, in order to our Salvation; to which end they may be considered, and better understood of all Men, we have here Printed them under their several Titles as followeth, (*viz.*)²⁰

Historical Context for Spurgeon

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was born to John, a minister, and Eliza Jarvis Spurgeon of Essex England.²¹ Converted at the age of fifteen in 1849, Spurgeon embarked on an intentional journey with the Lord that was marked by a great character of determination and fortitude. The fortitude of Spurgeon was rooted in a deep commitment to theology. His theology

¹⁹Steven R. Harmon, “Baptist Confessions of Faith and the Patristic Tradition.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29, 4 (2002): 350.

²⁰ Orthodox Creed, article 38.

²¹ W.Y. Fullerton, *Charles Spurgeon: A Biography*. (London, England: William and Norgate, 1920), 9-10.

for preaching began with a “commitment to the sole authority and infallible truthfulness of the Bible as the book of revealed truth.”²² Spurgeon’s commitment to the authority of Scripture may be observed as he categorizes creeds as subordinate to Scripture.

During his years of ministry, Spurgeon will encounter a group of men renowned for establishing the Oxford Movement. The key leaders of the Oxford Movement are John Keble, John Newman, and Edward Pusey. Spurgeon and those in The Oxford Movement came into direct conflict over baptismal regeneration. Often referred to as the “Tractarians,” the men of the Oxford Movement were intent on emphasizing the “necessity of creeds and the need for the Church to develop doctrine.”²³ The “Tractarians” brazenly criticized Evangelicals in general and Spurgeon directly for a lack of historical theology.”²⁴

John Newman, the “Tractarian,” extensively studied the early history of the church focusing on the heresy of Arius. His research confirms the necessity of creeds and the need for doctrinal development in the church. Newman considers Athanasius to be a hero of the faith, for in Athanasius’ theology was “the essential truth of Christianity: Christ himself.”²⁵ Like the “Tractarians,” Spurgeon also possessed a deep respect for Athanasius. This respect appears in positive comments made by Spurgeon about the value of creeds.

However, there was also a controversy between Spurgeon and the “Tractarians” that escalated publicly when Spurgeon preached the message, “Baptismal Regeneration,” opposing the “Tractarian” view of baptism. It was unusual, for the message did not represent the usual

²² Benjamin Forrest, *A Legacy of Preaching, Volume Two*, 111.

²³ Robert C. Gregg, and Dennis E. Groh. *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*. (London: SCM Press, 1981), 56.

²⁴ Tom J. Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*, 516.

²⁵ C. Brad Faught, *The Oxford Movement: A Thematic History of the Tractarians and Their Times*. (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 56.

charity which Spurgeon held towards those in other denominations. The unusual stance against the “Tractarians” is evidenced as he writes about the importance of confessions in his *Autobiography* saying, “And yet dear to our hearts in that great article of the Apostle’s Creed . . . I can number among my choicest friends many members of the Church of England, and some of every denomination; I glory in that fact.”²⁶ For Spurgeon, a commitment to Christ in “verity and truth” outweighed the denominational lines that were often defined by confessions, a fact illustrated as he directs the bond and witness of the church to the unity of belief found in the statement of the Apostle’s Creed that says, “I believe in the communion of the saints.”²⁷

Spurgeon, being a strong proponent of Calvinism, was likely aware of *The French Confession of Faith* of AD 1559. This confession was prepared by Calvin with the help of his student, De Chandieu, then revised and approved by a synod in Paris. In Article V, which pertains to the Word of God, authority, and the specific books of the Bible, there is an important statement about creeds:

Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them. And therefore we confess the three creeds, to wit: the Apostle’s, the Nicene, and the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God.²⁸

The three creeds mentioned by Calvin are those same three creeds to which Spurgeon refers in his sermons. The fact that the Chalcedon Creed is not mentioned by either Calvin or Spurgeon demonstrates Spurgeon’s consistency with Calvin. Furthermore, S. Reynolds, who analyzes

²⁶ *Spurgeon’s Autobiography*. Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records, by His Wife, and His Private Secretary, vols. 1-4 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897- 1900), 347.

