Evangelicals and Nicene Faith

Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness

Edited by Timothy George
Contents

Preface ix

Timothy George

List of Contributors xii

Introduction: The Faith We Confess xvii

Timothy George

Part 1: Identity

1. The Faith Once Delivered: Nicea and Evangelical Confession 3

   Thomas C. Oden

2. The Gospel Promised by the Prophets: The Trinity and the Old Testament 20

   Mark S. Gignilliat

3. The Road to Nicea: The New Testament 34

   Frank Thielman

4. Whosoever Will Be Saved: The Athanasian Creed and the Modern Church 45

   Gerald R. Bray

Part 2: History

5. The Reformers and the Nicene Faith: An Assumed Catholicity 61

   Carl L. Beckwith

6. The Nicene Faith and the Catholicity of the Church: Evangelical Retrieval and the Problem of Magisterium 74

   Steven R. Harmon

7. The Church Is Part of the Gospel: A Sermon on the Four Marks of the Church 93

   Carl E. Braaten

Timothy George, Evangelicals and Nicene Faith

Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission
   J. Matthew Pinson

9. Toward a Generous Orthodoxy 116
   Curtis W. Freeman

Part 3: Practice

10. Practicing the Nicene Faith 133
    Elizabeth Newman

11. The Nicene Faith and Evangelical Worship 147
    David P. Nelson

12. Taking In His Coming Down 159
    Kathleen B. Nielson

13. The Will to Believe and the Need for Creeds 169
    John Rucyahana

14. Can the Church Emerge without or with Only the Nicene Creed? 179
    Mark DeVine

15. Life after Life after Death: A Sermon on the Final Phrase of the Nicene Creed 196
    Ralph C. Wood

16. Delighted by Doctrine: A Tribute to Jaroslav Pelikan 202
    Timothy George

Abbreviations 207
Notes 209
Index 241
Preface

Timothy George

Most of the essays in this volume were originally delivered as papers at a theological conference held September 28–30, 2009, at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. The theme of that conference and of this volume was inspired by a talk delivered by the late Jaroslav Pelikan on December 5, 2003, at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University in connection with the celebration of his eightieth birthday. Professor Pelikan’s remarks on that occasion were later published as an essay, “The Will to Believe and the Need for Creed,” in Orthodoxy and Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. In that essay, Pelikan stressed both the confessional and unifying purposes of the creeds as expressions of Christian belief and identity. This was also the basic aim of the Beeson conference and of this volume, which came out of it. This book is dedicated to the memory of Jaroslav Pelikan and concludes with a brief tribute to him.

The fourth-century Creed of Nicea, also known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is the most widely recognized confession of the early church, embraced by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians alike. In recent years, the evangelical heirs of the Reformation have come to appreciate and to identify with the early church, not in an effort to “return to Rome” (much less to Constantinople or Moscow!), but rather as a reclamation of the apostolic witness that is the heritage of the entire Christian family. The essays in this volume explore the tensions and possibilities inherent in evangelical engagement with Nicene Christianity. The contributors address a variety of topics,
including the significance of the Nicene faith for pastoral work, evangelical worship, the emerging churches, biblical exegesis, and vital expressions of orthodox Christian faith around the globe.

Following the introduction, Tom Oden presents the recovery of ancient Christian teaching as a form of confession, a reclaiming of the apostolic faith by evangelicals no less than by other orthodox believers. This process has resulted in a new ecumenism, in which evangelicals are full participants. As contemporary evangelicals mature in their awareness of ancient ecumenical history, exegesis, and doctrine, both the old denominational barriers and old-line ecumenical structures are breaking down. The next two chapters, by Mark Gignilliat and Frank Thielman, discuss the theological framing of biblical faith in the Old and New Testaments. Most of the chapters in this volume use the Nicene Creed as the benchmark for gauging a full-orbed trinitarian confession in the life of the church. Gerald Bray, however, provides a helpful analysis and stout defense of a later confessional document, the so-called Athanasian Creed. This confession of faith emerged in the West around one hundred years after the received form of the Nicene Creed was promulgated at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

Two Lutheran scholars and three Baptist theologians present aspects of the Nicene faith within the history of the church. Carl Beckwith gives an account of the Reformation appropriation of the Nicene Creed as a form of “assumed catholicity.” Steve Harmon tackles one of the most persistently difficult ecumenical issues—the problem of magisterium. Carl Braaten, who has been a leading ecumenical theologian since the 1960s, examines the classic four marks of the church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—and shows how each of these traits is rightly understood in the light of Scripture and the Great Tradition. Matthew Pinson and Curtis Freeman, representing different wings of the Baptist movement, aim to dispel misunderstandings of the Nicene faith within a denomination popularly known for its rhetoric of “No creed but the Bible.”

Many of the essays in this volume deal with the historical and theological basis for reclaiming a robust confessional faith today, but a number of papers presented at the Beeson conference had a decidedly practical focus. Elizabeth Newman’s essay, “Practicing the Nicene Faith,” shows how deeds and creeds are inextricably linked together in the economy of divine grace. David Nelson pursues this theme into the contested arena of worship studies, whereas Kathleen Nielsen brings the perspective of a literature scholar, bridging the kenotic hymn of St. Paul in Philippians 2 and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s great poem “The Windhover.” Bishop John Rucyahana is a world Christian statesman whose heroic struggles during the genocide in Rwanda lend great credibility to his call for a renewal of credal orthodoxy. Bishop John’s presence at the Beeson conference and his essay in this volume remind us that the Nicene faith is thriving, despite great obstacles, throughout Africa and other areas of the world.

Timothy George, Evangelicals and Nicene Faith
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission
Global South. Within the evangelical culture of North America, the emerging church has garnered much attention over the past decade. Mark DeVine is not entirely dismissive of this phenomenon, but he argues that it will have lasting impact only to the extent that it finds an anchor in the kind of orthodox Christian faith expressed in the Nicene Creed. Ralph Wood offers a moving meditation on the final phrase of the Nicene Creed: “We look for . . . the life of the world to come.” Wood shows that the great eschatological breaking-in of Jesus Christ has already inaugurated “the life of the world to come,” while its final fulfillment awaits the consummation of all things for which believers in Christ yearn with “a hope that does not make one ashamed.”

The closing tribute to the late Jaroslav Pelikan is entitled “Delighted by Doctrine.” Cotton Mather once referred to church historians as “the Lord’s remembrancers.” Jaroslav Pelikan was perhaps the greatest such remembrancer the church has known in modern times. His life’s work was to trace the development of Christian doctrine, which he defined as “what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the Word of God.” But Pelikan was also known for his ability to capture profound truths in short, unforgettable statements. One of his best-known statements captures well the theme of this book: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

This book appears as volume four in the Beeson Divinity Studies series from Baker Academic, and I am grateful for the encouragement and support provided by the publisher for this project. I have also been greatly blessed by the support of my administrative secretary, Mrs. Le-Ann S. Little; my research associate, Dr. B. Coyne; and our research assistant, Mr. Sam Noone. I am also grateful to the faculty of Beeson Divinity School and to my colleagues and friends (several of whom are contributors to this volume), along with the administration of Samford University, which for the past twenty-three years has supported my efforts to bring together ministry and scholarship in the service of the church.
Contributors

Timothy George is the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University. He holds degrees from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (BA), Harvard Divinity School (MDiv), and Harvard University (ThD). George is an author of the Manhattan Declaration and has written or edited more than twenty books, including Amazing Grace: God's Pursuit, Our Response (Crossway, 2011), Our Sufficiency Is of God: Essays on Preaching in Honor of Gardner C. Taylor (Mercer University Press, 2010), J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought (Baker Academic, 2009), God the Holy Trinity (Baker Academic, 2006), Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail (Baker Academic, 2004), Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? (Zondervan, 2002), Theology of the Reformers (Broadman & Holman, 1988), and John Calvin and the Church (Westminster John Knox, 1988). George serves as general editor of the Reformation Commentary on Scripture, a series of twenty-eight volumes of sixteenth-century biblical exegesis. An ordained minister in the Southern Baptist Convention, George has participated in numerous ecumenical initiatives, including Evangelicals and Catholics Together and the international dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance.

