

The Nicene Creed: Remembering what it says; Re-membering what it forgot to say – a Mennonite perspective

By Andrew G. Suderman

“...when we forget the social contexts or ‘narratives’ which give our lives meaning, then moral language ceases to be meaningful.”¹ Thus begins Harry Huebner, a Canadian Mennonite scholar, as he expounds on the thought of Alistair MacIntyre with the hopes of better understanding Christian ethics. We must remember the story, the narratives, along with the social contexts from which they emerge, to better understand how they provide meaning and direction. These are vital in appreciating the gift and the legacy of the Nicene Creed, given how it has shaped the Christian church over the last 1700 years. The influence of the Creed, however, also has a shadow side in what the Creed did not include; an exclusion that may have been innocent enough as church leaders were focused on a particular conversation and set of questions, but which nonetheless has had detrimental effects and has caused significant amnesia within the Christian church and the Christian story. This paper will highlight both the gift that the Nicene Creed has been and what it failed to provide to the detriment of the Christian church and faith since the 4th century.

The Nicene Creed and its significance

The Nicene Creed continues to be recited and used regularly by almost all Christians today. This demonstrates how instrumental it has been for the Christian church since the initial draft of the Creed in 325 CE. It has played a significant role in shaping the Christian imagination over 1700 years. In many ways, it has provided an important and much-needed benchmark in helping to understand the perichoretic relations within the Godhead: highlighting the way in which God’s economic being emerged out of God’s immanent being. It offers an explanation of Jesus’ connection to God the Father. It offers an understanding of Jesus as not only the Son but as a divine manifestation and revelation of God’s very being – God from God, light from light, true God from true God.

The way in which this statement of faith was adopted and interpreted has had, for better or for worse, serious and significant ramifications in shaping the social manifestation of the faith communities that adopted it. The way in which the creed, as a statement of faith, emerged, highlights the tensions that the ecumenical council was negotiating at the time. Likewise, the reception of the statement that emerged out of Nicaea – as well as the more polished Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 – and the ensuing interpretive process from Greek to Latin created significant differences between the Greek (East) and the Latin (West) ecclesiological traditions.

The way in which this Creed and the inner relations within the Godhead was interpreted, however, has had serious consequences for the structure of ecclesial communities. Both the East

¹ Harry Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012), 9.

(Greek) and the West (Latin) structured communities based on and justified by its interpretation of the Creed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna reflects on the way in which these traditions – the West and the East – and their interpretations of the Trinity, with its roots planted in the Nicene Creed, justified and structured the ecclesial communities. The Trinity, she notes, has been a stumbling block for feminists for at least two significant reasons. First, the West’s interpretation adopted a hierarchical interpretation in terms of the relations between Father and Son. This interpretation is then projected onto the relations within the church, more specifically between male and female. She argues that “man” fully images God while woman images God by virtue of her relationship to man.”² The second reason arises because of the male dominated language and images used of God.

LaCugna demonstrates how these issues are exacerbated as the Creed is translated from Greek into Latin. She notes, for example, that even though the West affirmed the use of *homoousios*, its use was deeply influenced by Eunomius’.³ Eunomius, argues LaCugna, believed the basic Arian premise that “God was so utterly transcendent that God could not traffic with any element of the created order except through intermediaries. Jesus Christ was just such an intermediary....”⁴ Jesus was therefore less than God. This understanding meant that God, as unbegotten, was wholly separate and distinct from creation. Eunomius, LaCugna suggests, by utilizing this Arian concern “made God’s nonrelationality primary.... This was the significance of calling God Unbegotten. For Eunomius, in other words, the personal property of God—that which makes God to be God—is to be altogether unrelated to another.”⁵ This nonrelationality, coupled with the way in which the early church fathers depicted God the Father as the monarch (*monē archē*, sole rule or origin), and as the origin and cause of everything, worked well enough “as long as God and Father were synonyms and as long as the Son was seen as subordinate to the Father. However, neither is tenable if Father, Son, and Spirit are equally God.”⁶

LaCugna reminds us of the important Cappadocian response to Eunomius. The Cappadocians provided another interpretation that rejected Eunomius’ basic proposition of God’s nonrelationality. The Cappadocians distinguished between *hypostasis* and *ousia*.⁷ They spoke of the one God as existing in three *hypostases* without relegating God’s very being to substance (deriving from an over emphasis on *ousia*). This allowed for a new distinction between Fatherhood and Godhood; “they were no longer synonyms.”⁸ “[T]he Cappadocians made *person rather than substance* the primary ontological category”⁹ in which to understand God and God’s relations, both imminent and economic.

