A Nicene Theology of Suffering

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Anniversaries matter. (Just ask a married couple.) The year 2025 will mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the most widely respected of ecumenical councils in church history. Whatever their other disagreements, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants of various stripes, and members of those ancient African and Asian communions labeled "miaphysite" and "Churches of the East" all find common ground in the synopsis of sound doctrine first laid down at Nicaea in AD 325 and further refined at Constantinople in AD 381: the Nicene Creed. Not only is this creed the most ecumenical of Christianity's many statements of faith, but it arose from a church that suffered for its faith. In the rearview mirror of the bishops who gathered at Nicaea loomed "the Great Persecution" (AD 303–311), when Rome's emperors had spared no effort to eradicate Christianity from their realm. Between the creed's first formulation at Nicaea and its finalization at Constantinople, its supporters faced further imperial hostility: for instance, the creed's greatest champion, Athanasius of Alexandria, endured five bouts of banishment at the hands of anti-Nicene emperors.[1] Thus it is especially fitting that, as we theologize about suffering, we return to the Nicene Creed on the eve of its anniversary.

This essay sketches a theology of suffering informed by the wisdom of the early church and employing the Nicene Creed as a framework. Readers from noncreedal church contexts may rest assured that I am not using the creed as an independently authoritative supplement to or substitute for Holy Scripture

[1] For a pithy introduction to the Council of Nicaea against its backdrop of imperial persecution and patronage, see Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 39–57.

but rather as a handy, well-ordered overview of key biblical teachings. The architecture of the Nicene Creed itself echoes the sevenfold summary of Christian teaching in Ephesians 4:4–6, which I shall quote along with each related section of the creed as I proceed through its exposition. The result of this approach will be a balanced, ecumenical theology of suffering readymade for application to today's pressing ills.

God the Father

> "There is … one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4, 6).[2]
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> "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, visible and invisible."[3]

Like anniversaries, beginnings matter. Lay a poor foundation and the whole house may collapse. Stumble at the starting line and the entire race may be lost. The Nicene Creed echoes Scripture by beginning with a single all-powerful Deity who made everything, a good Father who created a good world from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This origin story stood in contrast with several rival versions circulating through the Roman Empire. Epicurean philosophers considering the world's existence chalked it up to chance. Plato thought its creator must have fashioned the visible cosmos from pre-existent matter in imitation of an eternal invisible realm, like a craftsman following a pattern using whatever materials are at hand. The Gnostics and Marcionites distinguished between the good Father of the invisible world and the bad, bungling maker(s) of the visible, material world.[4] On these alternative accounts, evil and suffering were due to the randomness, shoddiness, or maliciousness inherent in the world from the start. Against such insinuations the early church asserted the following five points:

1. God is not the author of evil.
2. God prevents or permits evil and draws good out of it.

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[2] All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[3] Quotations of the Nicene Creed are of the revised English translation from the Anglican Church in North America's 2019 Book of Common Prayer, conveniently accessible at https://anglicancompass.com/a-new-creed-the-acnas-revised-translation-of-the-nicene-creed/.

[4] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* §2, trans. John Behr (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011) 53, 55.

3. Ontologically, evil is nonbeing: a privation, corruption, and perversion of the good.
4. The misuse of angelic and human free will is the cause of evil.
5. Salvation history provides a narrative framework that accounts for the origin, spread, and ultimate destruction of evil.[5]

In the Christian view, then, suffering has neither the first nor the last word on existence. That role belongs solely to God, and his first and last word is the eternal Word, his only-begotten Son (John 1:1–5, 14).

Jesus Christ

"There is … one Lord" (Eph 4:4, 5).

> "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten 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, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and 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."

The dogma that the creed most fully fleshes out is Christ's identity and saving activity. Subsequent ecumenical councils of the ancient church at Ephesus (AD 431), Chalcedon (AD 451), and again at Constantinople (AD 553, 680–81) and Nicaea (AD 787) would maintain this concentration against a variety of heresies. Many of those false teachings attempted to put a buffer between God and suffering: Docetism denied that Christ came in real, vulnerable flesh; Apollinarianism and Monothelitism granted him the flesh but withheld from him a human mind and will capable of internalizing pain and temptation; Adoptionism, Arianism, and Nestorianism credited a created assistant rather

[5] Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "An Overview of Patristic Theodicies," in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, ed. Nonna Verna Harrison and David G. Hunter, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1–6 (here, 6).