Thomas C. Oden is the Henry Anson Buttz professor of theology and ethics emeritus at Drew University. He currently serves as director of the Center for Early African Christianity. Oden has degrees from the University of Oklahoma (BA), Southern Methodist University (BD), and Yale University (MA and PhD). He is an ordained United Methodist elder known for his call for a return to “classical Christianity” as exemplified in his books After Modernity . . . What? (Zondervan, 1992) and The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity (HarperOne, 2002). He is general editor for the twenty-nine-volume series Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity),
and the five-volume series Ancient Christian Doctrine (InterVarsity). He has participated in numerous ecumenical initiatives, including Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

Mark S. Gignilliat, associate professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, holds degrees from Bob Jones University (BA), Reformed Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the University of St. Andrews, Scotland (PhD). He teaches Hebrew, Old Testament exegesis, and biblical theology. Gignilliat’s book publications include Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel: Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Isaiah (Ashgate, 2009) and Paul and Isaiah’s Servants (T&T Clark, 2007).

Frank Thielman is a professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, where he has taught New Testament since 1989. He was educated at Wheaton College (BA), the University of Cambridge (BA and MA), and Duke University (PhD) and holds memberships in the Evangelical Theological Society, the Institute for Biblical Research, the Catholic Biblical Association, the Society of Biblical Literature, and Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. His books include Ephesians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2010), Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach (Zondervan, 2005), The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity (Herder & Herder, 1999), Philippians, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 1995), Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach (InterVarsity, 1994), and From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul’s View of the Law in Galatians and Romans (Brill, 1989).

Gerald R. Bray holds degrees from McGill University (BA) and the University of Paris-Sorbonne (MLitt and DLitt). He taught full-time at Beeson Divinity School in the areas of church history, historical theology, and Latin from 1993 to 2006, when he was named research professor. Bray’s books include We Believe in One God (ed.) in the Ancient Christian Doctrine Series (IVP Academic), Ambrosiaster’s Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians (trans. and ed.) (InterVarsity, 2009), Tudor Church Reform (Boyell Press, 2005), which contains the Henrician Canons of 1535 and the Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum, Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present (InterVarsity, 2000), The Anglican Canons 1529–1947 (Boyell Press, 1998), and The Doctrine of God in the Contours of Christian Theology series (gen. ed.) (InterVarsity, 1993). Bray also edited three volumes in the Ancient Christian Commentary Series and is a minister in the Church of England.

Carl L. Beckwith is associate professor of history and doctrine at Beeson Divinity School. Beckwith has degrees from St. Olaf College (BA), Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland (MPhil), Yale Divinity School (MA), and the University of

*Steven R. Harmon* is adjunct professor of Christian history at Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Until recently, Harmon was associate professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School. He holds degrees from Howard Payne University (BA) and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (MDiv and PhD). Harmon received a dissertation fellowship for study at Westfälischen-Wilhelms Universität, Münster, Germany. He also studied at Catholic University of America, the University of Dallas, and Duke Divinity School (sabbatical research). A specialist in patristics and ecumenical theology, he has taught Christian ethics as well as church history and doctrine. His writings include *Ecumenism Means You, Too* (Cascade Books, 2010), *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Paternoster, 2006), and *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (University Press of America, 2003). He publishes articles in several journals and serves on the Commission on Doctrine and Christian Unity of the Baptist World Alliance and is a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He is also the book review editor for *Perspectives in Religious Studies.*

*Carl E. Braaten* is emeritus professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where he taught from 1961 to 1991. Together with Robert Jenson he founded the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. He is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and he served as pastor of Lutheran Church of the Messiah in Minneapolis (1958–61). He holds degrees from St. Olaf College (BA), Luther Seminary (MDiv), and Harvard University (ThD). He has studied at the University of Paris, the University of Heidelberg, and the University of Oxford. He was the founding editor of two journals, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* and *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology,* where he continues to serve as senior editor. He has written eighteen books, edited twenty-five books, and written more than two hundred articles and chapters. His most recent books are *Because of Christ: Memoirs of a Lutheran Theologian* (Eerdmans, 2010), *That All May Believe: A Theology of the Gospel and the Mission of the Church* (Eerdmans, 2008), *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Fortress, 2007), and *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Fortress, 1998).
J. Matthew Pinson is the president of Free Will Baptist Bible College. He received degrees from the University of West Florida (BA and MA), Yale University (MAR), and Vanderbilt University (EdD). Pinson also did graduate studies at Regent College, Vancouver, and doctoral studies at Florida State University. He has authored several books and pamphlets, including contributing to Perspectives on Christian Worship: 5 Views (B&H Academic, 2009), Free Will Baptists & Church Government (Randall House Publications, 2008), The Washing of the Saints’ Feet (Randall House Publications, 2006), and Four Views on Eternal Security (Zondervan, 2002).

Curtis W. Freeman is research professor of theology and director of the Baptist House of Studies at Duke University Divinity School. He holds degrees from Baylor University (BA and PhD) and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (MDiv). He has edited two books—Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People (Judson Press, 1999) and Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision (Smyth & Helwys, 1994). Freeman writes articles that seek to describe the development of a distinctly Baptist theological tradition as well as articles relating to Baptist and free church theology. He is a series editor of Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Paternoster Press) and serves on the Commission on Doctrine and Christian Unity of the Baptist World Alliance.

Elizabeth Newman is professor of theology and ethics at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. She holds degrees from Wake Forest University (BA), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (MDiv), and Duke University (PhD). Newman is the author of Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers (Brazos Press, 2007). She also serves on the steering committee for Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy and the editorial board of Studies in Baptist History and Thought.

David P. Nelson is provost/chief academic officer at the University of North Carolina School of Arts. He holds degrees from Hardin-Simmons University (BM and MM) and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (PhD). He was editor of The Bible and the Mission of God (B&H Academic, 2010) in The Mission of God series and A Theology of the Church (B&H Academic, 2007) and was a contributor to Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue (B&H Academic, 2008) and Authentic Worship (Kregel Publications, 2002). He received a Faith as a Way of Life grant from Yale Divinity School for work focused on the study of faith and culture.

Kathleen B. Nielson holds degrees in literature from Wheaton College (BA) and Vanderbilt University (MA and PhD). She has taught in the English departments at Vanderbilt University, Bethel College, and Wheaton College.
Nielson directs and teaches women’s Bible studies at several churches, speaks extensively at conferences and retreats, and serves on the board of directors of Focus on the Family. She has authored numerous Bible studies, including *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs: Wisdom’s Searching and Finding* (P&R, 2009), *Psalms: Songs along the Way* (P&R, 2009), and *Proverbs: The Ways of Wisdom* (P&R, 2007), as well as various articles and poems.

*John Rucyahana* served as bishop of the Shyira diocese within the Episcopal Church of Rwanda. He holds degrees from Inyemeramihigo College (BA) and Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Pennsylvania (MAR). In 1993, Bishop Rucyahana was instrumental in establishing the Blessed Mustard Seed Babies Home in Hoima, Uganda, a home for abandoned children and those who had lost both parents to HIV/AIDS. In 1997, the genocide and subsequent violence decimated Rwanda’s infrastructure and destroyed local services, schools, churches, health-care systems, and the economic base. This left Rwanda an impoverished and broken nation desperately in need of reconciliation, with over four hundred thousand orphans, one hundred thousand of whom were located in the Shyira Diocese. Bishop Rucyahana began an orphanage to help these children. He is the chair of Prison Fellowship Rwanda and serves on the global board of directors of Prison Fellowship International. Recently retired as bishop, John Rucyahana was appointed president of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission.

*Mark DeVine* is associate professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School. He teaches church history and doctrine. He holds degrees from Clemson University (BS) and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (MDiv and PhD). DeVine is the author of *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at All Costs* (B&H Academic, 2005). He served as a missionary in Thailand and contributed to *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement* (B&H Academic, 2009) and to *The Disciple's Study Bible* (Cornerstone Bible Publishers, 2003).