... [T]he radical move of the Cappadocians was to assert that divinity or Godhood originates with personhood (someone toward another), not with substance (something in and of itself). Love for and relationship with another is primary over autonomy, ecstasis over stasis, fecundity over self-

² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us — the Trinity," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 84;

³ One of the leaders of the Anomoian controversy, which is often connected to Arianism. See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy : An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 144-53.

⁴ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 85.

⁵ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 86.

⁶ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 87.

⁷ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 86.

⁸ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 86.

⁹ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 86.

sufficiency. Thus personhood, being-in-relation-to-another, was secured as the ultimate originating principle of all reality. The metaphysical implication of the Cappadocian argument is that the divine essence derives from divine personhood.... If God were not person, God would not exist at all.¹⁰

In summary, the Latin interpretation (i.e., the Augustinian-Thomistic framework) postulates *substance* as the primary ontological category, whereas for the Greek (East) tradition, *person* (or *hypostasis*; relation toward another) becomes the primary category.¹¹ LaCugna concludes that “metaphysical positions must be rooted in and derived from what we know of God as revealed in the economy of salvation. Otherwise, metaphysical claims about God will appear to be nothing more than projections of human values onto the divine being.”¹²

And yet, LaCugna notes that neither tradition – West (Latin) or East (Greek) – offers a firm basis in salvation history. In both, Jesus Christ as a particular vision of human society and discipleship goes missing. For Mennonites, this critical missing piece hinders the full and enthusiastic embrace of the Nicene Creed. Jesus the Christ – the person and economic expression of God’s salvation – was largely forgotten in Nicene’s formulation.

On Memory and Remembering

In one of his most significant – albeit often overlooked – books, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, Walter Brueggemann provides an argument that has not only withstood the test of time, but becomes increasingly important with every passing year. In the book, Brueggemann provides a much-needed deeper understanding of “evangelism.” He is not satisfied with simply accepting the way in which “evangelism” has become known, assumed, or used. Rather, he reframes (and perhaps, ironically, saves) “evangelism” from the watered down, often manipulative and violent practice that it has become. One of the most significant chapters in this book is a chapter on the significance of memory – and remembering – for the Christian faith.

Brueggemann states,

The ancient voices of Moses and Jeremiah understood that everything for Israel depends upon the power and availability of its core memory, a memory that kept Israel close to, reliant upon, and responsive to Yahweh, the God of liberation, covenant, and land. Those same voices, however, understood that well-being in the land is a likely enemy of that core memory. In a context of affluent prosperity, Israel would eventually forget its memory, scuttle the God of the memory, disregard the demands of that God, and forfeit the joy of covenant with Yahweh. Moreover, this forgetting jeopardizes the very existence of Israel.¹³

The “insiders” to the covenant with God become hollow and uncaring, “honoring empty forms of faith and practice,”¹⁴ and ultimately cut off from the gifts, demands, and joys that come along

¹⁰ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 86-87.

¹¹ LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 90.

¹² LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 91.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 71.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 72.

with the relationship with God.¹⁵ Brueggemann explores Nehemiah (specifically Nehemiah 8) and the meeting with Ezra to better understand the significance of this core memory.

Brueggemann points out that this story is not about “outsiders,” but rather about Jews who were already part of the story (i.e., insiders). “This is a story of forgetters being made rememberers.”¹⁶ Within this process of becoming rememberers, Brueggemann notes two interesting characteristics:

- 1) This process of remembering involves the entire community; it is inclusive; and
- 2) The activity is reading the Torah in (and among) the hearing community.¹⁷

In reading and rereading this story, the story becomes a communal re-appropriation of a core memory that had been forgotten. A community of Jews was remembering and becoming a community of glad, liberated obedience.¹⁸