²⁷ Spurgeon referred to the Athanasian Creed in four different sermons: *The Bible*, NPSP 1:212, *Glorious Predestination* MTP 18:227, *Adoption-The Spirit and the Cry* MTP 24:669, and *MY Lord and My God* MTP 30:273.

²⁸ Philip Schaff ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*. Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 362.

Calvin's position on the creeds, quotes Calvin in the *Defensio*, noting that Calvin is concerned with the spirit of matters conveyed in the creeds above the mere use of biblical words. Calvin says, "It is not that we would accept nothing but a confession woven (contexta) and sewn (consuta) superstitiously with biblical words . . . [It is necessary to have] words truly in conformity with the biblical truth and offering the least possible of those asperities which can offend pious ears."²⁹ In a similar way Spurgeon acknowledges the use of creeds as summaries of the greater doctrines of Scripture.

We ought not merely to assert our belief in an orthodox creed, but we should know the meaning of it. We should not merely confess that such and such are our doctrinal sentiments; but we should go into truths like bees into the cups of the flowers, and find out where their honey lies.³⁰

Examination of Spurgeon's Use of Creeds

Historical Context

The question should be asked, "For Baptists, why did the use of the creeds seem to wane after 1689?" First, among Baptists, especially those in America, there existed a desire in "favor of more biblical terminology" against the patristic formulations of doctrines expressed in the creeds.³¹ There may be another legitimate explanation given in the dissertation of Michael Smith. Smith examines nine different Baptist leaders from 1609 to 1701, specifically analyzing their use of the Early Church Fathers. In his conclusion he states that the 1689 Act of Toleration may have provided a level of comfort to Baptists for "They no longer had to justify their views on baptism,

²⁹ Stephen M. Reynolds, "Calvin's View of the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 1, 23 (November 1960): 33–37. (The quote is from Calvin's *Defensio*, 312; Doumergue, *op. cit.*, II, 260.)

³⁰ *MTP*, 55:573.

³¹ Steven R. Harmon, "Baptist Confessions of Faith and the Patristic Tradition." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29, 4 (2002): 354.

church government, or freedom of religious conscience . . . They no longer had to defend themselves against charges that they were guilty of innovation in religion.”³²

Smith’s explanation frames a likely context within the world of Baptists for the way that creeds may have been employed more informally among Baptists. Nevertheless, Smith acknowledges the influence creeds held on pastors and churches up to Spurgeon’s time. J.C. Carlile, in his biography on Spurgeon, echoes Smith’s assessment of the informal use of creeds saying, “Among Baptists there has been age-long hostility to authoritative creeds.”³³ Carlile continues, “[Baptists] know that creeds have . . . not infrequently been used as instruments of persecution.”³⁴ Therefore, because of the conflict that arose around Baptist distinctives in the earliest years of definition, there is a valid reason for Baptists to have minimized the overt or explicit use of creeds.

The pattern that developed from 1689 on, concerning the distinctive uses of creeds and confessions, applies to Spurgeon in a particular way. First, it should be noted that Spurgeon utilized the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* in congregational life. Second, Spurgeon used the creeds in a specific manner, which is the focus of this paper. Specifically, Spurgeon’s use of creeds, more especially the Nicene Creed, is found in his references to the creed and the formulas throughout his sermons. A helpful description of Spurgeon’s use of creeds is given by Christian George in the abstract of his dissertation where he describes Spurgeon as one who “transmitted a highly developed Christology that was Chalcedonian in creed and Alexandrian in

³² Michael Atwol Smith, “The Early English Baptists and the Church Fathers.” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1982): 146.

³³ John Charles Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon: An Interpretive Biography*. (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, Inc., 1987), 254.

³⁴ Ibid.

style.”³⁵ George also notes that Spurgeon, in *The Treasury of David*, quotes Athanasius’ remarks on Psalm 45 verse 7. The following quote highlights a Christological implication, “therefore He is here ‘anointed,’ not that He may become God.”³⁶ Thus, these examples provide a glimpse into Spurgeon’s use of the creeds, and the early fathers responsible for their formation.

