

The Story Behind the Nicene Creed

Steve Hemler, President





Why Learn About the Creed?

- As a Church, and in many Protestant services, we recite the Nicene Creed every Sunday
 - This Creed, also called the Profession of Faith, is **THE definitive statement about what we believe as Christians**, and has been for 1,700 years
 - Creed affirms divinity of Jesus, widely denied today
- But have you ever wondered about the story behind the Creed? When, where, and why was it created?
 - And, what is the meaning behind those unusual words, phrases (e.g., “begotten, not made”, “consubstantial”)?



Presentation Outline

- **Christianity in the 4th Century**
- **Arian Controversy and the First Two Great Councils**
 - 325 Nicaea (1,700th Anniversary)
 - 381 Constantinople
- **Continued Significance and Relevance of Council of Nicaea**



4th Century Christianity

Fourth
Century



- At dawn of 4th century (300s), Christianity was a persecuted religion of a small minority
- At end of 4th century, it was the only official religion in Roman Empire and embraced by over **30 million** (more than half of Roman Empire)
- How did this happen?
- ***Video: Rise of Christianity***

Rapid Growth

313



Emperor
Constantine



- Edict of Milan: Legalized Christianity
- Imperial Policy Favored Christianity
 - Church property that had been confiscated was restored
 - New churches built (basilicas)
 - St. Helena at Holy Sites (Church of the Nativity, Church of the Holy Sepulcher)
 - Christian clergy granted privileges, status
 - What a welcome change!

The Spread of Christianity





Rapid Growth

Fourth
Century



- **Just as importantly:**
 - Christians had close and supportive social communities
 - Stood against immorality, upheld marriage
 - Held all human life is sacred and valuable, with equal dignity and worth
 - Care for sick, poor, and widows
- **People saw this, very different from their society, and found it attractive**

Rapid Growth



Gregory the
Wonderworker

- Mass influx of rural peasants into the Church
 - Abandoned paganism through work of Christian missionaries
 - Gregory the Wonderworker: “I found only 17 Christians in Neo-Cesarea and left only 17 pagans when I am ready to die 30 years later.”

Rapid Growth

380



Emperor
Theodosius

- Emperor Theodosius proclaimed Christianity only official religion
 - Paganism made illegal
 - “We desire that all peoples who fall beneath the sway of our imperial clemency should profess the faith which we believe has been communicated by the Apostle Peter to the Romans.”

Rapid Growth



- This proclamation was official recognition of the immense influence Christianity already had over the masses of people
- Christianity became basis of whole social order
 - Roman laws changed
 - Sunday observance laws
 - Legal holidays, calendar



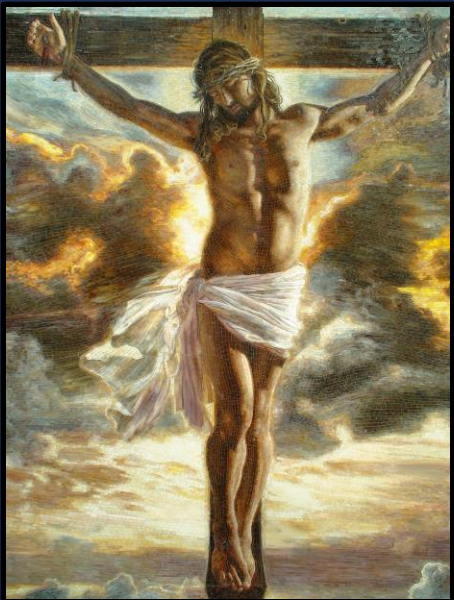
Arianism

Fourth
Century



- Persecutions stopped after 313, but now there were **internal threats** to unity
- Arianism was a major controversy
 - Arius, priest in Alexandria, Egypt
 - Son of God **created** by Father
 - Did not exist from eternity
 - “There was a time when he was not.”
 - Son of God **inferior** to Father
 - Highest creature of God

