Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2025, Vol 11, No 1, 1–20
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2025.v11n1.nic5
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459

The "Barabbas Delusion" reconsidered: A Nicene response to political and ideological distortions of Jesus Christ's redemption

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Abstract

This article revisits the enduring theological and missional importance of the Nicene Creed, even seventeen centuries after its origin. It focuses on a recurring Christological crisis known as the "Barabbas Delusion". Inspired by the biblical account of the crowd choosing Barabbas over Jesus (Mt 27:17), this delusion highlights the ongoing temptation within the Church to favour politically or culturally driven messianic figures instead of the crucified and risen Lord. By tracing this pattern throughout history, particularly within Christian Zionism, Apartheid Theology, Liberation and Black Theology, the Prosperity Gospel, and identity-based tribalism, the article suggests that such distortions indicate a shift away from the high Christology affirmed at Nicaea. The Nicene Creed's declaration of Jesus as "true God from true God" is presented here not just as doctrinal nostalgia but as a theological guide that counters ideological captivity and reorients the Church's identity and mission amid an era of post-Christendom, global Christianity, and ideological confusion. The article concludes by urging a Christ-centred mission renewal rooted in Nicene faith.

Keywords

Nicene Creed; Christology; Barabbas delusion; Political theology; Missional theology; Post-Christendom; Global Christianity; Ideological distortion

1. Introduction

1.1 A Kairos moment in Christological perspective

The Christian Church in the West is at a pivotal point. Seventeen centuries after the Nicene Creed was established (AD 325), Christendom faces a

significant theological and missional challenge. While Nicaea responded to the Arian crisis by reaffirming Christ's full divinity, today's Church confronts a different but equally perilous issue: a recurring Christological distortion called the "Barabbas Delusion". It can be described as the tendency to choose a politically convenient or culturally accepted Messiah over the crucified and risen Lord (Ayres 2007:162; Anatolios 2016:223).

This crisis marks a pivotal moment in Jesus's passion, when the crowd, under socio-political pressure, chose Jesus Barabbas rather than Jesus Christ (Mt 27:17). Theologically, this was more than a political mistake; it was a Christological tragedy. Barabbas, ironically called "son of the father" and referred to as "Jesus Barabbas" in early manuscripts (Mt 27:17, NRSV footnote), embodied a form of messianic hope fuelled by nationalist urgency and violent opposition. By making this choice, the crowd did not outright reject Jesus; they preferred a different Jesus, one shaped by ideological expectations rather than divine revelation (Wright 2016:201).

This illusion recurs throughout Christian history. Whenever Christ is invoked to support empire, race, nation, or consumerism, the Church's witness becomes distorted. The Barabbas delusion functions as a recurring theological disorder that Anatolios (2016:224) calls "the absolutisation of what is immediate, in which political urgency or cultural proximity takes priority over cruciform discernment. The result is a domesticated gospel, stripped of its redemptive scandal and reshaped to serve human agendas.

The unravelling of the Constantinian legacy after Nicaea is now evident. Western Christianity, once officially favoured, experiences declining influence, doctrinal splits, and a significant epistemological crisis (O'Donovan 1999:78; Farley 1983:112). The reduction of the Church's public voice reflects not only cultural marginalisation but also a more profound loss of Christological clarity regarding Christ's identity and mission.

At the same time, the core demographic and spiritual centre of Christianity have moved notably to the Global South, where the Christian faith flourishes in postcolonial and multipolar environments (Newbigin 1989:45; Sanneh 1989:20). This contrast between the decline of Christendom and the rise of Global Christianity signals a missional change that cannot be understood by sociology alone but also needs theological perspective.

In this context, returning to Nicaea is essential. It should be pursued not as sentimental creedalism but as a theological realignment rooted in high Christology. The Nicene declaration of Jesus Christ as "true God from true God" provides not only a historical clarification but also an enduring theological compass for modern challenges (Kinzig, 2023:215–225). Its precise Christology opposes any effort to tame Christ for ideological, political, or consumerist ends.