Obedience to Torah, notes Brueggemann in reflecting on Deuteronomy 8:1-20, leads to public well-being.¹⁹ Moses invites people to remember – to remember what God has done for God’s people, leading them out of Egypt and out of slavery to a land of promise and abundant life. Brueggemann notes how prosperity causes amnesia. “The good, generous blessing of the land will cause massive, programmatic forgetting... The juxtaposition shows rhetorically how present affluence drives out the sensitivities of gratitude. Gratitude has a very tough time in the midst of unlimited affluence.”²⁰ This, argues Brueggemann, arises because when one no longer remembers a lesser, more precarious time, all current well-being appears to be absolute and self-generated, making gratitude unnecessary, even silly. “Moses warns that a forgetting people should not become self-congratulatory and say, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth’ (v. 17). There is then no one to thank. And if there is no one to thank, then there is no one to heed, no one to obey. In an instant one becomes autonomous, self-sufficient, self-admiring, self-congratulatory, not accountable to anyone. This sermon of Moses is psychologically perceptive; it sees clearly how wealth and well-being oppose a capacity for gratitude.”²¹ If we forget, we get caught up in the same games from which we were saved.²² And in this way, “perishing” becomes a very real possibility. To “perish,” however, does not mean to be destroyed in some supernatural way, but that Israel will disappear by social seduction and erosion.²³ “‘To perish’ is not to be assaulted, but to give up one’s theological identity for a quick fix of well-being. It is to trade the birthright of covenantal social relations for a mess of pottage, a perennial temptation for the community of this radical faith and daring social practice.”²⁴

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 72.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 73. This, notes Brueggemann, is another (he says the second, but I do not think that the order particularly matters) urgent task of evangelism – to help remember.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 74.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 75.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 76.

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 77.

²¹ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 77.

²² Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 78.

²³ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 78.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 78.

Everything, says Brueggemann, depends on a live memory.²⁵ Amnesia leads to death!²⁶ And affluence and self-sufficiency lead to amnesia.²⁷ Death comes about not because of poor leadership or because of other empires, but because of forgetting Torah identity.²⁸

Remembering rightly²⁹ is necessary for recovery, homecoming, and therefore belonging.³⁰ “Remembering is the hard choosing of an alternative present authorized by a subversive past. When that subversive past is given up, an alternative present is rendered completely unavailable... *Choose memory and you get with it a liberated alternative. Choose amnesia and what you will inescapably get is the reductive despair of the empire, which absolutizes the status quo and precludes any imagination of an alternative.*”³¹

That amnesia (which on the surface shows up as ‘illiteracy’) causes the church to lack in any serious missional energy. It is only this odd memory, operative at the pre-rational places in our life, that gives energy for social action, generosity in stewardship, freedom for worship, courage in care for outsiders, and passion for God’s promises. Without memory, there will be little of courage, generosity, freedom, or passion.³²

Memory animates! It animates the living community to enact and embody an alternative logic that arises from an alternative, radical memory which in turn arises out of an alternative, radical story which grounds the person and witness of Jesus the Christ and his living community. When we forget that story, we perish.

The forgetfulness of the Nicene Creed

One of the main concerns regarding the Nicene Creed – and the Christian tradition built thereon – was that the life, and therefore the story and context, of Jesus was forgotten.

The First Council of Nicaea (325) declared:

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He suffered, and the third day he rose again ascended into heaven...

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan extension in 381, which has since become the more regularly used rendition that has become known as the “Nicene Creed,” adds a few more details. It says,

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father...

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 78.

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 82.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 83.

²⁸ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 83.

²⁹ To use Miroslav Volf’s reminder. See Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 83.

³¹ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 84. Emphasis added.

³² Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 90.

Although the Niceno-Constantinopolitan version adds a few more details to the confession, it is noteworthy that both renditions skip over the life, teachings, presence, and interactions of Jesus the Christ. The most the Nicene Creed provided, in terms of Jesus and Jesus' incarnation and presence, was that he was born and that he suffered and was buried (the latter version provides a few more details with regards to Jesus' death). The Nicene Creed established the emergence of a birth-to-death Christology and soteriology that has dominated western Christianity since the 4th century.

We could offer a more grace-filled historical understanding for this. The church and the early church fathers during this time were wrestling with and trying to respond to the questions, controversies, and contexts of their time. The early church fathers perhaps did not feel the need to re-articulate the significance of Jesus' life, presence, and teaching. This was undoubtedly important for the early church fathers. Its importance can be seen in the catechistic practices of the early church in which the importance of Jesus' life is highlighted for the newly converted Christian.³³ Jesus' life, presence, and teachings were simply not the imminent questions with which those who gathered in Nicaea (and, again, later in Constantinople) were wrestling.