Furthermore, to delineate the manner of Spurgeon’s use between confessions and creeds, it is important to note that during the years of Spurgeon’s ministry he consistently employed the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (SLBC)*. The *Second London Baptist Confession* was originally composed in 1677 and edited in 1689. The likely reason that Spurgeon preferred the SLBC is for two-fold: 1) the doctrine emphasizes the key elements relating to Particular Baptists and 2) “the language of ‘properties’ reflects classical personalism, while ‘God-head’ indicates a classical ontology,” reflecting the language of the Nicene Creed.³⁷ In his dissertation, Brandon Rhea compares the practice of Spurgeon to the *SLBC*. He concludes, “Spurgeon recommended the confession to all Christians.”³⁸ In addition, Rhea’s research identifies that “Spurgeon published guides which illuminated the doctrine of the *SLBC* . . . [and Spurgeon] published his own version that expounded through a question and answer format the

³⁵ Christian T. George, “Jesus Christ, The ‘Prince of Pilgrims’: A Critical Analysis of the Ontological, Functional, and Exegetical Christologies in the Sermons, Writings, and Lectures of Charles Haddon Spurgeon.” (1834-1892)” (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2011), viii.

³⁶ Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds. *Church Histories*, (Ages Library., Vol. 4, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church; Second Series / Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace* 2. Auburn, Or: Ages Library, 1997), 859. Spurgeon quotes Athanasius in the *Treasury of David*, Vol. 2 on Psalm 45:7.

³⁷ Matthew Y. Emerson, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*. 61.

³⁸ Brandon M. Rhea, “Charles Spurgeon’s View of the Christian Sabbath as Compared to the Second London Confession of Faith.” (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 25.

teachings of the *SLBC*.”³⁹ The *SLBC* was a confession that Spurgeon valued and utilized as a key element of his ministry.

Evidenced in his autobiography, Spurgeon emphasizes the formal use of a confession like the *SLBC* against the formal use of the creeds, never directly teaching on the way a creed is to be utilized. To understand Spurgeon’s use of the confession against the creeds one must understand that Spurgeon placed a great value on catechizing children and on the “compendium of doctrinal knowledge” for believers to “be able to give a reason for the hope which is in them.”⁴⁰ However, though he emphasizes the value of the *SLBC*, Spurgeon never negates the importance of the use of creeds. Instead, the distinction between the value of the two is noted by the way in which Spurgeon employs each device.

To advance this paper’s argument, it is important to answer the following question, “Why are creeds useful devices for people of faith?” There exist several facets to the answer. Schaff concludes, “They are summaries of the doctrines of the Bible, aids to its sound understanding, bonds of union among their professors, public standards and guards against false doctrine and practice.”⁴¹ Concisely stated, creeds separate orthodoxy from heresy. For instance, one writer says, “creeds were summary statements of belief that served to define orthodoxy for the broader Christian communion.”⁴² Furthermore, the creeds provided a pedagogical device to prepare candidates for baptism while assuring the candidate rightly understood the true gospel.⁴³ J.

³⁹ Brandon M. Rhea, “Charles Spurgeon’s View of the Christian Sabbath as Compared to the Second London Confession of Faith.” 27

⁴⁰ *Spurgeon’s Autobiography*. 347.

⁴¹ Philip Schaff ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 8.

⁴² Matthew Y. Emerson, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*. 37

⁴³ *Ibid*.

Holcomb describes creeds as the “bare-bones structures . . . while confessions distinguish denominational distinctives.”⁴⁴

Together, all of these facets help us understand the purpose that the creed serves as a basic, yet profound clarifying statement for faith, usually on a key issue of doctrine. As noted in the earlier statement by Spurgeon about denominations, creeds also provide a point of truth upon which orthodoxy and unity may be found among the catholic church. Therefore, the creeds were utilized in unique ways providing fundamental emphasis on key doctrines by Spurgeon as he preached to instruct his congregants and evangelize the lost. Spurgeon makes the following statement about the place of the creed that details his perspective:

They seek consolation from an orthodox creed, for which I might have much to say; but if a belief in a creed be trusted in, it is as if a man sought to quench his thirst with a bottle, but did not care to see whether it held water or no. A creed is a pitcher, in which the water is held, but it is not the water itself.⁴⁵

The Specific Use of Creeds by Spurgeon

There are two questions that ought to be addressed. First, “What was Spurgeon’s perspective on the use and value of creeds?” Second, “When Spurgeon used or referred to the creeds, how did that occur?”