Revisiting the Creed in this Kairos moment is therefore not an antiquarian exercise but an act of ecclesial repentance and prophetic renewal. Forged amid political volatility and doctrinal compromise, the Nicene confession speaks anew: the Church must re-centre its identity not on relevance, power, or tribal loyalty, but on the crucified and risen Lord of history, Jesus Christ, "true God from true God," who alone redeems and reconstitutes the people of God for faithful participation in the missio Dei.

1.2 Situating the "Barabbas Delusion" within contemporary Christological discourse

This study intentionally places itself at the intersection of Nicene Christology, political theology, contextual theology, and missional ecclesiology. Instead of examining the current Christological crisis from a single disciplinary perspective, it employs an integrated theological approach that encourages dialogue among biblical exegesis, creedal confession, and contextual discernment.

Recent work in Nicene retrieval theology has shown that the confession of Christ as "homoousios" with the Father was not merely a metaphysical clarification but also a safeguard for salvation and the church (Ayres 2007; Kinzig 2023; Anatolios 2016). The Arian controversy represented an ontological reduction of Christ that ultimately endangered both salvation and worship. Building on this insight, the present study argues that the modern Church faces a similar crisis: not through an open denial of Christ's divinity, but through the practical replacement of the crucified and risen Lord with ideologically convenient images of Jesus.

Engaging with political theology, especially O'Donovan (1999) and Stackhouse (2007), the article affirms that Christ is not a projection of political desire but its judge. It argues, however, that modern ideological

theologies often invert this order by subordinating Christology to the immediacy of politics. The concept of the Barabbas delusion serves as a diagnostic lens, revealing how nationalist, revolutionary, or consumerist urgencies can turn Christ into a figure of cultural utility rather than divine lordship.

The study also critically yet appreciatively addresses contextual, liberation, and Black theologies, recognising their vital role in confronting church complicity in injustice (Cone, 1970; De Gruchy 2024; Dube & Hankela 2025). The question is not whether justice is essential to the gospel, but under what conditions contextual identification risks becoming Christological substitution. The theological concern arises when Christ is reduced to a symbol of a particular struggle and separated from the cosmic, reconciling scope of redemption affirmed in the Nicene Creed.

From a missional perspective, the argument aligns with Newbigin's (1989) critique of Christendom and Niemandt's (2017) warnings about postcolonial distortions of the gospel. The decline of Western Christendom and the growth of Global Christianity create new opportunities for missional faithfulness, while also exposing the Church to new forms of ideological captivity. The Barabbas delusion describes this shared vulnerability by showing how different theological movements tend to replace the crucified Christ with a 'messiah of immediacy'.

Methodologically, the article advances by (1) examining the "Barabbas Delusion" through detailed biblical and narrative-theological analysis of the Passion accounts, (2) referencing Nicene Christology as a standard for theology, and (3) using this standard diagnostically on selected modern theological movements. The aim is not to morally judge these movements but to show how a single Christological disorder can develop across contrasting ideological contexts.

By framing the "Barabbas Delusion" as a recurring Christological crisis, comparable in theological significance, though not in form, to the Arian controversy, this study makes an original contribution to current Christological and missional debates. It argues that the Church's present fragmentation is not mainly doctrinal or institutional, but confessional: a failure to steadily confess and embody Jesus Christ as true God from true God in the face of ideological pressure.

2. Jesus and the "Barabbas Delusion"

2.1 A Biblical Christological crisis

The roots of today's Christological crisis are embedded in the gospel story itself. During Jesus's trial before Pilate, the crowd faces a choice between two figures with the same name: Jesus Christ and Jesus Barabbas (Mt 27:17, NRSV footnote). The crowd opts for Barabbas, a political rebel and symbol of nationalist resistance, instead of the crucified Messiah. This moment is not merely a minor detail of the Passion but a crucial theological rupture, revealing a common temptation to replace divine salvation with a politically convenient rescue.

Barabbas, who is ironically called "son of the father," represented messianic hopes rooted in violent resistance to Roman rule (Mk 15:7; Lk 23:19). In contrast, Jesus of Nazareth announced a kingdom "not of this world" (Jn 18:36), rejected violence, and embraced redemptive suffering. The crowd's choice thus revealed a profound misunderstanding of God's mission. As Wright (2016:201) points out, this was not merely a political mistake but a Christological disaster: a reversal of Israel's calling and the first sign of what can be called the "Barabbas Delusion".