Introduction

The Faith We Confess

Timothy George

One of the signs of getting older is that one’s friends and contemporaries begin to die. Not long ago Dr. Frank Forrester Church, one of my best friends from my student days at Harvard Divinity School, passed away. Forrest Church and I arrived at Harvard in the same year, he from the West Coast and I from the Deep South. We bonded almost immediately. We both loved classics and church history, and we both studied under the same professor, George Huntston Williams, who taught all of his students to appreciate what another great Harvard professor, Georges Florovsky, once called “the ecumenism of time as well as space.” Forrest majored on the early church, and I on the Reformation. At the time, my goal was to be a pastor; he wanted to become an academic. Somehow the wires got crossed, however; I became the academic, he the pastor. Forrest served just one church during his entire ministry: the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City. When he went there, there were some one hundred people, more or less (usually less), rambling around that great cathedral-like sanctuary. His obituary in the New York Times reported an average attendance of over one thousand in recent years. Who said Unitarians couldn’t have church growth!

Over the years Forrest Church and I had many discussions about orthodoxy and heresy, about doctrine and faith, about what it means to be a Christian in today’s world, about the will to believe, and about the need for creed. Within

Timothy George, Evangelicals and Nicene Faith
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission
the context of his denomination, Forrest was a flaming traditionalist, which means he believed in God! We each took our bearings from a different part of Harvard’s past. For Forrest, it was the Harvard of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, and the Unitarian pioneers of the early nineteenth century. For me, it was the Harvard of the Puritan founders whose motto was included on one of the early seals of the college: *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*, or “Truth for Christ and the Church.”

So now we, as pastors and professors, students and committed persons of the church from many different denominations and locations, are still struggling with the same issues Forrest and I debated on the banks of the Charles those many years ago. It is a long conversation stretching back across the centuries to Arius and Athanasius, including Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux, Erasmus and Luther, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Chauncy, and, although they were separated by nearly a century, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth.

I have been told that the theme of this book will generate a lot of conversation and raise eyebrows in some quarters. What are they trying to do down at Beeson—with Methodists and Baptists and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Anglicans, with moderates and conservatives and Calvinists and Arminians, all mixed up on the same program? We may be mixed together, but I hope we’re not mixed-up! Can I say that we have come together because, while the distinctives I have just mentioned (and many others that could be added) are important to each of us—the last thing we want to do is to concoct a homogenized, ecclesiastical pea soup—we want to declare our unity in *unum Deum*, as the Latin text of the Nicene Creed says: *in unum Dominum Iesum Christum, the Son of God, and in unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*, and we confess *baptisma in remissionum peccatorum*.

“The Will to Believe and the Need for Creed” is the title of an essay by the late Jaroslav Pelikan, based on a talk he originally presented at Yale University in 2003 at an event celebrating his eightieth birthday. Pelikan reminds us that “the will to believe” part of his title was not original with him. It was originally the title of an article and later a book by William James. James was a famous Harvard philosopher, the founder of the philosophy of pragmatism and psychology of religion in this country. James was perhaps best known for another book he wrote, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Buffeted by what Dostoevsky called “the whirlwinds of doubt,” James had little use for what he called “our positive dogmas about God”—credal formulas or confessions of faith.

When I was a student at Harvard, I would often walk across Harvard Yard, as we called the central quadrangle. On those walks I would pass Emerson Hall, which was built to house the department of philosophy during the tenure of William James. James was appointed the chair of the committee charged with recommending a legend to be carved in stone on the portals of Emerson Hall. James and his committee proposed the ancient Greek saying “Man
is the measure of all things.” But he was overruled by President Charles W. Eliot, who suggested instead Psalm 8:4, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” which undoubtedly irritated James until the day he died. It was William James who defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude,” which is not so far from Arius’s definition of the preexistent Logos as “the Alone with the Alone.” James was a great promoter of “the will to believe,” but he saw little use for “the need for creed.”

To assert boldly, as we have done in this volume, something so robust, so premodern, so outré as a statement of theological belief formulated nearly 1,700 years ago, is certainly to fly in the face of countervailing headwinds in our culture today. We have chosen to approach this classic confession through the prism of the Nicene faith and evangelical life. For the purposes of this project, evangelicalism may be defined as a worldwide renewal movement within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, embracing—but not limited to—puritanism, pietism, and pentecostalism. Evangelicals are increasingly coming to understand themselves not as a newly generated byproduct of the post-Enlightenment modern church, but rather as legitimate heirs of the apostolic faith expressed for all orthodox Christians in the Creed of Nicea. This claim cannot be made in a straightforward way, however, without acknowledging several significant obstacles and objections. I want to signal three of these at the outset.

The Evanescence of Meaning

One cannot understand the best-selling appeal of the new atheism today without taking into account what T. S. Eliot called “The Wasteland,” the title of his masterpiece written in the ashes of World War I. Postmodernism did not begin, as is often claimed, with French literary criticism, much less with the later musings of Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. It was born in the trenches of the Somme, Ypres, and Verdun. All of this means that any appeal to a tradition is suspect; any appeal that we make to traditional formulas of faith is automatically suspect. Even a theology as sophisticated and as attuned to modern scientific questions as that of Wolfhart Pannenberg is utterly without respect in a secularized academic culture that has learned to live “without God, without creed,” to quote the title of James Turner’s superb book on the history of unbelief in America.

The evanescence of meaning affects every field of endeavor, not just theology. Look back to an artistic movement such as Dadaism. Now, do not rush over to the library and try to find an artist named Dada in the dictionary. You will not find him there. You will find Derrida but not Dada! Dada is a nonsense word. It does not mean anything and was not meant to mean anything. It was chosen at random to express the inherent meaninglessness of the human project.
Listen to how the Dada Manifesto, published at Zurich in 1918, described this artistic movement: “We are a furious wind, tearing the dirty linen of clouds and prayers, preparing the great spectacle of disaster, fire, and decomposition.” One could not find a better description of 9/11 than that. In this kind of world, to make so robust a confession as the Nicene Creed is to fly in the face of the cultural assumptions and prevailing worldviews that mark the times in which we live.

Consider another field of human creativity: architecture. In the run up to World War II, Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany were both attracted to buildings designed in neoclassical form. In their efforts to build a new Rome and a new Reich, they turned to classical models from the past, even though the results were often garish and utilitarian. After World War II, with the defeat of the Nazis and the Fascists, classical architecture fell into disrepute, for no one wanted to use a style of building associated with the horrible tyranny of the middle part of the twentieth century. This, I think, makes all the more impressive the fact that in the early 1950s, when the campus of Samford University was being designed on the hillside on which it now sits, Major Harwell Davis, the university president, and those who helped him plan this campus made a deliberate decision to use Georgian colonial architecture. In the decades since, this architectural paradigm has been maintained with consistency under the presidencies of Leslie Wright, Thomas Corts, and Andy Westmoreland, with consequences one can still see when visiting one of the best-planned and most beautiful campuses in our country. All of this is the result of that post–World War II decision to swim against the tide, to construct a special space “for learning and for God” (Samford’s motto) that harks back to the harmony and beauty of the Great Tradition, even though the classical model of architecture had been discredited by the leaders of empires then in ruins.

Thus, Reid Chapel on the other side of this campus was built very much in the style of the First Baptist Church of Rhode Island, a great colonial church building with a spire reaching to the heavens. And later, even though we have a very different form of architecture at Beeson Divinity School, when we designed Hodges Chapel, we still wanted continuity, harmony, and beauty to be conveyed in the very space in which we meet to worship God. We deliberately and intentionally did this, over against all other models that were considered and promoted. Of course, this does not mean that one must be in a cruciform-shape building like Hodges Chapel, with the Apostles’ Creed etched in stone in the back and Soli Deo Gloria painted in gold over the organ, in order to worship God. No! We may surely worship God in a sawdust revival tent, or a crystal cathedral, or a country church, or a basketball arena, for “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

But if the purpose of a divinity school in a Christian university setting is to nurture, sustain, and transmit the deepest textures of meaning that form the ultimate reasons for the existence of such an institution, then how we shape...
the buildings in which we work and worship says a lot about what we believe and how we want to live.