For Spurgeon, the use of the term “creed” was applied in numerous ways. First, he would often refer to the creed of the Calvinists compared to the creed of the Arminians, as he often emphasized the five points of Calvinism, to which he held. For example, he writes, “It is the glory of that Church that it has a Calvinistic creed, and so far it is in harmony with the

⁴⁴ Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils, Know Series*. 14.

⁴⁵ *MTP*, 35:798

Scriptures.”⁴⁶ Second, Spurgeon would emphasize the value of the creed in relation to Scripture. For instance, in one sermon he proclaimed, “We certainly cannot depend upon creeds; they are good enough in their way, as trust deeds are too, but they are as broken reeds if we rely upon them.”⁴⁷ Third, he would address the creed as the broad system of beliefs to which one ascribed, either as a follower of Christ or as a system which “bids men believe a lie, by wrapping them up with assurances of their safety . . . a faith which consists in presumptuously trusting to ourselves.”⁴⁸ A prime example of this kind of use is found when Spurgeon addresses the Broad Church, a term he uses to describe the “Tractarians” and others who embraced doctrinal error:

Far be it from us to join with the Broad Church cry, and furl the banners upon which our distinctive colors are displaced. We hear on all sides great outcries against creeds. Are these clamours justifiable? It seems to me that when properly analysed most of the protests are not against creeds, but against truth, for every man who believes anything must have a creed, whether he write it down and print it or no; or if there be a man who believes nothing, or anything, or everything by turns, he is not a fit man to be set up as a model.⁴⁹

In one early sermon, “The Bible,” preached at the New Park Street Chapel, he mentions the Athanasian creed. In that sermon, Spurgeon emphasizes the importance of the Bible over the Athanasian Creed, seeming to assess that the Athanasian Creed undermines the authority of Scripture, implying that the creed emphasizes its teaching as the catholic faith to be believed instead of Scripture. In his critique Spurgeon says, “I hold the Catholic faith of the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible. It is not for me to draw up creeds; but I ask you to search the Scriptures, for this is the word of life.”⁵⁰ Though Spurgeon does not dismiss the value of

⁴⁶ MTP, 45:523

⁴⁷ MTP, 9:200.

⁴⁸ NPSP, 1:437.

⁴⁹ MTP, 17:250

⁵⁰ NPSP, 1:212.

creeds, in this early sermon he does communicate two things: 1) he shows his familiarity with early creeds, and 2) he clarifies the preeminence of Scripture as authoritative. The approach by Spurgeon aligns with the value he places on the importance of the Bible and the importance of Christ, “For the Bible was not only interpreted histologically but was also closely associated with Christ.”⁵¹ Had he placed a greater value upon the creeds in any other way, he would have been inconsistent in his treatment of the Bible.

Examining the sermons of Spurgeon and his use of creeds sheds light on the various ways that Spurgeon employs creeds. The research required this writer to search for key phrases and terms that relate to the Nicæan Creed, Apostles Creed, and various Early Church Fathers. The goal was to determine if there existed consistency in either usage over the years, or manner of utilization. The primary terms employed during the research were: “very god,” “begotten,” “creed,” and “nice” (short for Nicæa or Nicene). The search covered 63 volumes of sermons encompassing 3,561 sermons. This does not account for searches that were made in *The Treasury of David* and in *The Sword & the Trowel*, for which there were not significant findings at this time in the process.

Of those searches, the most significant findings came from the term “very god,” and “creed.” The reason for using those terms is found in the Nicene Creed itself. The creed reads:

1. We [I] believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible.
2. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only begotten* Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all worlds; [God of God] Light of Light, *Very God of Very God*, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made;
3. Who, for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man;
4. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; And suffered and was buried.
5. And the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures;
6. And ascended into heaven, And Steth on the right hand of the Father.

⁵¹ Peter J. Morden, *Communion with Christ and His People: The Spirituality of C.H. Spurgeon*, (Pickwick edition. Pickwick Publications, 2013), 290.