Matthew deepens the irony by emphasising the shared name "Jesus," highlighting the tragic substitution involved. The people did not outright reject Jesus; they chose a false Jesus, a messiah shaped by ideological expectations rather than divine revelation (Mt 27:17). As Anatolios (2016:224) notes, this symbolises the core of idolatry: "the absolutisation of what is immediate," where human fears and desires are projected onto the figure of the Messiah.

This crisis is reflected in Jesus' symbolic actions during His final days in Jerusalem. The cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:12–14, 20–21) acts as a parable of covenant failure, showing outward vitality without faithful fruit. The subsequent cleansing of the Temple (Mk 11:15–17) confirms this judgment. Built as a "house of prayer for all nations" (Isa 56:7), the Temple had become a "den of robbers" (Jer 7:11), signalling the collapse of Israel's mission. Jesus's eschatological discourse in Matthew 24, delivered after He departs from the Temple, links this theological failure with the upcoming

judgment, ultimately leading to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Wright 2016:202).

The cry for Barabbas thus symbolises the height of a long theological decline. Luke's account emphasises the convergence of imperial pragmatism and popular zeal as Pilate yields to the crowd's demands (Lk 23:18–25). This alliance between institutional power and cultural expectation reveals the systemic nature of the delusion: it is not merely individual error but a widespread rejection of the crucified Christ in favour of messiahs who promise control, identity, or immediacy.

This episode acts as both a reflection and a warning for today's Church. The "Barabbas Delusion" reappears whenever Christ is reshaped to serve civilizational, nationalistic, or ideological goals. As O'Donovan (1999:78) emphasises, Christ is not a projection of human desire but its judge. When the Church replaces Christ's redemptive identity with cultural constructs, it repeats the theological error that caused Jerusalem's downfall, a pattern seen throughout Christian history, from the Constantinian union of Church and empire to modern examples like Christian Zionism, racialised theologies, and consumerist gospels.

In choosing Barabbas, the crowd prioritised immediate relevance over eternal significance. Against this recurring temptation, the Nicene Creed's declaration of Jesus Christ as "true God from true God" offers a precise correction. It affirms a Christ whose authority surpasses tribe and ideology and whose redemptive mission cannot be exploited by political or economic interests. Only by reclaiming this high Christology can the Church resist the Barabbas illusion and bear faithful witness in a fractured world.

2.2 Choosing between two Jesuses: Barabbas, Kenosis, and the shape of salvation

The Barabbas episode goes beyond mere irony to expose a fundamental Christological tension that resonates throughout Scripture. Matthew's deliberate use of the shared name "Jesus" (Mt 27:17, NRSV footnote) creates a theologically charged contrast: two competing visions of salvation that share the same name yet embody very different conceptions of power, redemption, and divine action. The crowd's choice is therefore not just between belief and unbelief, but between conflicting messianic visions.

This contrast has its theological counterpart in Paul's Christological hymn in Philippians 2:6–11. Christ Jesus, "though he was in the form of God," does not grasp power but empties himself (ekenōsen), taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Redemption is therefore revealed as cruciform self-giving rather than political assertion. Barabbas exemplifies the opposite soteriological logic: liberation through violence, identity secured through resistance, and salvation achieved by force.

This juxtaposition provides a kenotic standard for identifying authentic Christology. The Jesus approved by God is the one who rejects immediate power and relies on divine faithfulness for salvation rather than human control. This directly challenges the crowd's expectations and clarifies why Barabbas appeared preferable to the silent, suffering Christ. As Wright (2016:201–202) notes, Israel's long history of calling and failure ends here with the tragic choice of a messiah motivated by national urgency rather than covenantal faithfulness.

Paul's hymn further broadens the meaning of this choice. The exaltation of the crucified Christ does not result in the victory of a specific group, but in the acknowledgement that "every knee should bow" and "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:10–11). This universal perspective strongly opposes any attempts to limit Christ to tribal, national, or ideological boundaries. When read through Philippians 2, the "Barabbas Delusion" is revealed as a rejection of kenotic lordship in favour of immediate agency.