Arianism



- **Denial of Christ's full divinity**
 - This means Jesus did not save us by his passion and death on the cross
 - Only the God-man can save humanity
 - Because he is God, Christ could offer the Father an infinite satisfaction for the infinite malice of sin
 - Because he is human, Jesus could offer a man's satisfaction for sins of humanity
 - Surveys show over half of Americans do not believe in Jesus' divinity (Arianism)

Athanasius

Fourth
Century



St. Athanasius

- Deacon and Bishop of Alexandria
 - Became Arius's bishop after death of previous Bishop Alexander
 - Later named a Doctor of the Church
- Articulate defender of traditional belief
 - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God.**” (John 1:1)
 - Fully Divine Word (Son of God) became human
 - Argued Christ must be fully divine to accomplish our redemption & salvation

Arianism: The Opponents and the Issue

**Athanasius
Alexander:**
*Bishop of
Alexandria*

Arius:
*Presbyter under
Alexander*

Father

Son

Creation

Father

Son

Creation

Arianism



Emperor
Constantine

- Many bishops supported Arianism
- Constantine saw argument as threat to unity of Empire
 - Called an “Ecumenical” Council of bishops at Nicaea to resolve Arian controversy

Ecumenical Councils



- Meetings of worldwide bishops normally called by Magisterium from which decrees bind all members of the Church
- First 4 Great Ecumenical Councils
 - 325 Nicaea
 - 381 Constantinople
 - 431 Ephesus
 - 451 Chalcedon



Constantinople
(Istanbul)

Chalcedon

Nicaea (Iznik)

Ephesus

Pope Leo XIV and Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople met in Nicaea (Iznik) on Nov. 28, 2025, to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of Council of Nicaea

First Four Ecumenical Church Councils

A.D. 325 - Council at Nicaea

A.D. 381 - Council at Constantinople

A.D. 431 - Council at Ephesus

A.D. 451 - Council at Chalcedon

Council of Nicaea

325

- First Ecumenical Council
 - Convened by Constantine at Basilica of St. Neophytos
 - Discovered in 2014 underwater in Lake Iznik
 - Pope Leo XIV attended Nov. 28 ecumenical prayer service near archaeological excavations of this ancient basilica
 - Council then moved to Constantine's Senatus Palace
 - Later destroyed and probably submerged in Lake Iznik
- First major meeting of Church leaders since the "Council of Jerusalem" (Acts 15)
 - 318 bishops attended
 - Met for 2 months in summer 325 A.D.

Council of Nicaea

325



- Big dispute was which of two Greek words best define the Son's relationship to the Father
 - Neither word found in Scripture
- Homoiousios
 - Of **similar essence** (substance) as Father
- Homousios
 - Of **same essence** (substance) as Father
- **Video: Council of Nicaea**



Council of Nicaea

325



- Our Profession of Faith (Creed):
“I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the **Only Begotten Son of God, born
of the Father before all ages. God
from God, Light from Light, true God
from true God, begotten, not made,
consubstantial with the Father;**
through him all things were made.”
- Which words are in response to
Arian controversy?

Council of Nicaea

325



- Affirmed Divinity of Jesus Christ
 - Always co-existed with Father
 - “born of the Father **before all ages**”
 - Pre-existent Word of God, Logos
 - **Identical** in substance (**same** essence) as Father (“homousios”)
 - “**consubstantial** with the Father”
 - Fully equal divinity with Father
 - “**true God** from true God”

Council of Nicaea

325



C.S. Lewis

- “**begotten**, not made”
 - C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (publ. 1952):
“To beget is to become the father of: to create is to make. **When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself.** A man begets human babies; a beaver begets little beavers. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A beaver builds a dam; a man makes a wireless set. **What God begets is God**; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man makes is not man.”