Creeds and Credalism

John Stott has said that evangelicals are gospel people and Bible people. This is a shorthand way of saying that evangelicals affirm both the material and the formal principles of the Reformation: justification by faith alone and sola scriptura. In the early years of the Reformation, the question of scriptural authority came to a boiling point. In 1519, Luther and Johannes Eck met in a public debate at Leipzig. In the heat of that exchange, Luther declared that popes could err and had erred, that church councils could be wrong and had been wrong, and that he would henceforth stand forthrightly on the holy written Word of God alone. The radicality of Luther’s insight cannot be denied. He declared that Scripture alone was the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. He said that a simple layperson armed with Scripture should be believed above a pope or a council without it. All of Luther’s reforming work proceeded from this basic assumption.

Yet calling Luther a champion of private interpretation and the heroic fore-runner of modern individualism will not bear close scrutiny. For how else can we understand his concluding remark in the “Disputation against Scholastic Theology” repeated in other settings: “In all I wanted to say, we believe we have said nothing that is not in agreement with the Catholic Church and the teachers of the church.” Luther argued against tradition, but from tradition and for tradition. To put it differently, he was arguing from a shallower tradition to a more profound one.

The retrieval of tradition, even for the sake of the gospel, seems to run counter to that strain of evangelical piety expressed by the slogan “No creed but the Bible.” Bible-church Christians, restorationists, and some Baptists, among others, have elevated this expression to a fundamental article of faith. “We have no creed but the Bible,” they say—thus making a creed out of their commitment to creedless Christianity! Sometimes such rhetoric becomes a cover for the discounting or denial of the doctrinal content of historic Christianity. “No creed but the Bible” can easily devolve into neither creed nor the Bible. Despite its abuse and popular misuse, however, this expression reminds evangelicals of the real dangers of credalism, as opposed to the valid and helpful use of creeds in the life of the church. Evangelicals are among the most ardent champions of religious freedom and have often opposed, at great personal cost, state-imposed religious conformity and its attendant civil sanctions. Also, in keeping with the Scripture principle of the Reformation, evangelicals refuse to elevate any humanly constructed doctrinal statement above Holy Scripture. The Bible alone remains the norma normans for all
teaching and instruction, the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinion should be tried.

Despite this aversion to credalism, evangelicals today are finding that the historic creeds of the church are a resource for faith and spiritual life. Evangelicals are engaged in a process of retrieval for the sake of renewal. In this way, they are coming to stand side by side with Orthodox and Catholic believers in affirming the Nicene faith of the early church. Jaroslav Pelikan has defined Christian doctrine as “what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the Word of God.” John Webster has described how the act of confession is the means by which the church binds itself to the gospel; in so doing, it makes known its commitment to Christ and the Bible.

Confession is the act of astonished, fearful, and grateful acknowledgment that the gospel is the one word by which to live and die; in making its confession, the church lifts up its voice to do what it must do—speak with amazement of the goodness and truth of the gospel and the gospel’s God. Creeds and confessional formulas exist to promote that act of confession: to goad the church toward it, to shape it, to tie it to the truth, and so to perpetuate the confessional life and activity of the Christian community. In this way, creeds and confessional formulas are the servants of the gospel in the church.

Applied Christianity

We encounter a further objection in arguing for “the need for creed” among evangelicals today. The objection is simply put: emphasizing the creeds reduces the Christian faith to dead orthodoxy and an intellectualism devoid of faith and life. We have heard it said, “Why does it really matter what we say? It is how we live that matters.”

Such a protest was at the heart of the pietist reaction against Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pietists like Philip Jacob Spener have argued that appeals to the classic texts from the past, whether the ancient creeds or the writings of the Reformers, are not enough. They wanted to emphasize Wiedergeburt, the new birth: a living, vital, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Although pietism has problems of its own—not least in providing the seedbed for theological liberalism, as in Schleiermacher, who became “a Moravian of a higher order” but a Christian of a lower one—we must recognize the truth at the heart of its concern. There are more than two hundred confessions of faith included in Jaroslav Pelikan’s great anthology Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition, including the Creed of Nicea. But we must not forget an even earlier confession of faith, the one from the man who was born blind in John 9. He confessed, “Though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). That is a personal confession.
of faith, and it speaks about the personal, transforming work of God in the life of a sinner saved by grace.

The traditions of pietism and revivalism, for all their downsides, remind us of this basic reality: the Nicene faith is a matter of heart religion, of life religion, and not just head religion. So we attend not only to believing the Nicene faith but also to practicing it. Practice means to perform something habitually, to make a habit of it. A habit is not just a custom; it is also a form of clothing worn by certain members of religious orders. To practice is to make a habit of; it is to be clothed with; it is to exercise or perform repeatedly, regularly, in order to acquire a proficiency or skill of some kind.

But what does it mean to practice the Nicene faith? Well, it means we have to keep practicing it—in our worship, our liturgy, our deeds of mercy, our love for others, our life of prayer—because we have not yet gotten it right. We have not yet gotten ourselves right. This is why we are called to church week after week: to sing the same old songs, to hear the same old sermons, to receive the collection in the same old way. This is a part of what it means to practice the Nicene faith. It is about life. It is about worship. It is about the disciplines that shape our discipleship. We remember that we are called to do this because Jesus Christ has transformed our lives. He has changed our destiny, and he has called us to serve, love, and obey him in life and in death.

The words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed have come down to us in two variant texts. One is a first-person singular form, and the other is a first-person plural one. Both of these versions of the creed are attested in the fourth century. Some scholars think that the first-person singular text was a result of the fact that the Nicene Creed was used as an early baptismal confession of faith: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty. I believe. . . .” The creed was also used corporately, however, to express the common faith that we share together. There is a place for both “I believe” and “We believe” in our expression of the Nicene faith today. As we affirm our solidarity with Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical believers around the world and through the ages, and as we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven . . . forgive us,” so too we confess the faith of the church in words that place us among that company of forgiven sinners, which is the body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space.

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].
With the Father and the Son
he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

AMEN
PART 1

Identity
Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

Jude 3

Introduction

In this essay I am asking how. My dialogue hopes for visible evidences of the concrete implementation of how. How to do what?—Present the faith! Bring life to faith! Bring faith to life! Not just any generalized faith, but the faith once delivered to the saints. The apostolic faith. The faith of the original eyewitnesses to God’s own coming to give humanity a new start.

The apostles were chosen and sent by the risen Lord into all the world—to every culture in every language—to embody this faith. Does this faith change with changing times? Trust the apostolic witness on this: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and
strange teachings” (Heb. 13:8–9). This goes against the grain of our modern pretensions to improve on the apostles. The gospel does not change with each new cultural situation. The style of language may vary, since the history of language changes. But the content of the witness, the gospel, remains the same. The deposit is rock-hard, like Peter (petros, “the rock”), who was called to guard the apostolic teaching: to “feed my sheep.”

This faith is not first delivered to one audience as truth and then later to another audience as a modified truth or an altered view corrected by time. The faith is only once delivered to specific apostles sent to proclaim the changeless truth of God’s coming, once, for all, in every language and culture. Count them: twelve, symbolic of a newly covenanted Israel.

Their deposit was delivered to whom? The saints—the gathered community of worship whenever and wherever they meet to celebrate the truth made known in the incarnate Lord. All these varied forms of Christian community in history have in common their shared life in Christ, who is just as alive with each of them as he was in his Last Supper with his closest disciples.

Why is this testimony needed today? Because it is life-giving and culture-transforming? Yes, but wait—there is more. This testimony is needed today because it is true. Ours is an age of increasing syncretism and radical pluralism. We imagine that we have at last become inoculated against the fantasy of the truth. Postmodernity, which lacks orthodoxy, has only minimal interests in truth claims. Truths, it says, are just competing finite powers with winners and losers. The winner is the truth socially recognized, but only for a time. Just wait till the next alleged truth comes along. Postmodern orthodoxy is wholly focused on one pivotal truth claim: Jesus Christ is Lord.

So how do we present the apostolic testimony, the faith once delivered to the saints, one by one to persons who are living in a culture spinning out into fragmentation? That is the question that brings us together for this essay. Let us look more closely.

“Our Common Salvation”: Ancient Creed and Modern Confession

*Upholding the Original Apostolic Tradition*

Timothy was instructed: “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13–14). The first task of the Christian teacher is to “hold fast” to the sound teaching passed on from the apostles. Timothy was not at liberty to teach his own private opinions or prejudices. Paul had provided a living model for the Christian leader to follow (Tertullian, *Praescr. 25*).