This exegetical framework establishes the standard theological pattern used throughout this article: whenever Christ is separated from the cross and reinterpreted as a tool for achieving political, economic, or cultural control, the Church finds itself once again facing Pilate's question, forced to choose between the crucified Son and a more convenient substitute.

3. The Nicene Creed, Christendom, and the contemporary Christological crisis

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) marks a pivotal moment in the theological and missional history of Christianity. Convened in response to the Arian

controversy, the council addressed a core question about the identity of Jesus Christ. In opposition to Arius of Alexandria's claim that the Son was a created and subordinate being, the Church affirmed that Jesus Christ is "true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance ("homoousios") with the Father." This high Christology was not just an abstract philosophical idea but a crucial safeguard for the gospel's redemptive truth and the Church's worship (Ayres 2007:154–162; Kinzig 2023:215–225).

Arius' position, although presented in terms of divine transcendence, ultimately weakens the ontological foundation of salvation. A Christ who is not fully divine cannot reconcile humanity to God or be the proper object of worship. The Nicene debate was therefore not just theoretical but highly missional: it involved the identity of the Saviour and the truthfulness of the Church's proclamation. By affirming the Son's co-eternity and consubstantiality with the Father, the Nicene Creed firmly rejected any reduction of Christ to a secondary or functional divine figure, maintaining both the exclusivity of divine revelation and the effectiveness of the atonement.

This doctrinal clarification occurred amid a rapidly changing political landscape. After the Edict of Milan (313 AD), Christianity shifted from marginalisation to imperial recognition. Although Constantine's involvement in the council and his support for "homoousios" have often been viewed with suspicion, recent scholarship suggests that his primary concern was securing doctrinal harmony amid social and political instability rather than enforcing imperial control over theology (Rukuni & Oliver 2019:3). In this context, the Nicene Creed aimed for theological unity without turning doctrine into ideological uniformity.

As such, the Nicene confession served as a confessional anchor, safeguarding the Church from cultural captivity and imperial manipulation. It resisted efforts to reshape Christ in line with prevailing philosophical or political agendas. It reaffirmed that the Church's ultimate loyalty is not to Caesar but to the crucified and risen Lord (O'Donovan 1999:78). The Creed thus established a normative Christological core that both defined orthodoxy and limited the Church's vulnerability to external powers.

In this context, the Nicene Creed provides a precise Christological correction to what this study calls the Barabbas delusion. While the delusion favours a Christ created by political power, tribal loyalty, or cultural ambitions, the Nicene confession declares the eternal Son who cannot be reduced to a mere functional saviour. As Anatolios (2016:223) notes, the Creed "liberates Christ from every attempt to reduce him to a functional saviour," maintaining Christ's lordship against all ideological distortions.

In contemporary contexts marked by theological pluralism, the collapse of Christendom, and the proliferation of ideological theologies, the Nicene Creed remains urgently relevant. It anchors Christian faith not in speculative metaphysics or civilisational myths, but in the confession that Jesus Christ is true God, incarnate for our salvation, crucified, risen, and reigning. Against competing messianisms – whether political, cultural, or religious – the Creed continues to speak with clarity: Jesus Christ is not a metaphor, a political instrument, or a cultural artefact. He is Lord.

4. Modern manifestations of the Barabbas Delusion: A diagnostic Christological framework

The modern resurgence of the 'Barabbas delusion' does not take on a single ideological form, nor does it appear consistently across different theological traditions. It seems that the identity and mission of Jesus Christ are often modified to serve specific political, cultural, economic, or community goals. The five movements discussed here, Christian Zionism, Apartheid Theology, politicised forms of Liberation and Black Theology, the Prosperity Gospel, and identity-based tribal Christologies, are therefore not considered morally or historically equal. Instead, each is seen as a distinct form of Christological substitution, demonstrating how the crucified and risen Christ can be practically replaced by a more manageable or ideologically convenient messiah.

