

Department of Liturgics

Commission on Worship

Prepared for DOL by John Kleinig

Date: August 2006

Document Status: Response to FAQ

Why has the LCA changed the wording of the Nicene Creed from "I" to "We" and "Christian" to "Catholic"?

The Nicene Creed does not belong to the Lutheran church. The Apostles Creed is the baptismal creed used only in those western Christian churches that have developed from the Roman Catholic Church, but the Nicene Creed is the creed that is shared by all orthodox Christians. It was drawn up as summary of the apostolic faith in the face of challenges similar to the church today and adopted in the great councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. In that sense it is ecumenical. If you wish to establish whether a church body or person holds the Christian faith as taught by the apostles and the Early Church, you need to discover if they are baptised and whether they believe and confess that creed. Any one who rejects any part of that creed does not belong to the 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church'. They belong to a sect instead. Thus this creed is not the property of a particular denomination; it is the property of all the orthodox churches in Christendom. It maps out the boundaries to the church. It confesses the faith that is shared by all orthodox Christians. It is our 'common faith' (see Titus 1:4), the faith that you and I and all true believers have in common. It is therefore used at Holy Communion, for through Christ's body and blood all true believers are there united as one body in Christ. So while each person confesses the faith personally with the Apostles Creed at baptism, we confess our common faith as we celebrate the Lord's supper.

Our previous translation of the Nicene Creed was not used by all liturgical churches in the English-speaking world. The new translation of the Nicene Creed was meant to replace an older Anglican translation (in which we changed catholic to Christian). It was officially adopted by the LCA at our 1997 convention at Croydon. It had been drawn up by international representatives from the main English-speaking churches. We were involved in the Australian side of this process. All the main Christian denominations agreed that, since this creed expressed our common faith, we needed to have a common translation of it from the original Greek text that could be used to defend the faith from attack by modern heretics. There was, as might be expected, much debate in our church over many of the points of translation. In the end, however, it was decided that they were not substantial enough to warrant the rejection of this translation.

The original Greek text of the creed has " We ", not " I ", and " catholic ", not " Christian ". First, there is the use of 'we' rather than 'I'. The theologians who formulated this creed did it in this form because it was meant express the basic content of the apostolic faith. It confesses our common faith in the Triune God, the foundation of our worship and life. It is, of course, true that we cannot see into the

heart of another person and so judge whether that person is a true believer. The creed was not meant to do that. We can, however, judge whether **what** they believe is apostolic, scriptural, and therefore true. Paul himself tells us that we are to judge people by what they confess with their lips in Romans 10:8-10 (see also 1 John 2:23 and 4:15 as well as the frequent use of "we" in that letter). We take people at their word. This is all very important for us as Lutherans. We are a confessional church linked together by the Lutheran confessions. Our unity is created by our common confession of faith. Our faith is always both personal and corporate. We speak together as a body of believers in the creed as well in our hymns and our liturgical texts. The 'we' that is used in our worship obviously excludes all those who reject what we believe on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. The 'we' of the Nicene Creed includes all those who believe what it says, just as it excludes all who reject what it says.

The second change also expresses our solidarity with all other baptised believers. The people who formulated the creed quite deliberately rejected the use of the term 'Christian' because it did not convey exactly what they wanted to express. Then as now, many heretics, and the members of every sect, claimed to be Christian. This was true even for those who rejected the divinity of Christ and other foundational doctrines. In the Early Church (at about 90 AD) Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, invented and used the new Greek adjective "catholic" to describe those churches that were faithful to the whole teaching of the apostles. It meant **that which was whole**. The trouble, then as now, was that many so-called Christians taught only some parts of the Scriptures and the doctrine of the apostles. Their teaching was therefore Christian and apostolic, but partially and incompletely so. In contrast to these groups, the catholic church claimed to teach the whole faith, what St Paul calls "the whole counsel of God" in Acts 20:27. The "catholic faith" is therefore the whole faith taught and practised by all true pastors and bishops in all churches at all times and in all places for the whole of humanity. The problem is that, just as there was no Greek word for that idea, there is no modern English word which accurately expresses that reality. The translators of the Nicene Creed thought about translating it by "universal" but rejected it because Christianity is not a universal religion. So they stuck with the word "catholic" as the only term that represented this truth adequately in modern English.

The association of the word "catholic" in Australia with a particular denomination is no reason for us to reject it. In other parts of the world the term catholic is associated with what we call the Eastern Orthodox churches. Our own Augsburg Confession asserts that we Lutherans are no new church but belong to the catholic church. In fact, it argues that we Lutherans were more catholic than the Roman Catholics, because they were sectarian in their rejection of some aspects of apostolic teaching. In the same way all Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists claim to be catholic too. So too does the Uniting Church. We should not use that word to refer only to Roman Catholics, for we too belong to the catholic church. What's more, it does express what we have in common with these churches despite all our differences. We Lutherans are not a sect and should not act in a sectarian way. To put it another way, I am a Lutheran pastor with a passion for our Lutheran heritage because I believe, with all my heart, that it is catholic and therefore relevant to all Christians. We are catholic because we hold the whole faith together with the apostles and all faithful people throughout the ages.

John W Kleinig