

We Believe

Worship Series Outline & Resources

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Series Outline

This worship series is meant to accompany the small group study *We Believe: How the Nicene Creed Can Deepen Your Faith* by Michael Carpenter. In this way, an entire congregation can experience the power and promise of the Nicene Creed. Small groups, such as Sunday School classes, would go through the small group curriculum, then the worshipping congregation would have the same focus in worship.

This series is six weeks in length, corresponding to each chapter of *We Believe*. This guide offers resources for structuring the series, both the sermons that anchor it and the liturgy that surrounds it in the worship service. This series works at multiple points in the church year, especially as a Lenten study with a focus on building faith, though it also works well in Eastertide or Ordinary Time.

Pages 2-7 of this guide give resources for the worship services built around the sermon series. There are suggested Scriptures which tie to that week's focus, as well as suggested musical selections for both traditional and modern worship. Because this series draws on the Nicene Creed as a deep and ancient font, I have also included a prayer from the early Church that resonates with the week's theme and which can be used in worship. Finally, there are notes on other aspects of the worship service you may wish to include.

Pages 8-13 of this guide are sermon outlines for the series. Each sermon outline contains ideas on how to begin the sermon in an engaging way, as well as ways to synthesize the information in *We Believe* for a congregation in worship. There is also material in each outline in how to end the sermon, with an eye toward deepening your congregation's faith through engagement with the Nicene Creed.

Thank you for using these resources in your congregation! I pray that they are beneficial to you as your congregation deepens its encounters with God through the Nicene Creed!

Worship Resources

Week 1 – “We Believe in One God”

Pages in *We Believe*: Pages 1-19

Suggested Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 8:1-6 (Primary)

Matthew 6:7-14

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Psalms 104, selected verses

“There is one God, the Father...”

The Lord’s Prayer

“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God,
the LORD is one...”

God the Creator and Provider

Suggested Hymns:

“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty”

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

UMH¹ 64

UMH 139

UMH 140

Suggested Praise Songs:

“Goodness of God”

“How Great Is Our God”

“Lord, I Need You”

Bethel Music

Chris Tomlin

Matt Maher

Suggested Prayer from the Early Church:

O greatest, Supreme Creator of things invisible!

You who are yourself unseen, who cannot be comprehended!

You are worthy, you are so worthy.

You are limitless, immortal, enduring forever.

You are God alone, uncontainable,

of virtues indescribable, of greatness indefinable. Amen.

(Arnobius, c. 300)

Worship Notes

The central metaphor of this series is that the Nicene Creed can be understood as a map, written 1700 years ago, which still leads us to a reliably deeper encounter with God. If you will be decorating your worship space for this series, consider leaning into the motif of maps and journeys. Consider putting footprints on the floor of your worship space, tracing the common flow of your worship service, making the connection between these familiar movements and the words of the Creed.

¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1980).

Week 2 – “Of One Being with the Father”

Pages in *We Believe*: Pages 21-40

Suggested Scriptures:

John 10:22-39 (Primary)

Colossians 1:15-20

Proverbs 8:22-31

Psalms 24

“The Father and I are one...”

The Supremacy of Christ

Wisdom’s Part in Creation

“Who is the King of glory?”

Suggested Hymns:

“Crown Him with Many Crowns”

UMH 327

“I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light”

UMH 206

“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

UMH 154

Suggested Praise Songs:

“What a Beautiful Name”

Hillsong Worship

“Holy Forever”

Bethel Music

“Jesus Messiah”

Chris Tomlin

Suggested Prayer from the Early Church:

You are Jesus Christ, Word of God.

Born before the light, creator together with the Father.

You are the author of mankind, all in all.

You are God who is from God,

Son from the Father,

Jesus Christ the King forevermore. Amen.

(Melito of Sardis, c. 150)²

Worship Notes

Light comes up again and again in different elements of this week’s focus. From the Creed’s designation of Christ as “Light from Light,” to the suggested songs and prayer, there are plenty of opportunities to incorporate light and shadows into your worship space.

² Melito of Sardis, “A Prayer to the Creator Christ,” in *Fount of Heaven: Prayers of the Early Church*, ed. Robert Elmer (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 38-39, adapt.

Week 3 – “For Us and for Our Salvation”

Pages in *We Believe*: Pages 41-57

Suggested Scriptures:

John 1:1-5, 14-18 (Primary)

Hebrews 2:5-17

Isaiah 53:1-6

Psalms 144

“And the Word became flesh...”

“Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect...”

The Suffering Servant

“What are humans that you regard them?”

Suggested Hymns:

“O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

UMH 57

“I Love to Tell the Story”

UMH 156

“Lift High the Cross”

UMH 159

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”

UMH 234, esp. verse 2

Suggested Praise Songs:

“Mighty to Save”

Hillsong Worship

“How Deep the Father’s Love for Us”

Stuart Townend

“King of Kings”

Hillsong Worship

Suggested Prayer from the Early Church:

I will rejoice, Lord, singing of your mercy and compassion.

I have known the power of your love;

for my sake you became a perfect man.

You let us know that you have not forgotten us;

out of compassion for us, you pour on us your goodness.

You have graciously brought us back to paradise

through the one who first separated

humanity from paradise. Amen.

(Methodius of Olympia, c. 300)³

Worship Notes

Even if you are not doing this series anywhere near Christmas, do not shy away from the Christmas elements of this week’s focus. Using “O Come, All Ye Faithful” as a hymn selection, and even breaking out some of your church’s Christmas decorations, would be a great way to draw your congregation into what this week’s focus says about the Incarnation!

³ Methodius of Olympia, “You Have Not Forgotten Us,” in *Fount of Heaven: Prayers of the Early Church*, ed. Robert Elmer (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 98-99, adapt.

Week 4 – “In Accordance with the Scriptures”

Pages in *We Believe*: Pages 59-75

Suggested Scriptures:

Luke 24:13-27 (Primary)

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Malachi 3:1-5a

Psalms 118

The Walk to Emmaus

“Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the scriptures...”

The Coming Messenger

A Song of Victory

Suggested Hymns:

“He Lives”

“Victory in Jesus”

“Crown Him with Many Crowns”

UMH 310

UMH 370

UMH 327

Suggested Praise Songs:

“King of Kings”

“Living Hope”

“House of the Lord”

Hillsong Worship

Phil Wickham

Phil Wickham

Suggested Prayer from the Early Church:

You are the true light who proceeds from the true light,
true God begotten of the true God.

You are the absolute king and sovereign,
but for us and for our salvation became a servant.

For yours is the glory, and the power, and the greatness,
and the majesty, with the Father
and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

(Methodius of Olympia, c. 300)⁴

Worship Notes

This sermon includes a section about “Easter eggs” in famous movies and shows (see page 11). A fun way to pique your congregation’s curiosity and sense of fun would be to prepare the worship space by hiding a few Easter eggs of your own in it! Regardless of how close to Easter this sermon is preached, this is a great exercise in having your congregation look at their worship space with fresh eyes. Even if no one finds any eggs, they might just notice something they had not really noticed before.

⁴ Methodius of Olympia, “A Blessing for the One,” in *Fount of Heaven: Prayers of the Early Church*, ed. Robert Elmer (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 45, adapt.

Week 5 – “With the Father and the Son”

Pages in *We Believe*: Pages 77-93

Suggested Scriptures:

John 14:15-17, 25-26 (Primary)	The Promise of the Holy Spirit
Romans 8:1-11	“The Spirit of God dwells in you...”
Genesis 2:4 <i>b</i> -9	“...and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...”
Psalm 104:24-30	God the Creator and Provider

Suggested Hymns:

“Spirit of the Living God”	UMH 393
“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty”	UMH 64
“Breathe on Me, Breath of God”	UMH 420

Suggested Praise Songs:

“Spirit of the Living God”	Vertical Worship
“Here Again”	Elevation Worship
“Fall Afresh”	Jeremy Riddle

Suggested Prayer from the Early Church:

Holy Spirit, everything that needs holiness turns to you.
You perfect others, but you lack nothing.
You live, but not because you were restored to life,
but because you are the source of life.
You, O Holy Spirit, are hidden in nature
but found in goodness. Amen.
(St. Basil the Great, 375)⁵

Worship Notes

With this sermon focusing on the Creed’s treatment of the Holy Spirit, several of the musical selections home in on the resonance between the Holy Spirit and breath. One way to enhance worship, then, would be to draw your congregation’s attention to their own breathing at certain points in worship. Are they mindful of their breathing as they center themselves in prayer? Are they filling their lungs sufficiently to sing?

⁵ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 9.22, adapt.