Nicaea Did Not Bring Unity

325 to 381



- Many objected to Nicene Creed's use of word "hom~~oo~~ousios"
 - Not Biblical terminology
 - Some felt imposed by Constantine
- Emperor Constantius II
 - Constantine's son
 - Favored Arians' "homo*i*ousios"
 - Tried to crush Nicenes
 - Athanasius exiled 5 times

Council of Constantinople

381



- Second Ecumenical Council
 - In Constantinople (modern day Istanbul)
- Called by Emperor Theodosius I
- Reasons included:
 - Use of “homoousios” in Nicene Creed
- Reaffirmed and expanded conclusions of Council of Nicaea
- **Video:** *Dr. Dan Keating, Prof. Sacred Heart Major Seminary*



I think, you know, you can look at it

Significance of Council of Nicaea

325



- Gave us the Nicene Creed, core statement of Christian beliefs
 - Jesus is truly God (vs Arianism)
- Identified the nature of God as Trinity
 - God as Father
 - The Word as Son
 - Existence of the Holy Spirit
 - Determines the nature of our salvation
- **Video:** *Bishop Barron on survey findings and why Nicene Creed matters*



WORD on FIRE SHOW

ARIANISM, THEN AND NOW



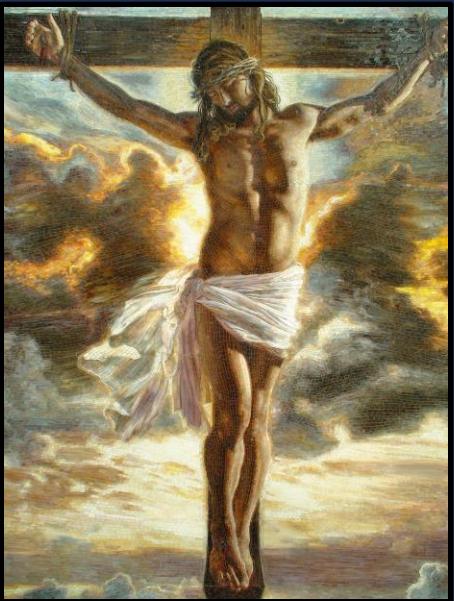
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Council Significance: Trinity



- God should first be defined by **who He is**, not by what He does (Creator)
 - God is Father as His first and deepest identity: “I believe in God, the Father”
- Jesus reveals the Father
 - “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father.’” (John 14:9)
 - “The Father and I are one.” (John 10:30)

Council Significance: Salvation



- Unlike “god” of Arius, the true God is
 - Eternally overflowing with love, life-giving
- Salvation comes from this overflowing of love and life
 - “From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (John 1:16)
- Only because Jesus is Son and in communion with the Father, can He bring us into that communion
- **Video:** *Michaels Reeves*, Pres & Prof Union Fndtn



Significance of Council of Nicaea

325



- Set precedents:
 - Legitimate to use non-Biblical words , such as “homousios,” to clarify a truth of faith
 - Holy Spirit is not limited to Sacred Scripture in guiding the Church
 - God’s truth also conveyed through **Sacred Tradition**
 - And through the use of **reason**, God’s great gift to us

Significance of Council of Nicaea

325



- Bishops are heirs to the **office** of the Apostles & speak with **special authority**
 - Distinction between disciplinary matters and doctrinal declarations
 - Disciplinary matters are rules decided upon by the bishops as men
 - Doctrinal declarations are beliefs of the Church as taught by the Apostles
 - Not new, but based on **Sacred Tradition**
- **Video:** “*Way of the Fathers*” podcast by Mike Aquilina



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- **Video:** *What now? With Dr. Dan Keating*





In Closing

- Better equipped to respond to today's Arianism.
- David Mills, *National Catholic Register*:

“We say the Creed in the Mass because it re-forms our minds and helps us understand the faith better, and as an act of worship [before] we meet Jesus in the Sacrament. Being said at Mass **transforms a dogmatic statement into a personal commitment.**”

“The Creed tells us, if we're paying attention and not just rattling through it, that it is the **only-begotten Son of God** that we will shortly receive in the Blessed Sacrament. He is the most real reality. He is the fundamental truth of everything. And he gives himself to us.”



