

Chapter 1



God

On Sundays in most Episcopal churches, just after the sermon, the priest invites the congregation to stand and “affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.” The people rise and say together a string of sentences that begins, “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”

This is the **Nicene Creed**, the product of a series of church councils in the fourth and fifth centuries. Over many years, early Christian bishops and leaders came together to sort out (and re-sort out) some of the most basic theological beliefs about the God they believed to be **Triune**—literally, three-in-one. They structured the creed to reflect the three divine persons who make up one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We’ll return to these relationships in later chapters. This opening affirmation about God orients the Christian faith.²

There is a God. This God is a being who is both uniquely and definitively other to our human existence, and at the same time intimately involved in our lives. God is both the Almighty, Creator

2. The Nicene Creed can be found on pages 326–327 and 358–359 of the Book of Common Prayer. Because it is central to much of Christian theology, it is also reprinted on pages 89–90 of this book.

of all that is, seen and unseen, and also so lovingly attentive to us that we relate to this God with the familiarity of a parent.

Moreover, the Christian God is the “one” God. In the cultural ferment of the Roman Empire, there was a raft of competing religious traditions, all demanding fidelity to their particular god or gods. But Christians asserted faithfulness to a particular God, the God who was revealed in and through Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ was not new. Jesus’s God was the God of the Jewish people, the God known as **Yahweh**, who had called a people named Israel into being and sent them into the world to make God’s glory known. When early Christians affirmed that they, too, believed in this “one God,” they affirmed that the history of God’s dealings with the people of Israel in the Old Testament was about them as well.

Creator and Covenant-Maker

The collection of laws, historical accounts, prophetic testimonies, poetry, proverbs, and much else that make up the Old Testament offer a place to begin thinking about the one God of the Christian faith. The Old Testament teaches us that God is not distant and removed. Instead, God acts in the world.

The first of these actions is creation. Out of nothing, God created the earth, the heavens, and all that is in them (Genesis 1–2). Nothing forced God to create. God created out of God’s great love. And when God created, God looked at this new creation and said it was good. God acts out of love and God’s love results in deep and profound goodness. Humans are made in the image of this God, which means we are made to be loving, good, and creative forces, too.

God also acts to create **covenants** with the people God has created. From ancient ancestors like Noah and Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, David, and others, God makes agreements. While the details are different, the basic idea of covenant is summed up in

what God says through the prophet Jeremiah: “you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jeremiah 30:22; also Exodus 6:7 and Leviticus 26:12). God lovingly chooses a particular group of people through whom God will act in the world, first by promising Abraham that he will become the father of a multitude of descendants. That promise is realized in the Hebrew people who settle in Egypt, and yet again when Moses leads them out of Egypt with the promise of a new land and a better home. By worshipping God and working to bring about the kind of society God desires, these chosen people will be blessed by God.

Christians adopt this belief in the particularity of God’s people. The first letter of Peter calls Christians “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). Such language doesn’t seem to square with the belief that all humans are created in the image of God. How are we all equal if some people are chosen and others are not? God chooses people not simply to bless them and set them apart from others, but so that through them all people may be blessed and know God’s love. God calls a people because God needs a whole community of people to make God’s blessing known. That tells us something important about God: God cannot be followed alone.

Yet the story doesn’t always unfold smoothly. God’s chosen people routinely fail to uphold their covenant with God. Their communities fracture and split. The world does not experience God’s blessing through them. Through judges, kings and queens, and prophets, God continually calls God’s people back to their covenant. This process culminates in the **Incarnation**, the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. In Christ, God takes flesh—the literal meaning of incarnate—and acts in the world in an entirely new way. We will take up this topic in later chapters, but for now notice this: in God’s action in Jesus Christ, we learn that God’s love is now both particular and universal. It is no longer just a chosen nation that is called by God. Through Jesus Christ, membership in that chosen nation is now open, potentially, to all people everywhere.

Our Father?

When Episcopalians offer the opening words of the Nicene Creed in worship—“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth”—we are affirming the creative power of God, the goodness and love of God, and the covenant and calling of God. But these words pose complications as well. In the Nicene Creed, Christians call God “Father.” Some faithful Christians struggle with this language. If God is so completely different from the world, how can God have gender? If God is male, then how can God understand problems women encounter?