7. And he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.
8. And [I believe] in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of life; Who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; Who spoke by the Prophets.
9. And [I believe] in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church;
10. We [I] acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
11. And we look for the resurrection of the dead;
12. And the life of the world to come.⁵²

The numeric results of the search of phrase “very god” demonstrate the utilization of the Nicene Creed by Spurgeon. Most often he used the entire phrase “very God of very God,” though there were a few times that Spurgeon would use the words “very God” as a creedal reference. The accounting took into consideration the use of each double phrase as a single use of the phrase itself. The research accounting indicates that Spurgeon used the creedal formula 218 times in 200 sermons which is approximately 6% of his earliest published works. In an unpublished sermon, originally delivered on Thursday, May 14, 1857, Spurgeon wrote, “Christ was very *Man*, he was also very *God* . . . the divinity was undiluted and infinite. Christ was very God of very God.”⁵³ The search through six published volumes of *The Lost Sermons of C.H. Spurgeon* indicated no use of the phrase “very God,” though it should be noted that most of the sermons in the volumes are outlines and not fully transcribed notes or manuscripts.

References to Creeds

Throughout his sermons, Spurgeon does not only utilize formulas from the creeds, he also mentions specific creeds by name. The following examples will trace the chronological order of the three creeds Spurgeon mentions in his sermons.

⁵² Philip Schaff ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 27-28. (*Italics mine to highlight phrases*)

⁵³ Charles H. Spurgeon, and Terence Peter Crosby. *CH Spurgeon's Forgotten Early Sermons*, (Leominster, UK, Day One Publishers, 2010) 58.

There are a few examples of Spurgeon mentioning the Apostles' Creed (AC). In the earliest reference it seems that he equates the NC and the AC. The first reference points to the text, in Acts 15:11, in which Peter refers to believing the Gospel. Spurgeon says, "You notice it begins with, "We believe." We will call it, then, the "Apostle's Creed," and we may rest assured that it has quite as clear a right to that title as that highly esteemed composition which is commonly called the "Nicene, or Apostle's Creed."⁵⁴ In another sermon, Spurgeon commenting on the personal nature of faith and prayer includes a reference to the AC saying:

Notice how the Lord's prayer runs: "Our Father which art in heaven," but if we would repeat the Apostles' Creed we must not say "we believe in God the Father," but "I believe." Believing must be in the first person singular; praying should have a width and compass about it to embrace all the saints, but believing must be by each one for himself — "The God of my mercy."⁵⁵

The next examples focus on several of Spurgeon's direct references to the NC. In one of his early sermons (1859), he states, "The witness of our church must be one and indivisible. We must have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. And yet dear to our hearts is that great article of the Nicene Creed, the "Communion of Saints."⁵⁶ Though Spurgeon's focus is not only on Christ in this statement, the emphasis on the value of the NC is noteworthy. In a much later sermon (1888), he says, "The Nicene Creed well puts it, and it is not too strong in the expression: "Light of Light, very God of very God," for Christ has all that the Father has."⁵⁷ In both of these instances Spurgeon makes a positive acknowledgment of the NC and its value for Christology, which is a consistent theme in each of his references to the NC. In another sermon (preached in

⁵⁴ *MTP*, 13:550. It is unlikely that Spurgeon was confused about the relationship of the two. It is more likely that he means that each creed is orthodox and consistent with that which the Apostles taught.

⁵⁵ *MTP*, 20:483-4.

⁵⁶ *NPSP*, 5:603.

⁵⁷ *MTP*, 40:670.

1881), Spurgeon again mentions the NC, but this time he emphasizes its subordination to the authority of Scripture, “The text does not say, “These are written that ye might believe the Nicene creed,” for good as that creed is, it was not then composed, and is not the chief object of faith.”⁵⁸ A final example illustrates Spurgeon’s use of the language of the NC as well as the direct mention of the NC, “Suffice it for us to say that, in the most appropriate language of The Nicene Creed, Christ is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.” He is co-equal with the Father; though how that is, we know not.”⁵⁹

The last creed that Spurgeon mentions is the Athanasian Creed. Though Spurgeon does not mention the creed or Athanasius frequently, the references to either demonstrate an appreciation of both. Consider the following statement when Spurgeon mentions Athanasius in context of the Arian heresy, “it did seem as if the heretics had killed the doctrine of the Deity of Christ; but the Lord was pleased to raise up his valiant servant Athanasius.”⁶⁰ In another instance Spurgeon acknowledges the fortitude Athanasius possessed as he stood against heretics. On at least two other occasions, Spurgeon then addresses the Athanasian Creed. In one instance he says, “We do not find the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity set forth in Scripture in formal terms, such as those which are employed in the Athanasian creed.”⁶¹ In another instance he refers to it as a “very good creed.”⁶²

Though the direct references to these specific creeds are few, the statements clearly demonstrate three ideas that Spurgeon holds about them: 1) he thinks positively of them 2) they

⁵⁸ *MTP*, 27:845.

