

**Essay on Alexander Campbell's Rejection of Creeds
on the 1700th Anniversary of the Nicene Creed
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In a 2024 essay in the *Restoration Quarterly*, Brad East lamented the loss of catholicity, particularly soteriological ecclesiology and effectual sacramentality, among Churches of Christ within the past fifty years. One recourse, Brad suggested, was to embrace a creedal tradition with a magisterial interpretation of Scripture, or, as he put it, “authoritative documents and authoritative leaders.”¹ There is a grave need, according to East, for an authoritative “Rule of Faith” and “the authority of bishops” in conjunction with Scripture.² Without both, as I summarized East’s position, the American Restoration Movement was “doomed from the start,” and while it “may have had a good run,” its “insufficient catholicism killed it.”³

Brad spied a “substantive disagreement” with my response to his essay. He is correct. He suggests that if the first four ecumenical creeds are “optional for any local congregation to accept or reject as they see fit, then even their acceptance is an act of self-contradiction.” This is because “tradition without teeth is no tradition at all” since tradition “works only if it commands assent.” If a congregation’s elders come to reject what earlier elders had accepted about the Trinity or Nicaea, how is the “conciliar confession of the Trinity operative, much less authoritative, in” a community?⁴ It must be binding on the community over the long haul and norm what the community believes.

¹ Brad East, “Churches of Christ: Once Catholic, Now Evangelical,” *Restoration Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2024): 138.

² East, “Churches of Christ,” 136-137.

³ John Mark Hicks, “Churches of Christ: Always Evangelical, Still Catholic,” *Restoration Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2024): 157.

⁴ Brad East, “Response to Responses,” *Restoration Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2024): 169.

I suggest, however, though we embrace the Nicene creed as a healthy tradition, even a true confession of the Triune God, that we hold it as a secondary expression of the primary authority which is Scripture. In other words, the truth of Nicaea depends on the meaning of Scripture and not upon the transmission of tradition or the communal voice of the assembled leaders of the church (the whole church was gathered at Nicaea). This perspective coheres with the essence of the Protestant tradition (e.g., Calvin), though it moves away from the classic non-creedal stance of my Stone-Campbell ancestors.

I will explore this suggestion in this brief essay. First, I will unpack Alexander Campbell's understanding of creeds, particularly the Nicene creed. Second, I will offer some perspectives on the use or non-use of the Nicene creed in our congregations where this strong anti-creedal bias persists as it does among Churches of Christ.

How did Campbell nuance his view of creeds and their function in the church? On the one hand, Campbell did not object to the use of creeds as statements of faith or as summaries of the gospel. For example, Campbell was quite comfortable with the Apostles' Creed. "I believe every word of it," he wrote, because "it is not, like all modern creeds, a synopsis of opinions, but a brief narrative of facts, of all the great gospel facts."⁵ Seemingly, he did not have a problem with the Rule of Faith present in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others in the second and third centuries. It was "generally" the "same topics found in the apostles' creed." They were summaries or "synopsis of prominent facts, of which the document called the apostles' creed is a fair specimen."⁶

⁵ Alexander Campbell, "Reply to Barnabas," *Millennial Harbinger* 3, no. 12 (December 1832): 602.

⁶ Alexander Campbell, *A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice on the Action, Subject, Design and Administrator of Christian Baptism: also, on the Character of Spiritual Influence in Conversion and Sanctification, and on the Expediency and Tendency of Ecclesiastic Creeds, as Terms of Union and Communion* (Lexington, KY: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), 760.

On the other hand, Campbell objected to confessional creeds—ones that do more than recite the great gospel facts—when used as tests of communion or bonds of union because they were but a “synopsis of opinions.” In his debate with N. L. Rice, he provided this definition: “A creed or confession of faith is an ecclesiastic document—the mind and will of some synod or council possessing authority—as a term of communion, by which persons and opinions are to be tested, approbated, or reprobated.” These creeds “became the constitution of churches.”⁷ Consequently, creeds functioned as denominational boundaries, and their statements moved from catholic facts to denominational opinions. The multiplicity of creeds expressed the multiplicity of denominations due to the multiplicity of opinions. “Sects,” Campbell believed, “are all founded on opinions, and not of faith” since “every society in Christendom admits the same faith, or builds on the same grand evangelical facts,” but an opinion is only, at best, a “probable inference.”⁸ Such confessional creeds, then, became statements of opinion rather than facts and speculative theories rather than narrations of God’s work in Christ by the Spirit.