Jesus taught his disciples that the Spirit is being given to “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Paul faithfully passed on the tradition he had...
received, which he regarded as unalterable: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.” What is the core of it? That “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3).

Paul regarded those in public ministry as “stewards of the mysteries of God” who are required to “be found trustworthy” in passing along the tradition (1 Cor. 4:1–2). Timothy was implored to “guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20–21). Along with objective accuracy, there remains a personal element in the transmission of tradition: “Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14–15; cf. Gal. 1:8–9; Jerome, Letters 52.7).

The Creed

The apostolic faith is concisely summarized in the creed. The purpose of preparation for baptism is to learn the core teachings that come directly from the apostles, in order to know what your baptism means and to avoid false advertising. Get this apostolic faith wrong, and everything else about Christianity will be misdirected. Nicea was called to define that core ecumenically—east and west, north and south, on the broadest possible scale—and to defend it against distortions. Nicea was a milestone not because it presented something new, but because it held to that same faith that had been received directly from the apostles through the Spirit and with minimal perversion. The Creed of Caesarea of 325 ended: “We have thought all this in heart and soul ever since we knew ourselves, and we now so think and speak in truth, being able to show by evidence and to convince you that we in past times so believed and preached accordingly” (Eusebius, in Socrates of Constantinople, CH 1.8, COC 2:30). By 431 AD, it was consensually defined that no one within classic Christian teaching has acquired the right “to declare or at any rate to compose or devise a faith other than [Greek, heteran] that defined by the holy fathers who with the Holy Spirit came together at Nicea” (Third Ecumenical Council, Ephesus, SCD 125).

But don’t we need a different foundation for our modern audience? Paul answers: “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). Those who pretend to lay a new foundation other than the apostolic testimony do so in vain; such an attempt is like building out of straw. They have already decided to do something else, to build up something quite different from the foundation, “which is Jesus Christ.” The foundation is all about a person, and a personal relation with this person. Our relation to this person is what brings us together.
Revitalizing Ancient Ecumenical Teaching: A New Ecumenism

Today, evangelicals are already embodying what is now being called the new ecumenism. This does not mean a new organization, but rather a rediscovery of our unity with ancient and contemporary Christian believers. Until recently, evangelicals have not had an adequate or viable ecumenical presence. That is partly due to the false but prevailing definition of ecumenism. Some have not yet recognized that this older, modern ecumenism has lost vital contact with the oldest, ancient ecumenism. That primitive experience of unity in personal trust in Jesus Christ is the emerging work of the Spirit. Those who define the ecumenical movement by church officials negotiating their institutional relations with each other—rather than by celebrating the unity of their personal relation with the incomparable Person, the incarnate risen Lord—will here become hard of hearing. But the day of ecumenism being defined by politics is over. That has not been blessed by the Spirit. The rapid demise of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement is due to its detachment from the ancient ecumenical movement. But the Spirit is doing something new, as the Spirit is always prone to do.

I hesitate to even bring up the term ecumenism, because it has been so long distorted. Its closest cognates are catholic and orthodox, both of which have been battered in modernity. So I will write only of ecumenism in an ancient, orthodox, and catholic sense. Confessing evangelicals are uniting to call for the vital recovery of ancient ecumenical teaching today. They constitute living evidence that God the Spirit is calling into being a renewed awareness of our unity in Christ—a new ecumenism. Confessing Christians are seeking the recovery of doctrinal integrity throughout the whole range of world Christianity. This healing is not a mere fantasy but already a palpable reality.

Evangelicals are no longer thinking of the renewing body of Christ simply within the context of recently created denominational walls. Walls that have been erected between Christian institutions have often been bound within the narrow limits of modern assumptions, hence without reference to the communion of saints. Contrary to a popular stereotype, evangelicals are no longer prone to venting spleen, but rather showing their unity in the body of Christ and its plausibility through faith active in love.

This Spirit-filled, personally grounded form of unity in Christ is most alive among young people, many of whom live in Asia and Africa. I have seen their faces. They are weary of accommodating to modernity. They are seeking grounding in ancient ecumenical teaching. Modern ecumenism rightly began in worldwide evangelical mission movements. I speak of the earliest expressions in the World Evangelical Alliance of 1846, and extending to the Edinburgh Conference of 1910. But sadly, by 1966 this modernizing movement had lapsed into a merger mentality represented by defensive bureaucracies, and it finally deteriorated into divisive advocacy and extreme politicization.

Postliberal ecumenism is actively returning to the wellsprings of unity in apostolic truth and classic Christian teaching. Wise Catholic leadership has recognized...
the weaknesses of the bureaucratic and liberal Protestant ecumenical elites and is now engaging actively in an ongoing conversation with worldwide evangelicals. Wherever lives are hidden in the risen Christ, we have much to consider.

**Nicea and Evangelical Confession**

A modest expression of this unity and vitality is the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS), a project once located in Drew University but now is at Eastern University in Philadelphia. A lengthy project begun in 1993, the last of its twenty-nine volumes was recently completed. These early exegetes are supplying Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants—both evangelical and liberal—with new roots in patristic teaching and exegesis.

Beeson Divinity School in 2009 was the proper place and time for announcing and celebrating the launch of the newest extension of the ACCS effort: the Ancient Christian Doctrine Series. It is a successor series—a five-volume patristic compendium of classic doctrinal definitions, organized around the familiar key phrases of the Nicene Creed. Each volume unpacks the most widely received classic definitions, often called articles, of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 325 (with clarifications in 381).

Here the richest doctrinal treasures of the patristic period are being mined and ordered as a commentary on this most authoritative and widely received doctrinal confession of the early church. The Nicene Creed remains the most commonly confessed affirmation of worldwide Christians concerning the heart of the biblical revelation.

These classic texts from the first eight centuries illumine those key decisive phrases of that summative creed. Nicea was written under heretical challenges that defined, for subsequent Christian preaching, liturgy, and catechetics, the boundaries of the faith received from the apostles. The Spirit-blessed efforts of the consensus-bearing exegetes of Scripture are again proving to be the most reliable basis for holding together the core of early Christian teaching, the gist of the gospel.

**Relearning the Meaning of Our Baptism**

The orderly teaching of Christian doctrine arose out of prebaptismal teaching based on consensually received scriptural exegesis. Drawing the whole course of Christian teaching into a single, cohesive statement was the motive of every early Christian teacher commissioned to prepare persons for baptism.

The creed was a convenient way of drawing together the entire diverse narrative meaning of the Old and New Testament Scriptures into a simple, memorizable affirmation of baptismal faith. This is why Christians all over the world still appeal to this most widely received of all ancient confessions.

Christians have a right to know the meaning of their baptism. Clergy have a sacred duty to teach it. Those rightly prepared for baptism understand what
it means to believe in God the Father Almighty and in God the Son, illumined through God the Spirit.

This ancient confession still serves as the most fitting and durable framework for the postmodern rediscovery of classic Christian teaching. Like all ancient baptismal confessions, it is set forth in a triune sequence. The three articles of the creed summarize the being and work of the one God who reveals himself in history as Father, Son, and Spirit. This is the one God to which all of Scripture attests.

The core of this sequence for summary teaching appeared in short form in Matthew 28:19–20 in the formula for baptism, in which the resurrected Lord concluded his earthly teaching with this charge: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” In this way, the Lord Jesus himself forever linked two crucial acts: baptizing and teaching. In all subsequent periods of Christian history, they have remained intimately interwoven.

The room for private opinion is vast among Christians of very different languages and cultures and historical times, provided those opinions are not repugnant to the core of biblical faith (John Chrysostom, Hom. 2 Tim. 2–3). Nothing is required of any believer other than that which is revealed by God the Spirit to conscience through Scripture, as necessary for salvation and as affirmed consensually by the Christian community.

Baptism is intrinsically voluntary. No one can be rightly forced to believe. It is a free response to a free gift. The task of Christian teaching is to clarify, illuminate, cohesively interpret, and defend the convictions distinctive to Christianity that empower and enable life in Christ (Mark 7:4–9; 1 John 2:12–14).