However, the fact that Jesus' life, teachings, and presence was omitted in the statement that emerged has shaped much of Christianity and its character thereafter. The Nicene Creed provided a new(er) Christological view that created a new soteriological emphasis that became the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The fact that Jesus Christ existed – was incarnate – became the object of belief; the life that Jesus led, and to which we are invited to imitate, became secondary if, indeed, it was perceived as needed at all for soteriological purposes. This was the shift that took place in the 4th century and thereafter – a shift toward orthodoxy, or “right belief,” which became distinct from orthopraxy, or “right living.”

Remembering what the Nicene Creed forgot

Alan Kreider, a Mennonite theologian, notes in his book *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*³⁴ how the early Christians' lifestyle was a product of their self-identity. “As ‘resident aliens’ [*paroikoi*] they were members of a church whose social reality spanned and transcended the Roman Empire.”³⁵ And as such, Kreider argues, the behavior of the Christian, including the new “convert” changed them into being better people.³⁶ And this, Kreider suggests, emerged from a significant journey of conversion that took several years of formation. Conversion meant becoming the kind of person who belonged to a particular – and peculiar – community.³⁷ It emerged through a process of “resocialization” “by which their new community superintended the transformation of their beliefs, their sense of belonging, and their patterns of behavior. No longer would they live by the values of the dominant society. A process of examination, instruction, and ritual rehabilitated the candidates for conversion, re-reflexing them into the lifestyle of an alternative community.”³⁸

³³ See, for example, Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999).

³⁴ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*.

³⁵ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, 18-19.

³⁶ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, 17.

³⁷ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, 21.

³⁸ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, 21.

For Mennonites (an ecclesial expression that emerged from the Anabaptist movement that began in 1525),³⁹ the separation between orthodoxy and orthopraxy – or rather, forgetting to focus on right living – has been one of the greatest concerns since the 4th century and thereafter. Mennonite theologians have spilled much ink reflecting on the shift that took place in the 4th century. This separation and distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy emerged in the context whereby the church, due in large part to the changes in policy and approach that Emperor Constantine initiated, entered a new relationship with the (Roman) Empire. Among Mennonites (and beyond), this process that led toward this new relationship became known as the “Constantinian Shift.” This phrase points to some of the conditions that led toward that which would later become known as Christendom – the union (marriage) of the church with Empire (and later, State). Due to this union, the being and nature of the church took on a drastically different form after 386 CE when Christianity became the compulsory religious expression of the Roman Empire. In a sense this was the logical culmination of the shift that began with the warming of relations during Constantine’s time.

Arne Rasmusson provides a good summary:

The Constantinian shift means that the church changes from being a minority to becoming the imperial religion of, with time, almost everyone. Not to be Christian thus required great conviction. This led to the creation of the doctrine of the invisible church as the true believers or the elect still were considered a small minority. The church thus no longer signified an identifiable people, but came to mean primarily the hierarchy and sacramental institution, with the consequence that faith and Christian life primarily were understood in inward terms.⁴⁰

“Conversion,” notes Kreider, “which had made Christians into distinctive people—resident aliens—now was something that made people ordinary, not resident aliens but simply residents.”⁴¹ Indeed, conversion and the Christian faith itself became a matter of belief, not embodied action or a way of being. This, in turn, shaped the characteristics of the church in its new role within Christendom:⁴²

- A distinction emerged between visible and invisible church.
- A division of labour, therefore, also emerged between the church and Empire. The church would now focus on the spiritual and personal, whereas the Empire dealt with the physical and political.
- A division emerged between clergy and laity. The religious would be led by one ethic; the laity by another. “This dualism seems to rest on an inherent contradiction of the Constantinian synthesis that affirms that everyone is Christian by law yet confesses at the same time that not everyone is Christian by conviction. Constantine’s state needed Christians who did not live by the ethic of Jesus, that is, who did not take their faith to have political relevance and uncritically obeyed the political authorities.”⁴³

³⁹ This makes 2025 a special year not just for the 1700 year anniversary of the first draft of the Nicene Creed, but also the 500 year anniversary of the Anabaptist movement.