If creeds remain a statement of the “evangelical facts,” they are useful summaries for the community of faith. But when they are a compendium of metaphysical opinions that function as tests of communion and boundaries of fellowship, they are divisive, or as the debate proposition put it, “necessarily heretical and schismatical.”⁹

Scripture, according to Campbell, is sufficient for the confession of the “evangelical facts.” The language of Scripture is all that is necessary. More specifically, Campbell identified “two grand principles” that testify to the “simplicity of [the] divine constitution of

⁷ Campbell, *Debate*, 762.

⁸ Campbell, *Debate*, 835.

⁹ Campbell, *Debate*, 759.

remedial mercy.” They are expressed in Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:16, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” The “two ideas expressed concern the person of the Messiah and his office,” and this confession “is the whole revelation of the mystery of the Christian constitution—the full confession of the Christian faith.” It is “the rock” or “foundation” upon which there can “be unity of faith, of affection, and co-operation; but never, never till then. Every other foundation is sand.”¹⁰

Campbell believed Ephesians 4:4-6 is an appropriate summary because we make this confession when we are baptized and embody the seven ones that constitute the unity of believers: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body, one spirit, one hope, and one God and Father.”¹¹ When baptizing a person, Campbell only asks, “do you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God?” If they answer yes, he baptizes him. If he denies that Jesus died for his sins or was not raised from the dead, then he does not receive him because he does not believe “the gospel facts in their proper meaning.” [“Proper meaning” raises interesting questions about the sufficiency of the confession itself, however.] Yet, if one makes the good confession, and “so long as [one] loves and honors the Messiah, by keeping his precepts, so long I love and honor” that one as a Christian sibling. “But if any one equivocates on any of these questions of fact, we simply say, he disbelieves the testimony of God.”¹²

¹⁰ Campbell, *Debate*, 822-3.

¹¹ Campbell, *Debate*, 836. Also, Campbell, *Debate*, 833: “When any man discovers this rock, and is willing to build on it alone; whenever he sees its firmness, its strength, and is willing to place himself upon it for time and for eternity, and on it alone, I say to him—Give me your hand, brother, you must come out and pass through the ceremony of naturalization; you must be born of water as well as of the Spirit, and enter into the new and everlasting covenant; you must assume the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

¹² Campbell, *Debate*, 811.

How, then, did Campbell view the Nicene Creed? He identified at least three problems with the creed. First, it functioned as a test of communion beyond the language of Scripture. The Creed of the Synod of Nicaea in 325 CE anathematized whoever disagreed with their confession of the nature of the Son. If the Son is “true God from true God, begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father,” then to say there was a time when the Son was not, or that he came into existence from nothing, or that he is a different substance from the Father, or a mutable creature subject to change, is to deny the faith of “the catholic and apostolic church.” Such a one, the Creed affirms, is “accursed and separated from the church.”¹³ As such, according to Campbell, it functioned as “the constitution and test of the true Catholic church, and the divine measure of all orthodoxy.”¹⁴ This entailed separation from the communion table. The creed, with its metaphysical language extraneous to Scripture, became a boundary for table fellowship and was thereby divisive.

Second, it employed metaphysical language. “The difference between Alexander and Arius,” according to Campbell, “arose from the neglect or disregard of the doctrinal statements and facts as revealed in the word of God on the subject of the nature and character of Christ, and by indulging in metaphysical speculations, aided by Clement’s natural religion, without regard to the word.” In Campbell’s view, “both sides of the Arian controversy in the fourth century were wrong, and yet both in some degree were right.” Arians were wrong in denying the glory of Christ though correct in attributing sonship to his incarnation, but Alexander was wrong in attributing sonship to the eternal nature of the Logos though correct in affirming the full deity of the Son. Yet, they both dared “to

¹³ “The Creed of the Synod of Nicaea (June 19, 325),” in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. and ed. By William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 49.

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, “Christian Union—No. III,” *Christian Baptist* 3, no. 3 (October 3, 1825): 189.

investigate a subject of such awful import as the *modus* of divine existence” and “presume[d] to go further in the discovery of God than [God] has revealed.” The disputes ignited a flurry of “technical phraseology” that “produced a scrupulous and systematic cast of diction which is altogether inconsistent with the noble freedom displayed by the inspired penmen.”¹⁵

Third, it was a conflation of ecclesial and political power. This combination laid the foundation for tyranny and persecution that has played out repeatedly in the history of Christianity. “Each side of the Arian controversy,” for example, “when in power, persecuted the other with the most ruthless sanguinary violence.” But if the original protagonists had “been let alone to enjoy their speculations, with a moderate attention to the word of God,” Campbell speculates, “their differences of opinion would either have done no harm, would have been healed, or would have died with them.”¹⁶ Instead, Constantine gathered the Eastern bishops to “legislate the Arians into the church or out of the empire.” Ecclesial and political power used the occasion for its own interests. In this sense, the Nicene symbol became the “prototype of all heretical [divisive] creeds,” which tended to the “corruption of the church” and its use of political power.¹⁷ The creed, then, institutionalized a particular way of affirming the dignity and office of Jesus of Nazareth. The boundary became not only theological but political and institutional.