than God in person with Christ's hungering and thirsting, sweating and struggling, crying and dying.[6]

Conciliar Christians insisted to the contrary that the eternal Son who shares fully in the Father's divine nature, which is beyond suffering ("impassible"), has stooped to share fully in our human nature and sufferings, whether physical, emotional, or mental. Athanasius' successor, Cyril of Alexandria, never tired of repeating the paradox that in Christ the impassible God suffered.[7] His older contemporary, Gregory of Nazianzus, taught that when Philippians 2:7 spoke of Christ's "taking the form of a slave," it meant that the Savior "was actually subject as a slave to flesh, to birth, and to our human experiences [Greek: *pathesi*, with its connotation of suffering]; for our liberation, held captive as we are by sin, he was subject to all that he saved."[8] Two centuries before Nicaea, Ignatius of Antioch had gone to his own martyrdom under Roman officials confident that he was following in the footsteps of his Lord, "who really was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, … who, moreover, really was raised from the dead when his Father raised him up. In the same way his Father will likewise also raise up in Christ Jesus us who believe in him."[9]

The resurrection of Jesus and his elevation as judge of the living and the dead anchored the early church's confidence that suffering and death were vanquished foes whose days were numbered. Christ's humanity was more than an assurance of his empathetic solidarity with us in our pains and griefs. In its risen and glorified state, his human nature had become a pledge of future

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[6] I am employing these labels for teachings that the early church deemed heretical; whether the church accurately represented what actually was being taught in every case is a different matter. Scholars debate whether the term "Arian" is misleading, whether the historical Nestorius was a "Nestorian," and so on.

[7] J. Warren Smith, "Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Soteriology," in *Suffering and Evil*, 191–212.

[8] Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 30.3, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 94–95. It bears noting that Gregory of Nazianzus' like-named friend, Gregory of Nyssa, was a pioneer of Christian abolitionism. See Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 146–63.

[9] Ignatius of Antioch, *Trallians* 9.1–2, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 221.

immortality for all the faithful. This vision of the comprehensive Christ—divine yet human, crucified yet risen—inspired believers to persevere amid religious persecution and the rampant miseries and fatalities of everyday life in the ancient world.[10]

The Holy Spirit

> "There is … one Spirit" (Eph 4:4).
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> "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets."

The death-defeating Christ inspired believers. Yet he did so not by winning a purely personal triumph that they could celebrate but not share, like spectators watching a victorious gladiator in the arena, nor by setting an example of virtue under trial that they simply could imitate, like students of Stoic philosophy looking to Socrates as a role model. Instead, Christ inspired believers by in-Spiriting them with his Holy Spirit, thus making them "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). This understanding of the dynamics of salvation demanded, though, that the Spirit must be more than a mere created being. Otherwise, the flow of divine life and power from the Father through the Son in the Spirit to the Christian would be disrupted. Hence the Nicene Creed

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[10] On the persecution faced by early Christians, see Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 137–52; D. Jeffrey Bingham, "The Apocalypse, Christ, and the Martyrs of Gaul," in *In the Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays on Jesus Christ in the Early Church in Honor of Brian E. Daley, S.J.*, ed. Peter W. Martens (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 11–28; James C. Skedros, "The Suffering of Martyrdom: Greek Perspectives in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," and Dennis P. Quinn, "The Enemies of God: Demons and the Persecuting Emperors," both in *Suffering and Evil*, 17–32, 49–56, respectively. For the effects on Christianity of the general prevalence of suffering and high mortality rates in the ancient world, see John J. O'Keefe, "The Persistence of Decay: Bodily Disintegration and Cyrillian Christology," in *In the Shadow*, 228–45; Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 106–112, and the harrowing account of William Rosen, *Justinian's Flea: The First Great Plague and the End of the Roman Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

came to assert the full deity of the Holy Spirit as the divine Lord and life-giver worthy of equal worship along with the Father and the Son.[11]