⁴⁰ Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 222.

⁴¹ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, 90.

⁴² The characteristics outlined below come from Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics*.

⁴³ Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 62.

- Sources other than the Bible become necessary in order to determine right action. Jesus' ethic was no longer seen as "realistic" as Christians were now in places of power and control.
- A different understanding of power emerged.⁴⁴

Due to this shift, Mennonite theologians have debated the significance and importance of the creeds in general, including the Nicene Creed. This follows a long history whereby Mennonites/Anabaptists have been depicted as "non-creedal." Instead, Mennonites/Anabaptists have tended to place more importance on confessions of faith rather than the creeds themselves. This disposition toward confessions as opposed to simple acceptance of creedal statements boils down to the importance Mennonites/Anabaptists place on faith being an active, lived, and embodied element, rather than understood simply as (correct) belief, which can (and has been) separated from an embodied way of life.⁴⁵

Perhaps the most prominent tension regarding the creeds (and "classical theology" in general) within the Mennonite community was that between J. Denny Weaver and A. James Reimer.⁴⁶ Weaver expressed (arguably) the more common Mennonite/Anabaptist tendency by depicting the creeds a result of a "fallen" ecclesial expression, i.e., the Constantinian shift and the union between the church with the (Roman) Empire. Reimer, however, argues that God's being as triune is foundational – necessary – not only for Christian belief but for Christian ethics as well. "The economic Trinity alone," notes Reimer, "is not an adequate grounding for ethics."⁴⁷ Without understanding the ontological connection between Jesus and God – or, rather, Jesus as an expression of God – Jesus can simply be depicted as a good person or a good example. But, Reimer argues, this is not enough if we want to understand God's way, activity, care, and love for the world in which we live. Reimer says, "I would concur with Wolfhart Pannenberg, when he argues that not the economic Trinity (trinitarian actions outward in relation to creation) alone but the immanent Trinity (intratrinitarian relations between Father, Son, and Spirit) is the essential theological prerequisite for our understanding of God's way with the world and our responsibility within that world."⁴⁸ Christian theology, argues Reimer, begins and ends with the doctrine of God.⁴⁹ The Biblical writers simply assumed the existence of God and were not, therefore, preoccupied with the metaphysical questions about the nature of God.⁵⁰ "Their primary concern was with God's self-revelation and historical action in the lives of people and the appropriate human response."⁵¹ Reimer suggests that the Anabaptists, historically, accepted the classic trinitarian and Christological formulations of the creeds. But they brought an ethical consciousness that was missing in them.⁵²

⁴⁴ See Andrew Suderman, "Re-Claiming Our Power: Assuming Political Agency in the Quest for Peace," in *A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Global Mennonite Perspectives on Peacebuilding*, ed. Andres Pacheco-Lozano Fernando Enns, Nina Schroeder-van 't Schip (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023);

⁴⁵ See, for example, Thomas Finger, "A Confession of Faith as a Living Letter," in *Holding Fast to the Confession of our Hope* (Elkhart, Indiana: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2006).

⁴⁶ For a wonderful look at this conversation, see Ben C. Ollenburger, "Mennonite Theology: A Conversation around the Creeds," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (Jan.) (1992).

⁴⁷ A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 393.

⁴⁸ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 393.

⁴⁹ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 393.

⁵⁰ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 394.

⁵¹ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 394.

⁵² Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 393.

At the heart of this intra-Mennonite tension lies an overarching concern regarding the significance of Jesus' ethic, or way of being and acting, that Christians are invited to participate in and embody. The Nicene Creed did not include this concern. The Nicene Creed, by not including any reference to Jesus' life, and way of life, fostered forgetfulness and amnesia to supplant healthy Christian imagination. But, for Mennonites/Anabaptists, the life and lifestyle of Jesus, which Mennonites/Anabaptists have described as discipleship, has been an important element in understanding the Christian faith.⁵³