⁵⁹ *MTP*, 45:513.

⁶⁰ *MTP*, 54:400.

⁶¹ *MTP*, 20:669.

⁶² *MTP*, 27:845.

are beneficial when one recognizes their proper subordination to Scripture, and 3) they are useful tools in preaching and teaching doctrine.

The importance of Spurgeon's focus on doctrine in his sermons is better understood by an examination of the terms and phrases that echo the creeds, in particular the NC. Christian George states, "[Spurgeon] transmitted a highly developed Christology that was Chalcedonian in creed."⁶³ Though George points to Chalcedon, he is not negating Spurgeon's dependence upon or use of the NC that preceded Chalcedon. George's greater focus is on Spurgeon's emphasis on Christ as the center of theology. The following statement by Spurgeon illustrates George's emphasis:

God helping me, is not his system of divinity or any other human treatise, but Christ Jesus, who is the sum and substance of the gospel; who is in himself all theology the incarnation of every precious truth, the all-glorious personal embodiment of the way, the truth, and the life.⁶⁴

This emphasis placed upon Christ explains the close tie to the NC and its invaluable explanation of the doctrine that pertains to the person of Jesus. Therefore, Spurgeon's consistent use of the phrase, "very God of very God" from the NC is an essential element by which he expresses his Christology. The following is only one example that shows several emphases mentioned earlier (creeds, Athanasius, very God, etc.) in one location. And though the focus here is upon the person of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, the statement reflects Spurgeon's Christology nonetheless:

. . . believing him to be God, we ascribe greatness unto Jesus Christ the surety of a better covenant. And as for the Holy Spirit, believing that the work of conversion is as great as even that of redemption, or creation, we believe him to be the everlasting God. We see him so described in Scripture that we dare not speak of him as an influence, as a new emanation from the Deity; but we conceive him to be a Person as very God of very God, as is the Father, so is the Son. We solemnly subscribe to the creed of St. Athanasius, that

⁶³ Christian T. George, "Jesus Christ, The 'Prince of Pilgrims'", viii.

⁶⁴ *MTP*, 7:308.

though there are not three Gods, but one God, yet there are three persons in the glorious Trinity in unity of the everlasting Jehovah, unto whom belong the shouts of the universe, the songs of angels, and the ascription of our united praise.⁶⁵

Thorough remarks on the copious employment of the language of the NC is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the following ideas that are coupled with Jesus being “very God of very God” are to be noted, as they highlight Spurgeon’s recognition of divine attributes and qualities and responses due God, the Father, that are also attributed to Jesus, the Son. Spurgeon expresses, “now is he crowned with universal sovereignty . . . Jesus is ‘very God of very God,’ and as such we adore him.”⁶⁶ In another instance Spurgeon asserts, “We subscribe to that ancient confession, ‘He is very God of very God.’ . . . and we each one salute him as ‘My Lord and my God.’”⁶⁷ As seen above, The Holy Spirit is counted as a member of the Godhead and the phrase applied to Jesus in the NC is used by Spurgeon to describe the Holy Spirit on numerous occasions. The following statement is one that ascribes many of the characteristics of God to Jesus the Son and highlights his views of the NC:

The Nicene Creed well puts it, and it is not too strong in the expression: “Light of Light, very God of very God,” for Christ has all that the Father has. When we come to Christ, we come to omnipotent omnipresent omniscience; we come to almighty immutability; we come, in fact, to the eternal Godhead.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *MTP*, 7:379-80.

⁶⁶ *MTP*, 20:889.

⁶⁷ *MTP*, 24:580.

⁶⁸ *MTP*, 40: 670.

