

THE
NICENE
CREED

AND
PARTICULAR
ATONEMENT

The Nicene Creed and Particular Redemption:

The Litmus Test of Christian Orthodoxy

Part I: Preface

Every Sunday, millions of Christians recite the Nicene Creed—the most universally accepted statement of orthodoxy in Christian history. Catholics affirm it. Orthodox affirm it. Protestants affirm it. Arminians affirm it.

And every time they do, they unknowingly confess particular redemption.

Here's how.

At the outset, I remind the reader of the wisdom of Solomon

“He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.” (Prov 18:13)

Having said that, let's begin. The primary purpose of the Nicene Creed was to refute Arianism: the belief that Jesus, though divine in a lesser sense as a “god,” was not *God* in the same sense as the Father.

To that end, it succeeded magnificently.

However, the Creed articulates far more than merely a defense of the Trinity or the deity of Christ. It serves as a comprehensive confession of essential Christian doctrine concerning the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ as fully God and fully man, and the scope and intent of His saving work.

That final element, His saving work, is the particular focus of this essay.

The Creed's framers were not composing casual, unintended phrases of worship. They were drafting the doctrinal DNA of the Christian faith. In every line they wrote, they were intentionally *guarding the boundaries of truth*.

✚ **Their words matter, their grammar matters, and their pronouns matter.**

Grammar Matters

The Creed begins with the statement: *“We believe...”*

That single phrase establishes the voice of the document. It speaks not for the unconverted world but for the confessing Church: those who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

It then declares of Jesus Christ: “*Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven...*”
The personal pronouns *us* and *our* directly correspond to the opening *we*.
They identify the same group: believers who share this faith.
A few lines later, the Creed reiterates the same deliberate phrasing: “*He was crucified under Pontius Pilate for us.*”

By the plain rules of grammar and antecedent reference, the “us” of the Passion clause *must* refer to the “we” of faith introduced at the outset.
It is not the language of general humanity but of specific confession – we who believe.
In the clearest way possible then, the Creed affirms not a *general* but a *particular* atonement.

The Creed’s language echoes Scripture’s own testimony:

- “He will save **His people**” (Matt 1:21)
- “I lay down My life for **the sheep**” (John 10:14-16)
- “The church which He purchased **with His own blood**” (Acts 20:28)
- “Christ loved **the church** and gave Himself **for her**” (Eph 5:25)
- “You have redeemed **men to God** from every tribe” (Rev 5:9)

The drafters of the Creed *knew* these texts intimately. Their language, therefore, reflects their theology – this is the only reasonable conclusion that does not undermine their competence as highly skilled theologians. They were, therefore, not novices unaware of the implications of their choice of language. They did not write, “*for the salvation of all He came,*” nor anything resembling universal scope. They wrote “*for us and for our salvation.*”

✚ **That distinction is not accidental or stylistic. it is deliberate, theological, and profound.**

The Impossible Dilemma

To interpret the Creed otherwise requires an exception: to take the document at face value in every *other* doctrinal statement—Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, and Judgment, **except this one.**

- Such inconsistency would require us to say that the Creed means what it says *everywhere else*, but not when it speaks of the purpose and scope of the cross.

That is precisely the tension and dilemma, this essay exposes;

If the Creed is reliable as a litmus test of orthodoxy in every other line, then it cannot suddenly become ambiguous or merely “liturgical” here – meaning written only as addressed to believers.

✚ **The professing Church cannot treat its “litmus test” of orthodoxy and key defining confession as grammatically precise in *every other* line and yet sloppy or neutral in the very clause where salvation itself is defined!**

Part II: The Inevitable Objections:

1. “It Wasn’t Drafted for That Purpose”

It will no doubt be objected,

“The Creed was written to and for those who profess faith; therefore, it uses language that reflects the believer’s confession. It doesn’t mean those who wrote it believed Jesus came only to save the Church.”

But this objection, while common, collapses under its own logic.

The Creed was indeed written to clarify *what* Christians believe about;

1. *Who* Jesus is and
2. *What* He came to do.

That is its stated purpose.

If you claim to be a Christian, then by its own structure the Creed declares: “*This is what Christians believe **concerning these things.***”

Nowhere does it say, “For the salvation of everyone He came.”. It could easily have worded it that way, yet it did not. In the clearest language possible, it defines who it is that Jesus came to save and for whom He died - the “us” and “our,” *who believe.*

The argument that this phrasing is merely liturgical, or incidental to a larger purpose, creates an immediate theological inconsistency.

If every other statement in the Creed is accepted as doctrinally *precise*, how can this one clause alone be exempted?

- If the Church insists that the Creed “means what it says” when it speaks of Christ as *true God from true God*, yet refuses to grant the same plain meaning when it says, “*for us and for our salvation*,” then we are not dealing with faithful interpretation, but selective, preferential belief – meaning, the reader is deciding what the Creed means based on their preference rather than on its language.

“You Say That but Don’t Mean It”

All Protestant free-will salvation advocates affirm the Nicene Creed.

Yet in doing so, they unknowingly affirm a statement that conflicts with their own view of universal atonement.

Their doctrine claims Christ died for all without distinction; the Creed confesses that He died for “us and our salvation.”

- ✚ **To reconcile this dissonance, the objector *must* argue by assumption rather than grammar: in no other place would the same reader redact the Creed to mean anything less or other than what it expressly states.**

“Yes, it reads that way, but it doesn’t actually *mean* that,” is their only recourse.

I reply, the Fathers who drafted the Creed were *deliberate* craftsmen of theology.

They chose each phrase with precision.

If their wording is taken literally everywhere else, then it *must* be taken literally here — unless one is prepared to say that they suddenly lost clarity, competence, or intention precisely when addressing the purpose of the cross.