Campbell’s perspective still pre-dominated the early Stone-Campbell Movement and then especially Churches of Christ. The liturgical practices and theological reflection of Churches of Christ gave no significant role to the creed and its language. For example, the

¹⁵ Campbell, “Christian Union—No. III,” 190.

¹⁶ Campbell, “Christian Union—No. III,” 190. See also Campbell, *Debate*, 809.

¹⁷ Campbell, *Debate*, 766-7.

early conservative reformer Benjamin Franklin rejected both Unitarianism and Trinitarianism in favor of a simple confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He cared nothing for the “theories about the Trinity” since “they wrote about a matter which they confessed they could not understand, explained a matter which they confessed could not be explained, and yet required men to believe their theories, on pain of damnation!”¹⁸

Biblical language was the test for acceptance in the new movement. The confession that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God was sufficient. Campbell writes: “If [a Unitarian or Trinitarian] will ascribe to Jesus all Bible attributes, names, works, and worship, we will not fight with him about scholastic words.”¹⁹ The “very soul, body and spirit of the gospel...is in the proper answer to the question, *What think ye of Christ?*” Christian union is found in the “*declaration of our faith in the person, mission, and character of Jesus Christ.*”²⁰ Thus, union rested on the fact that Jesus was the Christ, the son of God. In the context of swirling Trinitarian and Christological debates, Campbell called for the simplicity of biblical language.

This is how Campbell became relatively comfortable with Stone’s apparent Unitarian and Arian theology. In his debate with Campbell, the Presbyterian Rice pressed the situation with Stone whom he characterized as a “prominent preacher in the same church” as Campbell. Stone taught, according to Rice, that the Son was not eternal but “an exalted

¹⁸Benjamin Franklin, “Matters of Disagreement,” in *Gospel Preacher* (Cincinnati, OH: G. W. Rice, 1877), 2:246. See also his “What Must Men Believe to be Saved?,” *Gospel Preacher* (Cincinnati, OH: Franklin & Rice, 1869), 1:39-40: “If a man believes with his heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, he has true faith, divine faith, saving faith and there is no other faith through which man can be justified before God.”

¹⁹Campbell, “Millennium.—No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 4 (April 1830): 147.

²⁰Campbell, “Union Among Christians,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3, 3rd series, no. 4 (April 1846): 222.

creature." Consequently, there was an "infinite difference between [Campbell's] faith and that of Mr. Stone."²¹

In response, Campbell offered two primary perspectives. First, while the Westminster divines of 1648 would "certainly have either cut off his head or hanged him," the movement has pursued a more "salutary and redeeming policy" of bearing with Stone's opinions even as, Campbell acknowledges, he did not "approve of all Barton W. Stone has written or said." Yet, Jesus came to save rather than destroy, he preferred to "save some of those speculators" in expectation that the word of God would prevail. According to Campbell, the speculations of thirty years ago are no longer remembered.²² And this would have been the case with Arius and Alexander if ecclesial and political power mixed with metaphysical speculation had not sought to force a resolution to the conflict.

Second, after the union of the Stone ("Christians") and Campbell ("Disciples") movements in 1832, Campbell believed that the "Christians" had left their opinions behind and had come to affirm the substance of his Christological test.²³ While Stone had earlier flirted with Arianism,²⁴ he indicated that uniting with the Reformers meant that he laid

²¹ Rice, *Debate*, 829; cf. also p. 853. Alexander Campbell, "Unitarianism as Connected with Christian Union—No. III," *Millennial Harbinger* 3, 3rd series, no. 8 (August 1846): 451, used "Trinitarianism" to describe his own position though he reminded his readers that he was "no advocate of scholastic Trinitarianism."

²² Campbell, *Debate*, 864-5.

²³ Campbell, "Mr. Broaddus," *Millennial Harbinger* 4, no. 1 (January 1833): 9: "As far as my acquaintance with all the brethren extends, North, South, East, or West, (whatever their former opinions I know not,) they all accord in rendering the same honor in thought, word, and deed to the Son, as they do to the Father who sent him."