Besides giving life—including to Immanuel himself, who "was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary"—the Spirit's creedal job description involved revelation via the Old Testament prophets. Through their writings, "the Spirit of Christ within them … testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory" (1 Pet 1:11). Early Christians also used Israel's prophetic Scriptures as a source of instructions and exemplars for enduring temptation and tribulation themselves as the church recapitulated Israel's history.[12] Notice, though, the tense of the Nicene verb: the Spirit "*has spoken* through the prophets," not "is speaking" through them. In the previous two centuries, the church had undergone controversy due to the "New Prophecy" movement led by Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla. They allegedly claimed that the Holy Spirit speaking through them was superseding Scripture: no more pleasant food or marital relations for true believers, no more fleeing persecution, the Heavenly City is about to descend! Mainstream church leaders rejected such fanaticism. There was already enough of both suffering and hope among Christians without artificially heightening them. The Holy Spirit's communication in Holy Scripture was sufficient for God's people.[13]

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[11] The patristic logic is summed up by Giulio Maspero, *Rethinking the* Filioque *with the Greek Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 53: "[I]f the life communicated in baptism is not the same as the divine life, then Christian salvation is not real in that it does not consist in the communication of eternal life. This is why both the Son and the Spirit must be God, the one divine nature that is identified with the Life without limits." Yet the issue of the exact relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son within the eternal Trinity proved to be the cause of much strife and even suffering in the church. In the sixth century, the Western church unilaterally added to the Nicene Creed the bracketed line above, "and the Son" (Latin: *Filioque*), provoking consternation in the Eastern church. In AD 1054, each side excommunicated the other over the addition. Then in AD 1203–1204, the Western armies of the Fourth Crusade attacked and ruthlessly sacked Constantinople, the Eastern capital, thereby sealing with bloodshed and bitterness what had been originally a theological and political dispute. Subsequent centuries have seen sporadic attempts to heal the breach. Among the most recent efforts to resolve the underlying theological issue is Maspero, *Rethinking the* Filioque.

[12] See, for example, 1 Cor 10:1–13; Hebrews 11; *1 Clement* 4; 9–12; 17–19.

[13] For a summary of the Montanist controversy, see Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1984), 49–53.

The Church

"There is one body" (Eph 4:4).

"We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

Heresies like Montanism, Arianism, and the rest, as well as schisms among orthodox believers, inflicted internal suffering on the church even as it faced external suffering at the hands of pagan persecutors.[14] Indeed, the church's own response to persecution could incite fresh splits and heresies. After a severe third-century imperial crackdown saw numbers of Christians commit apostasy, the mainstream church permitted them to repent and be restored. Splinter groups of rigorists known as Novatianists and Donatists condemned this policy as too lax and formed their own "pure" churches. Despite such divisions, the Nicene writers echoed the Apostle Paul's affirmation of only one church, a community sanctified by the Holy Spirit, spread throughout the known world, composed of people of every ethnic and socioeconomic type, and established on the authority of the apostles. The recurring sign of this unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity was the Lord's Supper, of which all those and only those in communion with the greater church had the privilege to partake. As one of the earliest existing eucharistic prayers beautifully puts it: "Just as this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and then was gathered together and became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom."[15] Here at his table, the faithful commemorated Christ's own suffering unto death for their salvation and drew strength to live—and if need be, die—for him.[16]

Baptism

"There is … one baptism" (Eph 4:4, 5).

"We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

If the eucharist stood like a castle keep at the center of church unity, then baptism formed the moat that marked its outermost boundary. To be baptized

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[14] *1 Clement*, for instance, addresses an early postapostolic outbreak of schism due to a church coup in Corinth.

[15] *Didache* 9.4, in *Apostolic Fathers*, 359.

[16] For a valuable sketch of the development of the doctrine of the church and its practice during these centuries, see Bernard P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 2004), 120–75.

in the name of the Trinity (Matt 28:19) was to identify with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3–4) so as to exchange one's old existence under the dominion of sin, death, and the devil for a new reality of participation in the eternal life and holiness of the triune God. This transition, however, was hardly smooth or simple. Rather, baptism plunged one into the struggle between the death throes of the old age and the birth pangs of the new. This struggle played out across realms both personal and social as early Christians' individual habits and imperial habitat found themselves turned upside down by the inbreaking Kingdom of God. The consequence was suffering in a variety of guises. As a contemporary Christian whose life experience parallels that of early believers has observed:

> Suffering for Christ is not only the suffering of persecution. It begins when one leaves close relatives for the service of Christ. For some, it means selling their possessions and giving them to the poor, which often means giving them for the propagation of the gospel. For others, suffering for Christ may mean agonizing in prayer for the cause of Christ, or agonizing and toiling for the building up of the body of Christ and the perfecting of the saints.[17]