These movements are chosen based on their methods. Together, they span a broad ideological range, from right to left, the Global North and South, and privileged to marginalised settings, showing that the 'Barabbas delusion' is not limited to any single political or theological stance. What they have in common is not moral purpose or social position, but a shared Christological

vulnerability: the tendency to elevate what is immediate, such as national survival, racial identity, political freedom, economic success, or cultural preservation, and to reinterpret Christ accordingly (Anatolios, 2016:225).

The evaluative criterion used throughout this section is explicitly Nicene and cruciform. Drawing on the Creed's confession of Jesus Christ as "true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father," the analysis examines whether Christ is recognised as the eternal Son whose redemptive work is cosmic, reconciliatory, and cross-shaped, or if He is reduced to a symbolic agent serving a specific cause. This criterion does not deny the validity of contextual theology or political engagement but seeks to identify the point where contextual identification becomes a Christological replacement.

Therefore, the critique provided is diagnostic rather than dismissive. Liberation and Black Theology, for example, are recognised for their prophetic critique of injustice and church complicity, while the theological danger of making liberation the primary Christological focus is also noted. Likewise, Apartheid Theology and Christian Zionism are analysed not just on ethical grounds but as instances of deeper Christological distortion where Christ is used to justify exclusionary political causes. The Prosperity Gospel and modern tribal Christologies are late-modern versions of the same logic, where promises of control, success, or cultural security replace the scandal of the cross.

Taken together, these movements show that the 'Barabbas delusion' acts as a recurring, cross-contextual Christological disorder. Under various pressures, the Church continues to face the question posed in Matthew 27: Which Jesus will be chosen? The answer given in each context not only highlights theological differences but also reflects the Church's ongoing challenge to confess and follow the crucified Lord in a world that constantly demands more useful saviours.

4.1 Christian Zionism: Eschatology, election, and the Nationalisation of Hope

Christian Zionism is a modern Christological distortion where biblical end-times beliefs are closely tied to nationalist ideas. Developing primarily within American evangelical circles, it regards the contemporary state

of Israel as the key fulfilment of biblical prophecy. It situates Christ's redemptive work within a framework of geopolitical renewal (Hagee, 2006). In doing so, it risks placing the universal authority of Christ's lordship behind the territorial interests of a specific nation-state.

At its core, Christian Zionism honestly reflects a strong commitment to Scripture's authority and a desire to affirm God's faithfulness to Israel, often in deliberate opposition to supersessionist views that have fuelled antisemitism. The theological challenge arises when election is separated from its Christological fulfilment and turned toward current political arrangements. The New Testament consistently sees Israel's calling in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom all divine promises are fulfilled with their "Yes" (2 Cor 1:20).

From a Nicene and Pauline perspective, the problem is not eschatological expectation as such, but eschatological displacement. When Christ's return is made contingent upon political sovereignty or territorial control, the crucified and risen Lord is subtly recast as a geopolitical agent. Stackhouse (2007:158) warns that such frameworks risk collapsing divine providence into military strategy, thereby conflating the kingdom of God with the fortunes of the state.

Here, the "Barabbas Delusion" becomes clear. Since the first-century crowd preferred a messiah who could challenge Rome militarily, Christian Zionism often expects a Christ whose authority is confirmed by political power rather than cruciform faithfulness. The outcome is a functional Christology where Jesus is doctrinally affirmed but effectively sidelined in favour of eschatological mechanisms that offer control and certainty.

This critique does not dismiss the theological importance of Israel, nor does it support replacement theology. Instead, it emphasises that all doctrines of election and promise should remain firmly focused on Christ and centred on the cross. Detached from the kenotic lordship affirmed at Nicaea, eschatology risks becoming another area where Christ is seen as applicable rather than publicly confessed as Lord.

4.2 Apartheid Theology: Covenant distorted into racial ideology

In the South African context, Apartheid Theology exemplifies a clear case of theological heresy disguised as scriptural justification. Drawing from

Reformed covenant theology, it portrayed white Afrikaners as a divinely chosen people, using biblical language to defend racial segregation. The 1974 Dutch Reformed Church report, "Human Relations and the South African Scene," cited Deuteronomy 32:8 to support "separate development" (Van der Merwe 2014:270; De Gruchy 2024:32). Within this framework, Christ became a guarantor of cultural purity and systemic oppression, a nationalist messiah who justified exclusion. This distortion echoes the "Barabbas Delusion" by presenting Christ as serving racial dominance, rather than being the suffering Servant of all nations. Currently, the ongoing ecclesial reluctance to critically engage with the effects and consequences of Apartheid Theology has led to a deadlock in South Africa's efforts to move forward.