The Book of Common Prayer

The *Book of Common Prayer* is an important work that “served the Church as an educative tool.”⁶⁹ The *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) is a work published by Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1533 to 1556.⁷⁰ Though the work influenced the liturgy of the Church, it is also known that “Not all Anglican theological colleges train their ordinands” in the use of the BCP.⁷¹ The BCP was an important work that was employed in the Anglican church at the time of Spurgeon.

For Spurgeon, who values works like the BCP, there is also a clear aversion to the BCP for several reasons. The following comment is written by Charles’ brother James in *The Sword & The Trowel*.

How our brethren manage to read the burial service over ungodly men, how they can subscribe to the catechism, and many other enormities of the Book of Common Prayer, remains to us an enigma towards the solution of which we have not advanced a hair’s breadth since the day when we provoked so much indication by our sermon on “Baptismal Regeneration;”⁷²

Spurgeon himself addresses the BCP in his “Inaugural Address” at the Annual Conference of the Pastor’s conference, which was printed in the May 1877 edition of *The Sword & The Trowel*. In the address he remarks, “So must it be with belief in the Prayer-book, no one man can believe it all; possibly high church, low church, and broad church can manage it between them.”⁷³ Though he doesn’t dismiss the use of the BCP in its entirety, there is a definite

⁶⁹ Mark R., Lindsay, Thomas Cranmer and the Book of Common Prayer: Theological Education, Liturgy, and the Embodiment of Prosper’s Dictum.’ *Colloquium* 47, no. 2 (November 2015), 195.

⁷⁰ Lindsay, Thomas Cranmer and the Book of Common Prayer. 195

⁷¹ Ibid., 207.

⁷² S&T, 1868. 85.

⁷³ S&T, 1877. 195.

sense of Spurgeon's disdain for the BCP. In the same address he later declares that the BCP needs revision for the "mischief is in the catechism and the service book which are in constant use."⁷⁴

The BCP reflects the Nicene Creed in its thirty-third statement, employing some of the very language of the Nicene Creed. However, there is a definite sense that Spurgeon does not utilize the BCP as his primary source of creedal language that reflects his Christology. Spurgeon's resistance to elevate the BCP as a worthy creed is reason enough to draw this conclusion. However, the fact that Spurgeon is consistent when he refers to the Nicene Creed itself and only mentions it favorably is enough to warrant the opinion that he was fondly attached to the original over and against the BCP.

Theology At Stake

It has been said that Spurgeon "was loathe to pry into the mystery of 'eternal generation' and the 'filiation' of the Son" and "would plead ignorance on the matter."⁷⁵ However, based upon Spurgeon's comments in the sermon, "Strong Meat," there is a different perspective. Spurgeon says, "The mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, and the equally mysterious and sublime doctrine of eternal generation are best let alone by feeble minds" and he further warns that the doctrine of "The Sonship of our Lord is a great and marvellous mystery, to be meekly and reverently received."⁷⁶ Though these comments, at first glance, seem as if he is unwilling to pry, Spurgeon goes on to warn his listeners telling them that the contemporary dispute was no place

⁷⁴ S&T, 1877. 195.

⁷⁵ Ryan Rippee, *Charles Spurgeon on the Work of the Father*. *Midwestern Journal of Theology*, 18.2, (2019): 58.

⁷⁶ MTP, 9:293.

for modern minds. Instead, he points to as if relying on “those gigantic minds which belong to the past . . . enter the field of controversy . . . two such men as Dr. John Owen and Charnock.”⁷⁷

It is not as if Spurgeon is against addressing the doctrine himself. Instead, it is clear that he has a grasp of the terms and difficulties of the doctrine. It does seem that Spurgeon, knowing his audience and the context of the message for the day, hints at his expertise and directs others to a source with whom he agrees. For example, in his work, *On the Person of Christ*, Owen writes:

His being so was not a voluntary contrivance or effect of divine wisdom and goodness, his eternal generation being a necessary internal act of the divine nature in the person of the Father. Of the eternal generation of the divine person of the Son, the sober writers of the ancient church did constantly affirm that it was firmly to be believed.⁷⁸

Spurgeon, referencing and being influenced himself by such a statement, indicates the orthodox beliefs that assisted in his own theological system that undergirded his preaching. Therefore, though there is no systematized theology for Spurgeon, the evidence points to a highly developed understanding of doctrine and its implications for his church.