Incidental, Accidental, or Sovereign? The Trifecta Exposes the Objection

If the Creed’s phrasing at this crucial point does *not* mean what it naturally says, then one of three conclusions must follow:

1. **Accidental** - The drafters unintentionally worded it this way, writing what they did not mean.
2. **Incidental** - It was secondary to their main purpose, and therefore not carefully considered.
3. **Sovereign** - God, in His providence, guided their language to align perfectly with Scripture's testimony to a definite redemption.

The first is impossible. The framers of the Creed were some of the most theologically literate men of their era. They did not handle divine truth carelessly.

The second is equally weak, for their precision elsewhere else refutes any notion of negligence here.

Therefore, only the third remains: the **Sovereign** option.

God, who superintends the confession of His Church, caused them to word it as they did: in perfect agreement with Matthew 1:21, John 10:14-16, Acts 20:28, Ephesians 5:25, and Revelation 5:9.

 **Occam's Razor applies here.**

Thus the “Accidental / Incidental / Sovereign” trilemma stands as a test:
Either the Creed;

- *intends* what it plainly says,
- *accidentally* affirms particular atonement,
- *incidentally* reflects it, or
- *sovereignly* proclaims it.

In every case except the first two, which are untenable, its language still supports the truth that Christ came for “*His* people” (Matt. 1:21).

This is not an appeal to speculation; it is the logical consequence of consistency.

If the Church accepts the Creed's grammar as inspired precision when it speaks of the Trinity, then the same precision *must* apply when it speaks of redemption.

The Pandora's Box

If we concede that the Creed *says what it says but does not mean it* here, we open the door to the same dismissal elsewhere. Why should we not then doubt what it says about Christ's divinity, His incarnation, or His resurrection?

✚ **To deny its plain meaning in one clause is to undermine its authority in all.**

This becomes *reductio ad absurdum*.

If the Creed cannot be taken at face value regarding the purpose of Christ's coming, it cannot reliably define any doctrine at all. And if it cannot be trusted where it speaks of salvation, it ceases to function as the Church's *litmus test* of orthodoxy.

The Litmus Test Refutes the Error

The Nicene Creed, universally regarded as the touchstone of orthodoxy, does not proclaim that Christians believe Jesus came to save everyone.

It proclaims: "*We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ... who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven.*"

That statement defines not only *what* Christians believe, but also *who* may rightly claim the name "Christian" - those who confess the *same* faith which it articulates.

To universalize what the Creed particularizes is to step outside the parameters of its confession.

✚ **If the Creed is the doctrinal fence that guards true orthodoxy, then *this clause necessarily stands as one of its gateposts.***

It affirms a definite redemption in its design, effectual in its power, and glorious in its purpose.



2. "The wording is liturgical, not objectively factual or doctrinal. It references the atonement only as it relates to believers, but does not intend that to be objectively exhaustive."

I reply, **This objection rests on a false dichotomy.**

The Nicene Creed is liturgical *because* it is doctrinal! The objection assumes that what is "liturgical" is therefore not necessarily objectively true *as doctrine* as though the Church's worship consists in poetic sentiment rather than *true* doctrinal confession.

Such an objection is theologically absurd and destroys the very nature of what the Creed actually *is*. It was placed on the lips of the Church precisely *so that objective truth it*

expresses would be confessed. By doing so, it was *intended* to be a gatekeeper of orthodoxy concerning the objective truths it articulates.

When the Church confesses in worship that God is “Maker of heaven and earth,” she is not merely expressing devotional posture. She is by that statement, excluding false gods. When she confesses that the Son is “begotten, not made,” she is anathematizing Arianism. These statements are *intended* to be theological “gatekeepers” of what constitutes truth from error, true doctrine from heresy. The Nicene Creed does not do this only in a few places, but in *every line concerning every truth it articulates*. It is objectively true as doctrine, that the Holy Spirit is the “Lord, the giver of life” who “proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

The point is made. The Creed contains *the objective, factual truth concerning everything* it articulates. It is not a completely exhaustive systematic theology – for there are essential things it does not address – like justification by faith alone. The Creed makes no mention of this. So, I am not saying the Creed is objectively exhaustive orthodoxy. I *am* saying it is objective orthodoxy concerning *everything that it articulates*. *And it expressly articulates in two places a limited, definite actual atonement.*

Pastoral Reflection: The Face-Value Faith

This argument is not an exercise in exclusivism, but in *honesty*. I’m not narrowing grace; but clarifying design.

To say that Christ came *for us* does not deny that the gospel is to be proclaimed to all; it declares that His redemption *actually saves* those who believe – and they come “from every nation, tribe and tongue” (Rev. 5:9).

The door of mercy stands open wide by virtue of the universal proclamation of the truth that by His death and resurrection, Jesus saves all who believe – *that is* the “good news” but it is the door He Himself unlocks and holds open for His own.

Rightly understood, this reading strengthens assurance and deepens worship.

The believer may now say with full confidence: *He came for us. He was crucified for us. He rose again for us. **Not a potential Savior, but an actual Redeemer.***

This is the doxology of the Creed, and the comfort of the Church.

The Glorified Church in Heaven Gets It Right

The glorified Church in heaven no longer debates these things.
Before the throne, the redeemed sing in perfect clarity:

“With Your blood You have ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and nation.”

There is no confusion there: No half-truth, no equivocation. **The redeemed don’t sing ‘You potentially died for all’; they sing ‘You actually ransomed us.’**

So, let the Church on earth speak as the Church in heaven does - clearly, joyfully, and consistently.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven...

And with that confession, the Creed itself becomes what its framers intended - **The litmus test of Christian orthodoxy concerning *everything* it articulates.**