Re-membering the Nicene Creed

“We do indeed forget in our affluence. We are talked out of our memory. We do in fact forget to recite. We also live in an environment of a hostile culture where the fabric of faith is thin and fragile. We are at a moment of recovering a lost inheritance. That recovery now requires reading, interpretation, booting, appropriation of the whole memory.”⁵⁴ Empire encourages amnesia. This is particularly true as Empire cultivates an imagination and “collective spirit,” including an anthropological construction that “allows and approves of certain behaviours, reactions, feelings, and attitudes of the social and political actors, that shapes a certain logic and way of conceiving life, and that imposes and translates itself into values and a hegemonic *Weltanschauung*.”⁵⁵ It establishes a particular imagination about the world in which we inhabit and to which we are subject. It creates, in other words, a particular subjectivity.⁵⁶

There is a dangerous memory that Christians (re)claim whenever we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.⁵⁷ This dangerous memory subverts the logic of Empire precisely as it leads toward challenging the individualized subjectivity that Empire creates, thereby re-claiming our communal character and being. In remembering Jesus Christ as Lord, we re-member ourselves not only as a community, but as a communal (ecclesial) expression of God's action and solidarity with the other in proclaiming and claiming an alternative way of being – or kingdom – in the here and now.⁵⁸

Willie James Jennings reminds us that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are fragment workers. We, ourselves, are fragmented people, and we work with fragments, remnants of what is and has been, including that which colonialism and violence have caused, left behind, or continue to cause. And yet, God builds – constructs – out of these fragments. Much like the twelve baskets left after the sharing of the loaves and fishes, the fragments are more than the sum of its parts. It is only when the whole gets broken that everyone can be fed. “God works with

⁵³ Elsewhere I have argued how the book of James, and the commonly recited passage that “faith without works is dead,” challenges the very definition of faith that has often been assumed. Rather than understanding faith as belief (I believe therefore I have faith), James seems to suggest that the very definition of faith cannot be understood apart from works. In other words, faith equals belief and works. Without one of those elements one does not have faith. See Andrew Suderman, “Redefining Faith,” *Sojourners Magazine* (2013), <https://sojo.net/articles/redefining-faith>.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 91.

⁵⁵ Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key, Reclaiming Liberation Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2009), 2.

⁵⁶ See Míguez, Rieger, and Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*, ch. 2, “Empire, Religion, and Subjectivity”.

⁵⁷ Recognizing the full political significance of these terms! It is worth noting Karl Barth's reflections on this. See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, Harper Torchbooks, Tb56 Cloister Library (New York, NY: Harper, 1959), 65-71.

⁵⁸ For a wonderful example of this see William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford, UK; Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998).

these fragments, moving in the spaces between them to form communion with us. The fragments facilitate communion.”⁵⁹

The Nicene Creed has been a valuable resource for the Christian church. And yet, it too is but a fragment. It is important to remember what was left out. Mennonites have been somewhat leery about the Nicene Creed not only because it does not contemplate discipleship directly, but also because it is seen as the root cause of not seeing the life of Jesus as normative for our own. This lack of emphasis on Jesus’ life and teachings affects the kind of community we are and are called to be as the church, as we seek to participate in what God is doing in and for the world.

⁵⁹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness : An Education in Belonging*, Theological Education between the Times (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 34.

Bibliography

- Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy : An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper Torchbooks, Tb56 Cloister Library. New York,: Harper, 1959.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- Cavanaugh, William T. *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. Oxford, UK; Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998.
- Finger, Thomas. "A Confession of Faith as a Living Letter." In *Holding Fast to the Confession of our Hope*. Elkhart, Indiana: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2006.
- Huebner, Harry. *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012.
- Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness : An Education in Belonging*. Theological Education between the Times. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.
- Kreider, Alan. *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999.
- LaCugna, Catherine Mowry. "God in Communion with Us — the Trinity." In *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna. New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.
- Míguez, Néstor, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung. *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*. Reclaiming Liberation Theology. London, UK: SCM Press, 2009.
- Ollenburger, Ben C. "Mennonite Theology: A Conversation around the Creeds." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (Jan.) (1992): 57-89.
- Reimer, A. James. *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001.
- Suderman, Andrew. "Re-Claiming Our Power: Assuming Political Agency in the Quest for Peace." In *A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Global Mennonite Perspectives on Peacebuilding*, edited by Andres Pacheco-Lozano Fernando Enns, Nina Schroeder-van 't Schip. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023.
- . "Redefining Faith." *Sojourners Magazine* (2013). Published electronically May 10, 2013. <https://sojo.net/articles/redefining-faith>.
- Volf, Miroslav. *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.