Not only was the matter of eternal generation clarified by the Nicene Creed the doctrine of the incarnation was impacted. Stephen J. Wellum explains, “Christological questions remained. How do we preserve the unity of the incarnate Son in regard to one personal subject, while simultaneously making sense of his full deity and humanity?”⁷⁹ Wellum then acknowledges the importance of the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, “which established the basic parameters of Christological orthodoxy . . . [that] legitimately serve as ‘rules of faith.’”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ MTP, 9:293.

⁷⁸ Owen, *On the Person of Christ*. 1:34

⁷⁹ Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series*. (Wheaton: IL: Crossway, 2016), p. 256-7.

⁸⁰ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 257.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Spurgeon who held that the incarnation was central, saying Jesus Christ “is the sum and substance of the gospel” and “is in himself all theology the incarnation of every precious truth.”⁸¹

Though the NC emphasizes the deity of Christ, it does also place “the entire discussion of the incarnation within the overall plan of God to save us from our sins.”⁸² Spurgeon, in a sermon on 1 Timothy 3:16, remarks that this passage serves as a “most authentic apostle’s creed [which] declares that ‘*God was manifest in the flesh.*’”⁸³ In the profound and pithy manner typical of Spurgeon, he says, “God was manifest in the flesh of Jesus Christ the incarnate Word.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, Spurgeon, like Wellum, recognizes the impact the incarnation has upon salvation when he says,

My brethren, the mystery appears greatest of all because it *is so nearly connected with our eternal redemption*. There could have been no putting away of sin by vicarious suffering if God had not become incarnate. Sin is not removed except by an atonement, neither would any person have sufficed to atone but one of like nature to those who had offended.⁸⁵

Finally, the marks of the creeds in his preaching demonstrate Spurgeon’s reliance upon creeds and confessions in his ministry. When the Downgrade Controversy happened, one of Spurgeon’s frustrations was the lack of clarity of a statement of faith for the Baptist Union. What statement did exist allowed for ambiguity, that in Spurgeon’s assessment, contributed to the Downgrade. After leaving the Baptist Union, Spurgeon developed a statement of faith that was clearer on the issues to afford greater unity among Baptists. The theological compromise that

⁸¹ *MTP*, 7:308.

⁸² Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 282.

⁸³ SEE Volume 3, 10.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 12

happened in the Downgrade was to be avoided by implementing such a device among Baptist churches.

Conclusion

This paper intended to argue that the creeds, specifically the Nicene Creed, are critical to Spurgeon's Christology, as expressed consistently in his sermons. The research shows this to be an accurate assessment. Though the evidence does not indicate Spurgeon ever made declarations or gave instructions to his parishioners to study the creeds or to memorize them, the evidence does demonstrate the ease at which Spurgeon employed the language and terms of the Nicene Creed consistently throughout his pulpit ministry. Though Spurgeon often cautioned his hearers about a reliance upon any creed other than Christ, this tone indicated his understanding of the proper place a creed held for an individual. A creed was never to have greater emphasis than the Scriptures.

The evidence is also clear that Spurgeon had a highly developed theology that frequently pointed to the Nicene Creed and the specific position it established regarding the deity, incarnation, and eternal generation of Jesus. By Spurgeon infusing the terms of the Nicene Creed and its theology in a seeming effortless way in his sermons, there is further proof that he possessed a deep intimacy and love for the creed. A limitation this writer encountered in the research is that in the Spurgeon Library there are few works that may have pointed to Spurgeon's own study of resources that emphasized the Nicene Creed. Though Spurgeon owned Schaff's work on the *Creeds of Christendom* and research indicated that the series *The Works of the Rev. Joseph Bingham* contained information on the Nicene Creed, there were no annotations that indicated any significant information that would support any specific conclusion pertinent to this paper.

Unfortunately, the hope for this paper was to explore the implication of the creeds for Baptists. Though the Downgrade Controversy provides a glimpse into Spurgeon's emphasis upon confessions, there were two issues that hindered answering that aspect of the thesis: 1) the research never found any statements in which Spurgeon spoke directly about creeds and Baptists, 2) the scope of time and space are beyond the limits of this paper. Though this is a shortcoming, it does not negate the fact Spurgeon demonstrates that creeds affirm the roots of Baptist theology aligning with the Christian Tradition.

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