4.3 Liberation and Black Theology: Between prophetic protest and Christological substitution

Liberation Theology and Black Theology arose as essential prophetic responses to the Church's participation in systemic injustice, colonial domination, and racial oppression. In environments where Christian faith had been used to justify exclusion and exploitation, these movements insisted that the gospel be heard from the perspective of the marginalised, rereading Scripture through the lived experiences of the poor and oppressed and revealing the moral failure of a Christendom that proclaimed salvation while denying justice (Cone 1970; De Gruchy 2024).

Biblically, these traditions drew strength from Jesus' inaugural proclamation in Luke 4:18–19, affirming that the kingdom of God has concrete social and political implications and that Christian faith cannot be separated from embodied suffering. In South Africa, Black Theology served as a vital theological disruption, challenging the theological legitimation of apartheid and reclaiming the gospel as a message of dignity and resistance (Dube & Hankela 2025:12–15).

The Christological risk here does not come from seeking justice itself, but from narrowing Christ's redemptive identity to a specific struggle. James Cone's statement that "Christ is Black because he suffers with the oppressed" (Cone 1970:120) effectively challenged white supremacist distortions of Jesus; however, when such identification becomes exclusive rather than just an analogy, Christ risks being limited to a particular socio-

political context instead of being recognized as the incarnate Son through whom all things are reconciled (Col 1:15–20).

From a Nicene perspective, the concern is not whether Christ aligns with the oppressed; He does, but whether His identity is permitted to go beyond every social and political category. The Nicene declaration of Christ as "homoousios" with the Father preserves this transcendence, affirming Jesus not merely as a liberator in history but as the eternal Son through whom history itself is redeemed. When liberation becomes the primary Christological focus, the scandal of divine self-giving risks being overshadowed by the urgency of political victory.

This tension remains sharp in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite political freedom in 1994, persistent economic inequality, social division, and moral disillusionment have revealed the limits of political redemption alone. In this environment, churches are again tempted to instrumentalise Christ as a guarantee of political legitimacy or as a symbol in ongoing identity conflicts. Dube & Hankela (2025:18) warn that when Christ is reduced to a tribal or ideological tool, the Church risks repeating the very logic it once opposed.

Here, the "Barabbas Delusion" becomes clear. As in Matthew 27, the choice isn't between faith and unbelief but between conflicting visions of salvation: one cruciform and eschatological, the other immediate and politically charged. When Christ is reinterpreted mainly as a revolutionary figure whose mission is fulfilled through social revolution alone, the Church risks choosing a Jesus shaped by historical urgency rather than the crucified Lord who judges, redeems, and transforms history.

This critique does not lessen the lasting significance of Liberation and Black Theology. Instead, it affirms their prophetic role in exposing injustice and insists that theology speak from within real suffering. What it opposes is the Christological shift that happens when liberation overshadows reconciliation, political identity takes precedence over catholicity, and the cross is sidelined to serve the cause, moments when the Church again stands before Pilate's question, not asking whether Jesus is helpful, but whether He is Lord.

4.4 Prosperity Gospel: The triumph of consumer Christology

The Prosperity Gospel is perhaps the most widespread and tempting form of the 'Barabbas delusion' today. It reimagines Christ as a provider of personal success, health, and wealth, thereby transforming faith into a transactional means of gaining divine favour. Kenneth Copeland (1974:15) states, "God's will is for you to prosper in every area," reframing salvation as upward mobility and comfort. C.J.P. Niemandt (2017:25) contends that this theology distorts the gospel into a commodified promise of satisfaction, disconnected from the cross and detached from discipleship. Here, Jesus is accepted but rebranded as a motivational figure whose power is judged by material results. The suffering Christ of Nicaea is replaced by a satisfying Christ who asks for nothing and gives everything. The Prosperity Gospel is *theologically and pastorally damaging* at a time of the development and expansion of Global Christianity in the Third World.