Week 6 – “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic”

Pages in *We Believe*: Pages 95-110

Suggested Scriptures:

John 17:1-5, 20-24 (Primary)	“That they may be completely one...”
Ephesians 4:1-6	Unity in the Body of Christ
Leviticus 19:1-2	“You shall be holy...”
Psalms 133	The Blessedness of Unity

Suggested Hymns:

“The Church’s One Foundation”	UMH 545
“We Are the Church”	UMH 558
“I Come with Joy”	UMH 617

Suggested Praise Songs:

“King of Kings”	Hillsong Worship
“House of the Lord”	Phil Wickham
“Baptized”	Zach Williams

Suggested Prayer from the Early Church:

Lord, we pray for peace in this world,
and in our churches, spread around the world.
God of the whole world, give us your everlasting peace,
and take it not away.
Preserve us. Keep the church unshaken
and free from the waves of this life,
founded on a rock until the end of the age.
Raise us up by your mercy,
as we dedicate ourselves to one another and to you,
the living God, through Jesus Christ. Amen.
(Apostolic Constitutions, c. 375)⁶

Worship Notes

As I say in the sermon outline (see page 13), I highly recommend celebrating Holy Communion in this final week of the series. If you celebrate Communion weekly, fantastic! But if you don’t, and if this doesn’t fall on a regular Communion week, consider making an exception. There is no better way to give a tactile, taste-able illustration of how Christ makes his Church “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” than by joining together at his table.

⁶ Apostolic Constitutions, “We Pray for the Church, for Peace,” in *Fount of Heaven: Prayers of the Early Church*, ed. Robert Elmer (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 141-142, adapt.

Sermon Outlines

Week 1 – “We Believe in One God”

Primary Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:1-6
Supporting Scriptures: Matthew 6:7-14; Deuteronomy 6:4-9;
Psalm 104, selected verses
Bottom Line:⁷ “God is far above but never far off.”

Outline:

Chapter 1 of *We Believe* opens by comparing the Nicene Creed to an “elevator pitch,” a 60-second sales pitch used by people in the business world to sell themselves to potential employers or clients. That is, the Nicene Creed is a brief summary of orthodox Christian beliefs. An engaging way to begin the sermon, then, would be to introduce the concept of the elevator pitch. ***Consider writing your own and sharing it!***

The turn from the sermon opener to the main body of the sermon comes by describing the Creed as the Church’s elevator pitch. From there, this being the first sermon in the series, it may be helpful to give a brief historical sketch of the Council of Nicaea. Briefly answering questions like: when was it, where was it, who was there, and why?

While later sermons in the series will cover topics in the Nicene Creed that were controversial and momentous, the opening clause about God the Father covered in this first sermon was not controversial. Here, the essential claim about God being one, our Father, and the Almighty can be introduced from the focused Scriptures.

A helpful journey through the middle portion of the sermon mirrors the content of Chapter 1 of *We Believe*. God, the Creed says, is both “Father,” a deeply personal title, and “the Almighty,” a term that creates distance between us and God. The tension between these terms, and between the theological concepts of God’s transcendence and immanence, brings the sermon to its bottom line: **God is far above but never far off.**

The conclusion of the sermon leans into the bottom line by connecting it to stories of people being transformed by God’s transcendence or immanence. Either from stories in *We Believe* or from your own life or congregation, something that communicates this initial truth of the Nicene Creed: that the one God who made all that there is also made you and me and loves us better than we can imagine.

⁷ The concept of a sermon’s bottom line is from Talbot Davis’s *Simplify the Message: Multiply the Impact* (Abingdon Press, 2020). With a bottom line, the concept is that the sermon is built around a single point, not multiple points. The entire sermon drives toward the singular bottom line, which is repeated several times in the close of the sermon, so that the sermon’s message is remembered and impactful.

Week 2 – “Of One Being with the Father”

Primary Scripture: John 10:22-39

Supporting Scriptures: Colossians 1:15-20, Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 24

Bottom Line: “There is not one iota of difference in the natures of the Father and the Son.”

Outline:

This sermon, touching on what the Nicene Creed says about the nature of Jesus, is the core of the series. It is also the most dense and deep, going into the *homoousios* vs. *homoiousios* debate that was the pivotal argument at the Council of Nicaea. In those two words, separated only by a single letter, is a world of difference.

A light and engaging way to pull the congregation into the sermon is by opening with other examples of how changing a single letter can produce disastrous results. You can find two humorous examples on page 34 of *We Believe*, and you can come up with others. These get listeners in the mood to understand and appreciate the central conflict at Nicaea.