The most influential teaching summaries of the creed were written as catechetical lectures on the creed by Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechetical Lectures), Gregory of Nyssa (The Great Catechism), John Chrysostom (Baptismal Instructions), and Augustine (Catechizing the Uninstructed and Faith and the Creed). From these came systematic theology.

Teachers as varied as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther have held that the Nicene Creed is the best of the condensed statements of Christian faith and the most reliable way to learn the heart of faith. In professing the form of the creed received in Jerusalem, Cyril explains that the believer is helped to keep close to the center of the faith once delivered by the apostles, which has been built up strongly out of all the Scriptures. For since all cannot read the Scriptures, some being hindered from the knowledge of them by lack of learning, and others because they lack leisure to study, in order that the soul should not be starved in ignorance, the church has condensed the whole teaching of the Faith in a few lines. This summary I wish you both to commit to
memory when I recite it, and to rehearse it with all diligence among yourselves, not writing it out on paper, but engraving it by the memory upon your heart, taking care while you rehearse it that no catechumen may happen to overhear the things which have been delivered to you. I wish you also to keep this as a provision through the whole course of your life, and beside this to receive no alternative teaching, even if we ourselves should change and contradict our present teaching.¹

The creed, says Rufinus, serves as a “short word” summarizing the whole of biblical faith, providing “standard teaching to converts,” and offering “a badge for distinguishing” those who preach Christ according to apostolic rule. It is constructed “out of living stones and pearls supplied by the Lord” (Symb.).² Rufinus was among the earliest (345–410) of many classic commentators on the rule of faith. He thought that the Holy Spirit had superintended its transmission in order that it “contain nothing ambiguous, obscure, or inconsistent.” Poignantly, he explained: “The reason why the creed is not written down on paper or parchment, but is retained in the believers’ hearts, is to ensure that it has been learned from the tradition handed down from the Apostles, and not from written texts, which occasionally fall into the hands of unbelievers.” Rufinus based his commentary on the personally remembered “text to which I pledged myself when I was baptized in the church of Aquileia.”

“Contend for the One Faith”: Conciliar Tradition in Evangelical Protestantism

The Primitive Rule of Faith

By the end of the first century, the baptismal formula (Matt. 28:19) was taken to be an established summary of the essence of faith (Ignatius, *Phld.* 7–9; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.17). It drew together common points of consent in a brief way that any believer could memorize and confess from the heart. By this simple confession the mass of material in sacred Scripture was, by common assent, tightened, unified, organized, and reliably transmitted.

The rule of faith (regula fidei) defines in summary what is to be believed as necessary for salvation. The Bible contains all that is necessary to be believed, and the church is commissioned to teach nothing less than that faith revealed in Scripture (Second Helvetic Confession).³ The creed is derived closely from the whole course and gist of Scripture (Luther, *Brief Explanation*, WML 2). The rule of faith is summarized in baptismal confession. An article of faith must be based upon revelation of the truth declared in Scripture, and ecclesiastically defined with ecumenical consent (Gallican Confession, CC 3; Vincent of Lérins, *Comm.* 2, 20–24). Alleged consensual teachings that lack these features may remain matters of opinion and left
open for continued debate and speculation, but not taught as apostolic truth fit for the salvation of souls.

Newly devised human traditions that claim to be divine revelation but disavow the apostolic witness must be gently and charitably resisted. They must not be confused with the divinely revealed good news received from the apostles. “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8; see also 1 Tim. 1:4). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they neglected the commandment of God “in order to maintain the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8; Tertullian, Praescr. 7). The godly transmission of the memory of Jesus Christ must be maintained accurately and faithfully, since it is the living memory of God’s own coming to humanity (John Chrysostom, Comm. Gal. 1.6).

Irenaeus conversed personally with Polycarp, who himself had talked with the eyewitness John about the events surrounding the life of Jesus (to Florinus, in Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.20). Thus through only one intermediary, Irenaeus understood himself to be personally and accurately in touch with a reliable eyewitness to the original events of Christian revelation.

The Apostles’ Creed is the Western form of the received text of the consensual memory of the earliest baptismal confession, which developed as a summary exposition of the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 (Didache 7.1; Justin Martyr, 1 Apol. 61). Irenaeus regarded the rule of faith as the “canon of truth which he received in his baptism” (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 1.9.4; 1.10.1; see also Tertullian, Bapt. 11; Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 8.15; Cyprian, Epistles 69.7; 70.2). As early as in Paul and Matthew, there is a fixed formula for baptismal confession (see also Ignatius, Magn. 11; Eph. 7; Trall. 9; and Justin, 1 Apol. 13, 31, 46; Dial. 85). The twelve spare phrases of the Old Roman Symbol are direct descendants of the easily memorizable and earliest baptismal confessions that derived from the Pauline and Petrine decades. The Didache called believers to guard what they had received without adding or subtracting. Irenaeus (Adv. Haer. 3.4.3) and Tertullian (Praescr. 29–35) thought that all heresies would be easily recognizable by their self-deceptive habit of tacking on innovations to the received apostolic tradition as if essential. Clement of Alexandria appealed to the antiquity of the apostolic witness as prior to all subsequent distortions of it (Strom. 7.17).

By searching the Scriptures, any believer can compare later proposals for Christian understanding with the apostolic witness. In On First Principles, Origen accepted as orthodox teaching only that which had been taught by the apostles and accurately mediated through consensual tradition (OFP, Preface). Antiquity of teaching—meaning the ancient teaching of the apostles—was one of the three criteria constituting the Vincentian rule, the other two being catholicity of reception and universality of consent (Vincent of Lérins, Comm. 2–3).
Even the heretics tried to appeal to the apostolic tradition for support, only to find their views in due time rejected by the church itself on behalf of the apostolic written testimony. The Holy Spirit was promised to the apostolic successors not in order that they might make known new doctrine, but that by the Spirit’s assistance they might “inviolably keep and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith delivered through the apostles” (Vatican Council I, Constitution 1.4).\(^5\)

When divergent teachings arose, the churches spread across the ancient empires appealed to the joint consensus of the most ancient churches of Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria to maintain apostolic teaching accurately. They sought to guard those documents that most accurately presented the original tradition. The position of Rome as capital of the empire made it an obvious center for Christian guardianship; yet churches there were always seeking to be in concert with Alexandria, representing the African continent, and with Jerusalem and Antioch, representing the Eastern churches.

**General Consent to the Core Narrative of Scripture**

Any ancient Christian exegete had authority only by correspondence with the general consent that accurately represented the mind of the whole church—by reasoning, by analogy of faith—upon the whole scriptural narrative.

No single voice taken alone can claim to carry every nuance of the full consent of the whole church in all things. Even the church’s greatest theologians may err, wrote Vincent of Lérins, but these errors are in time corrected by the lack of consent (Comm. 10–11, 17, 28).

The surest medium of consensual Christian teaching is liturgy, through the language of common prayer. The practices of baptism, Eucharist, Lord’s Day services, and many elements of the Christian year are powerful safeguards for the retention of the teachings of the apostles. Even if preachers were known to be phony and heretical, as long as they celebrated Holy Communion and baptism in due order, the liturgy had not been invalidated. Indeed, the liturgy itself performs the ironic task of contradicting what has been badly taught (Augustine, C. litt. Petil. 45, 82).

By this means, the Holy Spirit again and again turns human pride and distortion into the praise of God. The church has been guided by God’s Spirit through many historical crises. New languages, concepts, and symbol systems have arisen repeatedly in the history of Christian teaching. For a time, a disproportionate emphasis may have been given to one or another concept, but eventually all these concepts must stand the test of time and either be confirmed or rejected by the living ecumenical church under the guidance of the Spirit. The result is that by Scripture, creeds, transgenerational institutions, liturgy, and catechetical teaching, the Spirit continues to illuminate the mind of the church and to make the apostolic teaching recognizable.
The Spirit calls us to test all things in relation to divine inspiration: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:19–21).