The Fatherhood of God is concerned with the intimacy of God’s love. When Jesus’s followers asked him how to pray, he taught them to begin by saying, “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9). In the prevailing religious ethos of the day, such a practice bordered on scandalous. That is why when Episcopalians pray as Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer, we often introduce it with the phrase, “We are bold to say.” It takes a scandalous boldness to call this almighty God our Father.

Calling God Father does not have to entail any beliefs about God’s gender. God is beyond our understandings of gender. Although Jesus instructed us to call God Father, Jesus also highlighted aspects of God that seem more feminine. In this, he was continuing a trend from the Old Testament, such as when God is compared to a mother who will not forget her nursing children (Isaiah 49:15).

There comes a point where the English language fails us. In conversation about God, it is often helpful to use pronouns. But there is no pronoun in English that is beyond gender, meaning people are forced to choose between “him,” “her,” and “it.” None of these is sufficient to talk about God.

The trouble with language and names for God reveals a basic problem in thinking about God. We can learn plenty about God from God’s actions in the world. But God is also so completely

different from what we know that we can never fully comprehend God. At some point, our speaking, talking, and reasoning about God reaches its limits—but God keeps going. It is a helpful reminder when thinking about theology: our knowledge about God is always limited because we are not God. It's not for nothing that Episcopalians say praying shapes believing. In prayer, we can come to deeper realizations of the loving, creative goodness of God, even if we cannot always put those realizations into precise words.

Trusting in God

The knowability or unknowability of God may mean little to a person saying the Nicene Creed in church on Sunday. Forget the finer points of God's creation; the bigger obstacle is in the first two words: "We believe." The world The Episcopal Church ministers in is marked by skepticism, cynicism, and a lack of firm commitments. To state something so clearly and firmly is to invite attention, questioning, even ridicule. "How can you believe there is a supreme God," I've been asked, "when we have seen natural disasters and disease, poverty, and illness raging out of control?" Or, "You believe in God? I believed in the tooth fairy—when I was six years old." For some people, the "We believe" begins to sound untrue. "Do I have to believe this to belong to church? What if someone finds out I'm just mumbling along or crossing my fingers behind my back?" These are real and honest concerns that make us consider what Christians mean about belief.

In English, the word **belief** has two meanings. On the one hand, belief is connected to existence. When we say of a child that she believes in the tooth fairy, we are saying the child believes the tooth fairy exists. On the other hand, belief can also be connected to trust. When I say that I believe in my friend, I'm not saying I believe my friend exists, I'm saying I trust my friend. The Latin word *credo*—the root of our English word *creed*—has these latter connotations. When Episcopalians say, "We believe in one God,"

we are expressing a belief in the existence of God. But the full force of the creed is as an expression of trust. We *trust* in one God.

Even this can be too far for some people. Why place our trust in a God who apparently allows bad things to happen to good people? Why trust a God whose existence cannot be proven? Why not just forget all about it?

God was not the only god the people of Israel knew. Indeed, at times, they worshipped some of these other gods. The early Christians also lived in a world with no shortage of other gods. At times, some Christians abandoned the worship of the God of Jesus Christ for these other deities. Few of them questioned the existence of God or gods. Rather, it was about trust. Early Christians who worshipped other gods, for instance, did not trust that they would be safe without worshipping an official Roman god.

We may not often think in these terms today, but we also live in a world with no shortage of other gods competing for our trust. Forces like money, sex, individualism, consumerism, and a whole host of others act like gods that vie for our trust. They lure us with the seductive belief that, if we only put our trust in their solutions, our problems will be solved. If only I had more money, my life would be secure. If only I could break free of this community that holds me back, I could be who I am meant to be. If only I could buy more stuff, I would feel better about myself. Through painful experience, many of us have learned that none of these gods offers the sustaining depth of goodness and love we find in the God of Jesus Christ.

To walk in the Episcopal way of following Jesus is to begin by making a basic statement of trust: we trust in this one God, who has created this good world out of love, who calls us into an intimate covenant and sends us out to make God's love known. We may not always understand God's ways. We may be tempted by other gods in our world. But we believe in a God who is worthy of our trust and who is calling us into a deeper and more full life both with God and with one another.

TO PONDER

- What words, phrases, or images help you understand God?
- What other gods in the world most frequently compete for your trust?
- In what ways have your relationships with others helped to teach you something about God? In what ways has your understanding of God taught you something about people around you?