At this point, introduce that central conflict. Briefly walk through the Council of Nicaea’s primary call to settle the matter of the nature of the Son. This can be done by contrasting verses like John 10:30 and Luke 18:19. Explain how this led some to believe that Jesus was like God but was not God.

Then, introduce the concepts up for debate at Nicaea: *homoousios* and *homoiousios*. Page 35 of *We Believe* has a way to unpack the terms in ways accessible for everyday Christians. I believe strongly that everyday Christians can be taught and understand this core aspect of our faith, that Jesus is *homoousios*, or “of the same nature,” as the Father. ***Don’t shy away from it because it’s potentially confusing!***

This drives the sermon to its bottom line, the play on words that **there is not one iota of difference in the natures of the Father and the Son**. The sermon can end, then, by illustrating why this declaration is so important. Without this, Nicaea’s central declaration is just an obscure semantic debate. Rather, the truth of *homoousios* means that we have full salvation. Pages 39-40 of *We Believe* reinforces this.

Week 3 – “For Us and for Our Salvation”

Primary Scripture: John 1:1-5, 14-18

Supporting Scriptures: Hebrews 2:5-17; Isaiah 53:1-6; Psalm 144

Bottom Line: “Jesus was not an impostor among us but incarnate for us.”

Outline:

This third sermon in the series has the potential to be the most emotionally impactful on your congregation. In it is the most reassuring, loving clause of the Nicene Creed, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” This gives the central “Why” not only for the Creed itself, but for the entire Gospel message.

Here are two effective ways to open the sermon. First, depending on the time of year this sermon is given, you can open in the way that Chapter 3 of *We Believe* opens: by talking about the “reason for the season” of Christmas. This can be an effective way of drawing in the congregation if you’re preaching in January, or it could also be a fun “Christmas in July” type connection.

The second way to open is by asserting that this sermon gets into the “why” of the Nicene Creed. You can light-heartedly connect this to children’s never-ending string of “Why?” questions in search of understanding. Promise the congregation that this sermon will answer the great “Why?” question of their faith.

From here, introduce the Scriptures, walking through how each of them communicate God’s deep desire to save and redeem us. The primary Scripture is John’s account of the Incarnation in John 1, but the classic John 3:16 could also be included here.

A connection can then be made to the Council of Nicaea by explaining the Docetist controversy (see pages 47-48 of *We Believe*). This doesn’t need to be unpacked as extensively as *homoousios* last week, but it is helpful for your congregation to hear that some believed that Jesus wasn’t really human. A humorous connection, especially to the young people in the congregation, is with the popular game “Among Us,” which deals with an impostor pretending to fit in. This leads to the sermon’s bottom line, that **Jesus was not an impostor among us but incarnate for us.**

Like last week, this truth has profound implications. Jesus’ incarnation means that God really became human, and thus knows our needs, temptations, and struggles. It means that God’s overriding objective in the Incarnation was our salvation. It wasn’t a historical accident or a neat coincidence; our salvation was the goal.

Week 4 – “In Accordance with the Scriptures”

Primary Scripture: Luke 24:13-27

Supporting Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Malachi 3:1-5a; Psalm 118

Bottom Line: “Our salvation always goes according to God’s plan.”

Outline:

The fourth sermon in this series concludes the Creed’s material on the Son. It is concerned, primarily, with the Creed’s claim, mirroring 1 Corinthians 15, that all this was done “in accordance with the Scriptures.” The purpose of this sermon, is to communicate that there is intention and purpose in our faith. Using the central metaphor of the series, that the Nicene Creed is a reliable leading map to God, this sermon communicates that God has a plan. That doesn’t mean there aren’t detours and dead-ends along the road, and it doesn’t mean that everything happens for a reason. But it does mean that the destination is never in doubt.

The sermon can start either in Scripture or in the world. To start in Scripture, introduce the primary Scripture of the Emmaus story by putting the worshippers in the shoes of those joyless disciples who don’t know it’s Easter. Let the pathos of their experience draw in the congregation.

To start in the world, introduce the concept of “Easter eggs” in movies, shows, and video games (see pages 61-62 in *We Believe*). Explain, then, that this sermon will show them the Easter eggs of their faith, pointing them to God’s larger plan and how it was always the plan.