The Creed

The creed points not to itself but to the revelation it attests. It is not significant in itself except as a gathering up of the whole gist of scriptural teaching. The creed is, at heart, a confession of the cumulative meaning of the prayers, liturgy, and common acts of the whole Christian community of all times and places. The creed expresses the common sense of the faithful about what the revelation of God in Scripture narrates and proclaims. It does so in a short form that seekers and youthful initiates may grasp and understand, and that all believers everywhere may confidently confirm as reliable biblical teaching. When new ideas were tested, they were tested by this rule of baptismal faith. Arguments from Scripture were proposed by both heretics and orthodox to decide upon the consensus of the faithful that had been received from the apostolic testimony and believed always. That is what the Nicene Creed represents prototypically for the whole of ecumenical Christianity.

This consensus sets the boundaries for the shared confession of the worldwide worshiping community. Many ideas were able to be freely examined within these boundaries, but some were out of bounds. When advocates of these nonconsensual views turned up purported texts by alleged apostles, they were judged and rejected in relation to the consensus that had emerged from and been fairly tested by the earliest communities of faith as expressed in their baptismal confessions. These became the rule of faith (regula fidei) for the worshiping community—the trustworthy rule by which the boundaries of scriptural teaching could be marked out.

Today we live amid a flurry of well-publicized and desperate efforts to revive these heresies, which are attempts to give even the weirdest ideas the faint aroma of legitimacy. Speculating scholars have gained doting press attention by focusing on long-rejected ideas, claims, and their documents. 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 elitist of all false claimants to Christian truth were the gnostics, who were contemptuous of the naïve consensus of uninformed believers and were never even interested in gaining the hearts of ordinary believers. Yet these ordinary believers could easily see that these later speculations did not match the authenticity and beauty and clarity of the original apostolic witnesses.

The creed is a window into the earliest Christian reflection on the most decisive points of saving faith. The Triune God, the saving work of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit in church and ministry are not optional but
required points of classic teaching commonly assumed among these living communities of Christian worship in vastly different cultures and centuries.

**The Patrimony of the One Body**

This tradition is the rightful patrimony of all global Christians today, whether Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic, or charismatic. It rings true because it radiates the light of the Spirit and the warmth of divine grace.

How are such varied Christians able to find common dogmatic inspiration in the ancient rule of faith? Why are these texts and extracts so intrinsically ecumenical, so broadly catholic in their cultural range? Because all modern ecclesial traditions have an equal right to the truth borne by the earliest apostolic teaching. All of these traditions can, without a sacrifice of intellect, draw modestly together to ponder the texts most common to them all. These classic texts have decisively shaped the wider subsequent history of doctrine in global Christianity in all centuries.

Hence, Protestants are recognizing the scriptural faithfulness of the pre-Lutheran fathers, while charismatics are being reawakened by the Spirit of the ancients. Catholics are owning their premodern sources once again, and Orthodox are rejoicing with the glory of these belated recognitions. Cyril is not owned by Alexandria, nor Gregory by Rome. All believers have a right to all the most faithful consensual teachers of God’s revelation. These influential minds are the common possession of the whole church: African, Asian, European, and elsewhere.

**The Core Patristic Conciliar Tradition Welcomed within the Classic Reformation**

This tradition of general lay consent continued and was received in the Reformation by the repeated acceptance of the three creeds: Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian (*Quicunque vult*) as evidenced in the Augsburg Apology, the Smalcald Articles, Melanchthon’s Thesis of 1551 (The Three Chief Symbols, BOC:17–23), and the Thirty-Nine Articles. “The three creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles’ Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed; for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture” (Thirty-Nine Articles, 8).

Melanchthon followed the earlier Reformers in arguing that Protestant teaching was grounded in a genuinely “Catholic association, which embraces the common consensus of prophetic and apostolic doctrine, together with the belief of the true church. Thus in our Confession we profess to embrace the whole doctrine of the word of God, to which the church bears testimony, and that in the sense which the symbols show” (CR 24.398). He condemned as novel whatever might clash with the most ancient consensual symbols of the church (*symbola accepta; Loci Communes* 19.19–20).

Timothy George, Evangelicals and Nicene Faith
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission
Defining Evangelical Confession of the One Faith

Five years ago, J. I. Packer and I compiled a topically arranged volume of extracts selected from the most widely quoted evangelical statements of faith produced internationally since 1950. I remain indebted to the incomparable J. I. Packer and to the wisdom and gentleness he brought to defining the evangelical consensus.

Theologically, the roots of modern evangelicalism go back much further than its nineteenth-century identity name would suggest. Evangelicals build upon the same foundation as the apostles and fathers. This received tradition embraces: (1) the trinitarian, incarnational, and socially transforming consensus realized in the classical Christian patristic period; and (2) the consensus of the Magisterial Reformation on biblical authority and justification by faith only, through grace only, in the work of Christ alone.

As denominations wilt and inventive theology grows ever more wildly eccentric, the unifying force of the core apostolic tradition is gradually increasing. Put simply: those united by their personal relation to Jesus Christ are discovering each other.

“Once for All Delivered”: Binding the Generations

The Ecumenical Council’s Authority Grounded in General Lay Consent

The authority of the ecumenical councils is grounded in general lay consent under the guidance of the Spirit based on the canonical written Word. What makes the general councils reliable is the presence of the Holy Spirit assisting in the interpretation of the apostolic witness at the depths of conscience and common sense.

The ecumenical council that gathered at Chalcedon declared its intention to “make no new exposition” but merely to take away all haziness by defining clearly the consent of the whole church in a “united exposition and doctrine”—“further than this we can say nothing. . . . This is the orthodox faith; this we all believe; into this we were baptized, into this we baptize” (Ecumenical Council, Chalcedon, Session 2, NPNF² 14:248–49).

The councils were pledged to “not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set” (Prov. 22:28). For it was not merely human ingenuity that spoke in the councils but “the Spirit himself of God” confirmed by general lay consent (Third Ecumenical Council, Ephesus, Letter of Cyril to John of Antioch, NPNF² 14:253). Since Gregory the Great, this formula has been widely received: those are orthodox (i.e., consensually acknowledged ecumenically) who gratefully receive what the ecumenical councils received and reject what they rejected (Gregory I, Letters 1.25; 5.51–54; 6.66).

Since the ancient ecumenical councils were “constituted by universal consent, one who rejects them does not overthrow them but himself” (Gregory I,
Letters 1.25, NPNF² 12:82). At the time of Gregory’s writing, there had been only four synods of general lay consent, which he summarized so concisely that it has become a standard formula: “The Nicene, in which Arius, the Constantinopolitan, in which Macedonius, the First Ephesian, in which Nestorius, and the Chalcedonian, in which Eutyches and Dioscorus, were condemned” (Gregory I, Letters 4.38, NPNF² 12:159). Boundaries are necessary if faith is to be valued over against its counterfeit currencies.

The Transgenerational Community and the New Ecumenism

The unity of believers is not limited to contemporary voices. In this consensus fidelium are voices from all cultural histories, all continents, and all languages—not just modern westerners north of the equator. The confessing and renewing and charismatic movements are being drawn back toward this classic consensus of faith. This consensus is enabling an emerging new configuration of the one body of Christ. These movements are being given life not for boasting or dialogue but for repentance and witness.

The new ecumenism is not an organization but an emerging spirit. It is not a new institution but a burgeoning convergence of consciousness that echoes the unifying work of the Spirit.

Modern evangelicals are maturing in their awareness of ancient ecumenical history, exegesis, and doctrine. Worldwide believers are becoming more familiar with evangelical commitments, vocabulary, and values. The orthodox are reviving, while the revivalists are becoming more orthodox. The Catholics are becoming more Spirit-led, while the charismatics are becoming more catholic. It may appear to be nothing more than a cloud the size of a person’s hand (to use a biblical metaphor), but it is gathering steadily to burst out in the latter rain.

Many of those who once looked unavailingly to the modern ecumenical movement for an expression of unity in the body of Christ have become disillusioned. Out of the pain of these illusions, they are now looking toward ancient ecumenism for contemporary wisdom. They see noble figures of the Reformation tradition such as Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, and Wesley as expressions of the Great Tradition stemming from the apostolic witness of the early church.