²⁴ Stone, "The Editor's remarks on brother H. Cyrus' letter, No. 2," *Christian Messenger* 9, no. 7 (July 1835): 163: "Arius asserted that Jesus Christ was a created intelligence of the highest order, and Athanasius contended he was *begotten, not made*...and to this [Athanasius, JMH] have I subscribed long ago, as the most probable. See my letters to Doc. Blythe. I acknowledge that much speculation has been used on both sides of the long vexatious question. I, like many others, have indulged in it; but convinced of its inutility, and bad effects in society, have for several years back relinquished these speculations, and have confined myself to the language of scripture in my public teaching." Stone, "Queries," *Christian Messenger* 7, no. 5 (May 1833): 139, felt "disposed to use scriptural terms, when speaking on this subject, and therefore call Jesus the Son of God, the only begotten, &c. I can see nothing in scripture to justify the idea of the Son of God being created, the idea appears too low."

aside all his former speculations and spoke only in the "words of inspiration."²⁵ Stone acknowledged his debt to Campbell for "expressing the faith of the gospel in the words of revelation."²⁶ In his last decade, his Christological statements are replete with biblical phrases without extended speculation as to their ultimate ontology.²⁷

Given Campbell's qualms about creeds and the Nicene Creed in particular, how do his heirs within Churches of Christ respond? Many remain in fundamental agreement with Campbell about the non-use of creeds as a test of communion, and, therefore, they will not embrace the original intent of the Nicene creed itself to draw a line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (or heresy) or to fence the table based on the confession of the creed.

Perhaps four considerations are pertinent. First, at present, I do not see the practice of reciting the Nicene Creed in most liturgies in Churches of Christ as a feasible option. It certainly cannot be used, as Campbell himself argued, to fence the table and divide the body of Christ. It is neither a test of communion nor a bond of union. Indeed, the language itself is unfamiliar to most people in Churches of Christ. Consequently, its introduction into the liturgy—sacred space for Churches of Christ—is not generally an option. It is too human, too authoritative, and too divisive for that space. It does not and perhaps cannot function as a norm for faith among Churches of Christ. Its introduction would be disorienting.

²⁵John Augustus Williams, *Life of Elder John Smith; with some account of the Rise and Progress of the Current Reformation* (Cincinnati, OH: R. W. Carroll and Co., 1870), 455.

²⁶Stone, "Reply to Brother John Curd's Letter," *Christian Messenger* 8, no. 8 (August 1834): 239.

²⁷For example, Stone, "Letter IV: To ___ a Presbyterian Preacher," *Christian Messenger* 2, no. 8 (August 1828): 247: "The doctrine that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God, and not the living God himself--that he existed a distinct intelligent being from the Father in heaven before creation, and by whom God created all things--that this being was sent into the world by the Father, not to do his own will, but the will of him that sent him--that he was made flesh and dwelt among us,--that he suffered, died and ascended up where he was before--This doctrine we cannot but believe."

Second, I think the Apostles' Creed or the ancient Rule of Faith is more amenable to Churches of Christ. This is for the same reason Campbell saw value in both. These confessions of faith are focused on the narrated facts of the gospel. They are framed by the economic Trinity rather than the immanent Trinity. It is more in tune with the language of the apostles to speak of the Father sending the Son in the power of the Spirit than it is to speak of the Son as *homoousios* with the Father or true God from true God. The narrative of evangelical facts is what Churches of Christ have sung for decades, and this is familiar language from both hymns and Scripture. Narrative summaries like the Rule of Faith or the Apostles' Creed rooted in the early centuries and baptismal liturgies are much more acceptable to Churches of Christ than the apparent metaphysics of the Nicene Creed.

Third, while I personally have no problem with the recitation of the Nicene Creed—or the Apostles' Creed or the Rule of Faith in some form, I suggest a more inclusive approach among Churches of Christ is to embrace a fuller practice of reading Scripture in our assemblies in ways other than a prelude to the sermon. If we habitually read summary texts or proto-creed texts, and/or employed benedictions and calls to worship derived from Scripture, this would serve a similar function to reciting the Apostles' Creed or a Rule of Faith. The church could easily read texts like Nehemiah 9, Acts 10:38-43, Romans 1:3-5, 1. Corinthians 15:3-8, Ephesians 1:3-14, or Titus 3:3-8 that narrate the story of God or evangelical facts in Scripture. A consistent diet of rotating texts that summarize the narrative and proclaim the gospel has the potential to shape the community in ways like the Apostles' Creed or the Rule of Faith, perhaps better than either. Moreover, I would encourage the use of hymns that express the theological depth of the Nicene creed in poetic language.

Fourth, teachers and leaders need to introduce their congregations to the proto-creeds in the New Testament, the Apostles' Creed, the Rule of Faith, and the Nicene Creed. Before introducing them into their liturgy, the community needs to become acquainted with the history, meaning, and significance of these expressions of ancient faith. Not only would this be an opportunity for theological growth in understanding the faith, but it would also connect the present faith community with the ancient Great Tradition shared by all Christian communities across the world.