4.5 Identity politics and tribal Christology

In our fragmented global landscape, theological distortion often manifests as identity-based tribalism. Whether driven by nationalism, ethnicity, or ideology, these theologies limit Christ's lordship to a specific group or cause. In India, Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS have attempted to co-opt Christ into a culturally Hinduized framework (Thomas 2024:72). In the U.S., white nationalist movements have invoked a racialized Jesus to justify their exclusionary politics, as seen at the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally (Smith 2024:88). These "tribal Christologies" undermine the catholicity of the Church and weaken the universal message of the gospel (Mt 28:19). Just as the first-century crowd's cry for Barabbas shows, these movements prefer a saviour who defends heritage over one who dies for the world.

4.6 Conclusion

Across these theological expressions, the 'Barabbas delusion' recurs with a consistent logic: it replaces the crucified Christ with a more manageable messiah shaped by human fear, desire, or ambition. Whether it involves racial supremacy, economic prosperity, cultural protectionism, or political revolution, each distortion trades the scandal of the gospel for the immediacy of control. As Anatolios (2016:225) powerfully notes, "Idolatry is the absolutisation of what is immediate." The Nicene Creed's declaration

that Jesus is "true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father" directly challenges these simplifications. This approach refocuses the Church on the centrality of Christ. He is not as imagined through human projection, but as revealed in divine self-giving.

By resisting the illusion, the Creed functions as a theological immune system, protecting the Church's witness from ideological captivity. It urges the people of God not to create new messiahs, but to rediscover the one who reigns through the cross.

5. A missional reorientation through high Christology

The fall of Western Christendom alongside the rise of Global Christianity indicates not just an institutional change but a significant theological crisis. At its heart is a repeated failure to proclaim and embody Christ's full divinity. The Church's witness has been weakened whenever Christ is reshaped to fit cultural trends, political needs, or economic interests. What is needed is not only ecclesial reform but a theologically grounded reorientation toward the high Christology of the Nicene Creed as the core of the Church's identity and mission (Ayres 2007:163; Kinzig 2023:225).

The Creed's declaration of Jesus Christ as "true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father" ("homoousios") affirms that mission arises not from ideology or relevance, but from participation in the divine life revealed in the crucified and risen Lord. Far from nostalgic orthodoxy, this Christology provides the foundation for faithful and prophetic engagement in a diverse world. As Newbigin (1989:158) notes, mission flows from the joyful revelation of God in Christ, not from civilizational dominance or political victory.

Such a missional reorientation starts with repentance. For Western churches, this means turning away from the Constantinian tendency to use Christ for cultural influence and abandoning historic alignments of gospel, race, empire, and ideology. As O'Donovan (1999:78) reminds us, Christ is not the projection of human desire but its judge. The Nicene Christ is neither controllable nor tribal, but Lord of all, whose kingdom is not of this world yet transforms it through grace.

For churches in the Global South, where Christianity's vitality now thrives, the challenge is equally pressing. Inherited colonial theologies and imported Western distortions, such as the Prosperity Gospel, threaten to reproduce the same failures that led to the collapse of Christendom (Niemandt 2017:25; Thomas 2024:72). A Nicene-informed missiology counters these tendencies by grounding global Christian expression in the crucified Christ rather than cultural mimicry or religious consumerism. As Anatolios (2016:230) observes, the Church's holiness and transformed life serve as a testimony to the true confession of Christ.

This reorientation also requires a renewed vision for theological education. The Church's future depends not only on academic competence but on spiritual formation rooted in Christ's death and resurrection. Farley (1983:112) argues that theological education must cultivate "cruciform discernment", the capacity to distinguish the faithful Christ from ideological substitutes. Likewise, Laing (2009:54) stresses the formation of leaders shaped by doctrinal depth, contextual mission, and cross-centred maturity. Leadership grounded in "homoousios" seeks not influence but faithfulness.