The Unity of Apostolic Consensus in the First Generation

The apostles themselves had a fully formed and sufficient vision of the Lord’s teaching. But that did not prevent Peter and Paul from earnest debate on Jewish legal practices, which led directly to a further-refined consensus. Tensions of culture and language between the proclamations of Mark and John and between James and Paul have required all subsequent adherents of apostolic teaching to search for their common ground. Their personal styles

Timothy George, Evangelicals and Nicene Faith
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission
did not mark fundamental doctrinal differences. The apostles were firmly convinced that the Spirit was uniting them in a common faith, not divergent doctrines as so often interpreted (John 17:20–26; Cyprian, Dom. or. 30).

It was not the unique or peculiar features of any one apostle’s teaching that defined the consensus; rather, the consensus emerged out of the Spirit-led recollections of eyewitneses as their faith was embraced in a convergence. Apostolic consensus did not develop out of a democratic groupthink process that groped after the most imaginative solutions to human problems. Instead, it lived out of the worshiping community that wholeheartedly consented to the Lord’s teaching under the guidance of the Spirit.

**Lay Consent a Protestant Principle**

The ancient principle of general lay consent is firmly embedded in the confessions of the Protestant Reformation. Augsburg cautioned against ecclesial burdens “introduced contrary to the custom of the universal Christian church” (Augsburg, BOC 105).

The objection of the Reformers to medieval Catholicism was not that it had grown too old, but that it was much too new and mistakenly innovative. It had invented “an unprecedented novelty” in relation to apostolic testimony. Sadly, the novelty was introduced precisely through leaders appointed to guard the tradition, who, “under pretext of the power given them by Christ, have not only introduced new forms of worship and burdened consciences with reserved cases and violent use of the ban, but have also presumed to set up and depose kings” (Augsburg, CC 98).

The congregational tradition more directly assumed a due process of lay consent that is entered into “not only expressly by word of mouth, but by sacrifice,” with or without taking the written form of confessions (Cambridge Platform, CC 391). The Baptist consensual statement of 1925 argued that Baptist statements of faith “constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. They are not intended to add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament” and are “not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation” (CC 345).

**The Whole Laity through Time Is the Consenting Community:**

**Multigenerational Consent**

General consent is transmitted through many generations. Hence, it is intrinsically multigenerational. That differs from modern notions of experiential consent epitomized by Schleiermacher, in which consent depends primarily upon contemporary feelings of individuals now. This tends to demean reasoned voices of the past generations.
When a consensual council or regional synod seeks to clarify or better articulate the faith once for all delivered to the saints, in effect it is proposing an interpretation to the remembering church and humbly asking the church of subsequent generations for steady confirmation of that interpretation, not as if it were new, but on the assumption that it is apostolic. A local or regional body may contribute to the attempt to define the larger consensual ecumenical teaching, but not without the subsequent intergenerational consent of the whole church.

Yet no one should assume that absolute unanimity is required for ecumenical consent; otherwise, no question would ever be closed, and a single heretic or tiny cadre of objectors would be an absolute obstacle to ecumenical teaching and unity in Christ.

**Durable Consensus Is Recognized Only within Longer Time Frames**

The deposit of apostolic teaching does not change with time. Since reporting on a once-for-all event, it is not subject to revision. No one adds or subtracts from it (Rev. 22:18–19). The risen Lord, who is always the same, meets us within our changing times. It is not he whom time changes, but he who changes time. Thus, the one message—always one and the same truth and way and life in every age—is capable of responsive hearing amid the ever-changing flow of human language.

The laity is stretched out over twenty centuries and is still growing. It seems at first glance that this longevity encompasses too many cultures to pretend that any viable consensus exists among believers. But this is the unmistakable miracle: there is a consensus. It can be seen only through large portions of time. So those who see only small hunks of time, like the present, are likely to miss it altogether. It is a picture that can be seen only through a historical lens.

Meanwhile, general consensus is often misunderstood as absolute unanimity. Whatever occurs in history is imperfect. The church occurs in history, so its consent is always imperfect. Perfectionistic views of absolute consensus always fail to grasp the need for daily repentance. Exaggerated hopes prevent the recognition of rough-hewn, durable forms of working consensus that have been articulated repeatedly and lived out culturally.

These consensual achievements are known because they have a conspicuous textual history of authority in the worshiping community. Consensus is already a fact. What we have not adequately explained is why that fact is so persistent and yet so ignored by historians. It is a datum hard to see if you have blinders on or glasses that filter out the brilliance of its radiance.

Self-assertive human beings are always going to be tempted to use an alleged consensus as a ploy for power rather than as a servant of the truth. So the history of Christianity exposes many attempts to use a true consensus falsely, to use it instrumentally for special interests or class privilege. Yet even these attempts must stand the test of general lay consent over long stretches of time.
Many Mansions

Within the vast historic archive of orthodox teaching, there are many colors of permissible interpretation. There is plenty of room for these and more, provided the **regula fidei** is not neglected. Consensus clarification is not looking for a single interpretation that would bind up the written Word and make the Spirit strictly subservient to a passing culture or economic class or political bias. It is interested in offering life.

No statement of the unity of Christian teaching is unchallengeable. But every challenge to date has failed to erase the core of Christian confession.

It is a fact that people keep on being baptized, even when they only partially grasp the full meaning of their baptism. The Spirit is giving them time to learn. Yet whenever the faithful lift up their Spirit-led unity in praise, someone is always there to try to shoot it down. Some detractors appear to have a holy calling to expose all the weaknesses and limitations of the emerging classic Christian consensus. Others want to make some political use of it that is not consistent or confirmable within the consensual texts themselves.

Is the laity to conclude that because we do not see a fully formed consensus on every disputed question (e.g., omniscience or millennialism), we must be silent about it? My view is that we can and must say something, even though we need not try to say everything. The modest effort of this compendium runs many risks in the attempt to speak for the historic worshiping community. But the greater risk is to make no attempt at all.

Paul instructed Timothy to guard what had been committed to him (1 Tim. 6:20). Vincent commented that Christian teaching consists in “what you have received, not what you have thought up; a matter not of ingenuity, but of doctrine; not of private acquisition, but of public Tradition; a matter brought to you, not put forth by you, in which you must be not the author but the guardian, not the founder but the sharer, not the leader, but the follower.” The *ekklesia* is not seeking to discover a new word for each culture but to proclaim the truth of the most primitive gospel ever anew, so that “by your expounding it, may that now be understood more clearly which formerly was believed even in its obscurity” (Vincent of Lérins, *Comm.* 22.27, *LTCF* 27). It is tampering with evidence to pretend to improve upon apostolic testimony itself, although our perceptions of the apostolic witness may improve or worsen.

This does not imply that there can be no progress in church teaching. Vincent argued that there is progress, but true progress is not change. True progress is an advance in understanding of that which has been given fully in the deposit of faith (Vincent of Lérins, *Comm.* 23.28). The inner cohesion of the witness of the Spirit does not wait or depend on our analysis. Our analysis can only confirm it, not create it. You know what you have seen, beheld, heard, and been addressed by. No one can take that from you.

Lowercase-c *catholic* as a description of Christian faith means “according to the whole” (Greek, *holos*), and the biblically proper reason for applying the
term to the church, or any part of it, is that the wholeness and fullness of the biblical revelation of God’s truth are faithfully held within it. The witness of the Holy Spirit is integral to catholic faith; hence, the perception of evangelical consensus—that is, of the integrated message of the Bible—is basic to catholic identity. The evangelical consensus claims catholicity as being essentially an integrated, organic grasp of the biblical vision of God and godly living.

Evangelical Christians are those who read the Bible as God’s own Word, addressed personally to each of us here and now. To embrace the evangelical life is to live out of a personal trust in, and love for, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The evangelical confidence is that anyone who engages seriously with the Bible, humbly asking God for light, will duly share the sight of what millions of Christians from the beginning have been privileged to see.

Let us pray with Jerome:

Lord you have promised
that in your kingdom all are equal
from least to greatest
but how can there be a lesser or greater if all are equal?
we give you thanks because the blessed secret is disclosed
by One who incarnated it:
whoever shall do and teach shall be great
whoever shall teach and not do shall be least
we rejoice that all shall know you, as written,
from the least of them to the greatest.
We come to know ourselves
by knowing ourselves in you
as you bind all together
by yielding to share our weakness.
Amen.

Adapted from Jerome, *Jov.* 2.27