In recognition of this reality of manifold suffering for Christ, the ancient church honored its martyrs and confessors,[18] its consecrated virgins and widows, its monastics and missionaries, its almsgivers and intercessors, its teachers of the faith and trainers of the soul. It sought by its Christ-like suffering to alleviate the earthly afflictions of the impoverished and enslaved, the diseased, disabled, and demonized, and above all else to rescue sinners from an afterlife of torment.[19] And just as baptism signifies not only Christ's crucifixion but also

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[17] Josef T[s]on, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Lanham: n.p., 1997; repr. Wheaton: The Romanian Missionary Society, 2000), 424. As a pastor in Cold War-era Romania, Dr. Tson and his family endured persecution under the Communist regime. My copy of this, the published version of his doctoral dissertation, originally was gifted by the author to Voice of the Martyrs, a watchdog organization that tracks the global persecution of Christians.

[18] The latter were those whose persecution for their faith fell short of execution.

[19] On the early church's social services, see Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 125–37, 151–57; Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 112–19. On its evangelization of the Roman Empire, see Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

his resurrection, so, too, Easter hope accompanied and transfigured all these forms of suffering in the church.

The Age to Come

> "There is … the one hope of your calling" (Eph 4:4).
>
> "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

For the early church, eschatology represented not an awkward appendix to the faith but its grand culmination. The God who had created a good world in the beginning would restore its goodness and recreate it in perfection at the end. The Christ who himself rose from the dead as Lord would raise the dead and judge the world at his return. The life-giving Spirit would grant to God's people life everlasting. The oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church would reach perfection as the apostles joined together with the holy martyrs and saints of every nation and generation to celebrate God's uttermost triumph over sin, death, and the devil. Into this hope were the early Christians baptized, and out of this hope they lived, suffered, and died. Stories circulated among the congregations about believers who had set good examples either by their own deaths (whether from infirmity or martyrdom) or else by their pious, restrained responses to Christian loved ones' deaths.[20] In the ancient church's imagination, the faithful dead quickly took on the role of heavenly intercessors in imitation of Christ and in concert with him.[21] The creed itself, though, reflects the New Testament's focus on the final state over the intermediate state. Whatever the Christian departed may do or not in the meanwhile, the end is sure: resurrected life in God's renewed creation.[22]

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[20] See, for instance, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* (both readily accessible at https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/); Regina L. Walton, "The Deaths of Macrina and Monica in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* and Augustine's *Confessions*: The Female Philosopher and the Problem of Christian Grief," *Suffering and Evil*, 131–41.

[21] Skedros, "Suffering of Martyrdom," 17–32.

[22] Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 19–114.

Conclusion: A Fireproof Faith

> "There is … one faith" (Eph 4:4, 5).
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> "We believe …. We believe …. We believe …. We believe …. We acknowledge …. We look for …. Amen."

Like a six-pack carrier, faith holds together the half-dozen doctrines considered above and makes them portable across cultures and centuries. Today our world groans under the suffering of billions. War. Pandemic. Persecution. Genocide. Depression. Addiction. Human trafficking. Natural disasters. Genetic disorders. These are only the most prominent of the myriad miseries afflicting humanity. To persevere ourselves and to minister compassionately to others, we have no better resource than the same sturdy faith that has sustained God's people through every storm and shock across the millennia. We will only benefit from that resource, though, if we treat our Christian beliefs not as a talisman to ward off suffering but as a touchstone for understanding and overcoming it. At the heart of the creed stands the fact that even God has not avoided suffering but has passed through its horrors into glory on the other side. Where our Savior has led, there must we follow. Persecuted pastor Josef Tson has complained at the lack of a Protestant theology of martyrdom, which he has sought to supply.[23] Religious historian Philip Jenkins, after recounting how many once-strong Nicene churches outside the West have withered away, makes this observation: "Besides the missionary theology cultivated by many churches, we also need a theology of extinction."[24] A theology of personal martyrdom or of church-wide extinction or of any other form of suffering takes its proper bearings from the crucified and risen Christ, Son of the only true God and Creator, whose Spirit calls and conforms the church of the baptized faithful to his sufferings and resurrection. Seventeen hundred years after Nicaea, this is its testimony—and it still rings true.

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[23] T[s]on, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*.

[24] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 249. His following pages (250–62) survey several possible theologies of extinction.