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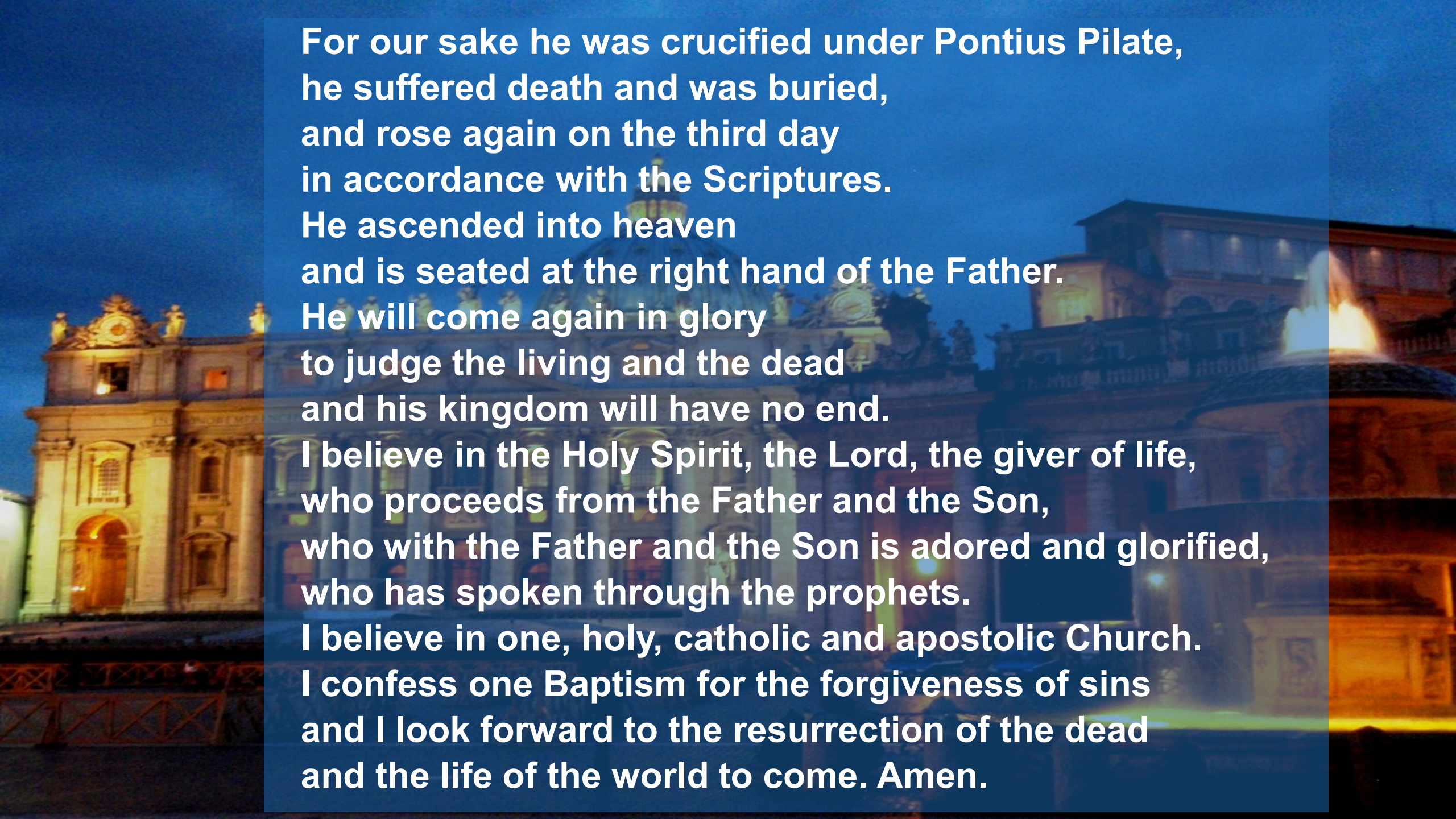


Questions?

Comments?

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.



**For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
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.
I 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 adored and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

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Philosophical Term “Substance”

- “Substance” is the reality that undergirds something’s existence, the act of being.
- Substance pertains to *what* something is. To identify a substance, one must ask, “What is it?”