Beyond institutional restructuring, this vision urges the Church to become once again a community shaped by the cross. Freed from being enslaved to cultural expectations, the Church is called to prophetic involvement in God's mission. In a post-Christendom setting characterised by fragmentation and ideological temptation, the Church cannot afford to downplay its Christology. Only the bold declaration that Jesus is "true God from true God" can restore its ability to resist distortion and proclaim hope. As Anatolios (2016:229) emphasises, "The Creed liberates Christ from the frameworks that seek to manage Him," and in doing so, frees the Church for mission.

The Nicene Creed is therefore not a relic of the past but a living theological guide. It allows the Christian Church to speak truthfully about Christ, to resist the 'Barabbas delusion' in its modern forms, and to proclaim a gospel that is both ancient and always new: Jesus Christ, true God from true God, crucified, risen, and reigning.

6. Conclusion: The Nicene Creed as a compass for a faithful future

This study introduces the Barabbas Delusion" as a practical diagnostic framework for understanding how modern Christological distortions influence contemporary Christological and missional theology. While the Arian controversy represented an ontological crisis concerning Christ's being, the current analysis highlights a related but distinct functional Christological crisis in which Christ's divinity is acknowledged but His lordship is practically overlooked.

Across different theological movements – whether nationalist, racial, revolutionary, consumerist, or tribal the same basic pattern appears. Christ is affirmed in principle but often reinterpreted in practice to serve immediate ideological goals. This does not deny Christ's divinity but shifts His mission, leading to multiple "Jesuses" who claim relevance, control, or protection. At the same time, the crucified and risen Lord becomes increasingly symbolic.

By examining the Barabbas episode as a key biblical example, the article demonstrates that modern church divisions reflect the Gospel's critical Christological moment: the choice between a messiah formed by human urgency and one revealed through divine self-sacrifice. The Barabbas illusion thus functions as a universal theological disorder, recurring whenever Christ is separated from the cross and absorbed into ideological agendas.

The originality of this contribution lies not in cataloguing ideological distortions individually, but in exposing their shared Christological logic and grounding it exegetically, creedally, and missiologically. In doing so, the study reframes the post-Christendom crisis as fundamentally confessional rather than merely cultural or institutional, calling the Church to discern anew which Jesus it will proclaim and follow.

Seventeen centuries after its founding, the Nicene Creed remains a vital theological guide amid cultural upheaval, doctrinal confusion, and missional uncertainty. The 'Barabbas delusion', whether expressed through nationalism, prosperity, identity, or tribal loyalty, persists whenever Christ is reshaped to serve human agendas. As O'Donovan (1999:78) reminds us,

Christ is not the projection of our desires but their judge. Each preference for familiarity over faithfulness, power over prophecy, or comfort over cruciform discipleship echoes the ancient cry for Barabbas.

Against this temptation, the Nicene Creed reaffirms its importance not as a monument to orthodoxy but as a living declaration. Its high Christology, "true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father," grounds the Church's identity and mission in divine revelation rather than ideological construct. It provides not institutional security but theological clarity, allowing resistance to cultural assimilation and ideological captivity.

The Creed also affirms the Church's catholicity: unity not in tradition or structure, but in the person and work of Christ. In a fractured world marked by nationalism, racism, and identity politics, the Nicene confession calls the global Church to embody the reconciliation achieved at the cross. It addresses both the decline of Western Christendom and the rise of Global Christianity, reminding the Church that its future lies not in reproducing Christendom but in recovering the missional essence of Nicene faith (Newbigin 1989:158).

The Church, therefore, faces a crucial moment. The main question is no longer how to remain relevant or regain power, but to whom it will confess. As Ayres (2007:163) argues, retrieving Nicaea is not about repeating formulas but reaffirming the theological integrity needed for faithful mission. To confess the Nicene Christ is to declare a Saviour who cannot be tamed, manipulated, or replaced, a Lord who rules not by force but through mercy, not through ideology but through incarnation.

The way forward is not about innovation but reorientation. Only by returning to where Nicaea stood and confessing amidst today's pressures what the Church first confessed amid its own struggles can the people of God resist the Barabbas delusion and faithfully witness to the scandalous hope of the gospel.

In a time of civilisational instability and theological confusion, the Nicene Creed remains the Church's compass. It orients faith, mission, and hope not by cultural drift, but by the lordship of Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and reigning, the only Saviour who is Lord of all.

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