Then, by unpacking the other Scriptures (and any others you feel led to include), drive to the bottom line, that **our salvation always goes according to God’s plan**. This, again, is a pastoral sermon, because it allows listeners to lift their eyes above the dead-ends and detours of life to see that God has already written the book. If you are bold enough, introduce at the end of the sermon how our stories end in Revelation 22. ***The end of our story has already been written!***

If you have used the concept of “Easter eggs” in your sermon, you can end by inviting the congregation to have eyes to see other “Easter eggs” in their world. Encourage them to be looking for them and to call them out when they see them.

Week 5 – “With the Father and the Son”

Primary Scripture: John 14:15-17, 25-26
Supporting Scriptures: Romans 8:1-11; Genesis 2:4b-9; Psalm 104:24-30
Bottom Line: “The only way to worship the Trinity
is together, together, together.”

Outline:

The fifth sermon covers the Nicene Creed’s clause about the Holy Spirit. Depending on your congregation, this sermon could have very different impacts. Some congregations are very conscious of and conversant in language about the Holy Spirit. To them, this sermon would be a confirmation of what they have believed. Other congregations are hesitant and uncertain when it comes to the Spirit. They are not alone, and to them, this sermon could serve as a primer on the third Person of the Trinity.

Beginning the sermon could be as simple as asking the congregation to picture what the Holy Spirit is in their minds. This would be an engaging moment for people who say they believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet have only a vague conception of who the Spirit is. Alternatively, the sermon could begin by drawing on a common image of the Holy Spirit, such as a dove, fire, or an Advocate.

It would be helpful in the middle portion of the sermon to recite what the Creed says about the Holy Spirit. This provides a natural gateway to the day’s Scripture readings, from which the Creed derives its language.

From there, zoom in on the historical context of Nicaea and explain how there were some in that time who did not think the Spirit should be worshipped with the Father and the Son. This would offend Spirit-conversant congregants and reassure Spirit-hesitant congregants, either way increasing engagement. With that, unpack the specific grammar of the Creed (see pages 87-89 of *We Believe*) that takes pains to repeat the word ‘together’ three times. The Creed is insistent, falling over itself repeating that the Holy Spirit is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son. This brings the sermon to its bottom line: **the only way to worship the Trinity is together, together, together.**

The sermon lands by fleshing out the Spirit’s power and role in Christian living. Chapter 5 of *We Believe* has several examples that could be used, but you should as a first option use a personal testimony or that of someone in the congregation (with permission). ***The Spirit is still speaking, still empowering, still giving life, and your congregation needs to hear it!***

Week 6 – “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic”

Primary Scripture: John 17:1-5, 20-24
Supporting Scriptures: Ephesians 4:1-6; Leviticus 19:1-2; Psalm 133
Bottom Line: “The marks of the Church are promises to live into, not benchmarks to measure up to.”

Outline:

The series rounds out with the Creed’s closing words, which cover not the Trinity but the Church. This sermon covers the so-called “marks of the Church,” that it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. *These four adjectives could be entire sermons on their own, so allocate your time wisely!*

If you are using this as a Lenten series, then this final sermon comes on Palm/Passion Sunday or sometime in Holy Week. If that is the case, begin the sermon by locating the primary text of John 17 in Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse” of John 14-17, which happens on Maundy Thursday. Let this sermon be a meditation on what it means to be the Church during this holiest of weeks.

If this is done outside of Lent, then it can begin provocatively by asking the congregation if they believe the “capital C” Church, that is, the worldwide body of Christ, is “one”? Is it holy? Is it, dare we ask, catholic? (You’ll define what catholicity means later in the sermon.)

From here, introduce the Scriptures, which hear Jesus praying that the Church would be one and God demanding our holiness, among other things. Don’t be afraid to lean into the tension of the Creed’s declaration of a Church that is “one” and “holy” and the reality in the headlines and in your own experience.

The way forward comes in pages 96-99 of *We Believe*, when we realize that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic not because of our best efforts, but because of God’s grace. Borrowing from John Wesley’s words about perfection, “Every command in holy Writ is only a covered promise.”⁸ This leads to the bottom line that **the marks of the Church are promises to live into, not benchmarks to measure up to.**

Conclude the sermon by drawing out how the church you’re preaching to should “live into” these promises. What would it look like for your church to grow closer toward “oneness”? What would happen if your church earnestly pursued holiness together? As a practical matter, an incomparable way to follow-up this sermon would be to celebrate Holy Communion together as a church.

⁸ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse V: Sermon 25 – 1728,” in Outler and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 211.