

ANCIENT CREED EVALUATION
THE NICENE CREED

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History of the Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed has stood as a unifying defense for orthodoxy for seventeen-hundred years. In the early 300s Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria began to preach that Christ, God's Son, is a created being and "there was once when he was not"¹. Opposed by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria defended God the Son as co-eternal with God the Father. It ignited a furious theological debate within the church. Just prior to AD 325, when the roman emperor Constantine convoked an ecumenical council to be held at Nicaea, answering the Arian question, he wrote a letter to these two men rebuking them for prying into matters that were beyond human understanding². As the most influential creed in church history, it paved the way for Christians to worship God and affirm Him to be Trinitarian. This council, the first of its kind, set a precedent for the defense of orthodoxy through an authoritative channel. Following the same structure as the earlier Apostle's Creed, it mentions all members of the Trinity and gives a synopsis of the gospel narrative. Furthermore, it provides clear statements about Christ's and the Holy Spirit's divinity. It affirmed biblical doctrine and rejected other opinions as heresy. However, unlike the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed was never intended to be a personal statement of faith, instead its opening words 'we believe' offer the church a community statement "providing a summary of the One in whom Christian's put their trust"³. Due to the expanse of the

¹ Norman Tanner, *From the anathema against Arius and his followers at the end of 'The profession of faith of the 318 fathers' in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989), 5.

² Averil Cameron, *Eusebius, Life of Constantine* 2.67.1-3 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999), 117.

³ Marianne Hicks, *Loving the Questions: An Exploration of the Nicene Creed*, 2.

Roman Empire and therefore Christianity, it became more susceptible to misinterpretation. It was of the utmost importance that the Church addressed these issues in order to keep the faithful from being led astray and to defend the witness of the Gospel in the world. Nicaea emboldened church fathers like Athanasius to produce works such as *On the Incarnation* against an onslaught of Arianism that would continue to influence the empire for the next sixty years. It paved the way for a second ecumenical council held in AD 381. Constantinople I, called by emperor Theodosius I reaffirmed Christ's "essence with the Father"⁴. The resulting Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed reiterated the homoousios doctrine of Nicaea and became the normative statement of what the church believes. The Cappadocian Fathers produced a framework for the relationship within the Godhead. Nicaea was endorsed by Constantinople I and with that closed a period in church history that was dominated by the Arian controversy⁵. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral calls it "the sufficient statement of the Christian faith".⁶

Significance of the Nicene Creed

According to David Maxwell, associate professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, in order to be creedal Christians, the Nicene Creed must play a central role in church-life beyond being a text that is merely recited⁷. To be part of the church

⁴ John Chrysostom, *The Divine Liturgy of our Father Among the Saints*. (Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox press, 2005), 67.

⁵ Andrew Perry, *The Theological Achievement of the Nicene Creed*, 2.

⁶ Hicks, Marianne. *Loving the Questions: An Exploration of the Nicene Creed*, 2.

⁷ David Maxwell, *The Nicene Creed in the Church*. (St. Louis, Concordia Journal: Vol. 41, Article 3, 2015).

means to recognize an affiliation to something larger than oneself and something older than the modern nation-state. More than that however, the story “extends from the beginning to the eschaton and which hinges around the time when the Son, who is homousios with the Father, became incarnate for us and was crucified and rose from the dead”.⁸ It would however, be a mistake, to treat the Nicene Creed as an exhaustive list of theological doctrines. Though it does present doctrine, it does so, out of a controversy that had infiltrated the church’s testimony. The Nicene Creed is best understood as a plot summary of the biblical account. It encapsulates the minimum of the Christian belief and does not allow much room for personal interpretation. Justin Holcomb writes in his featured *Know The Creeds and Councils* series, the fact that “Jesus and the Holy Spirit are just as much God as the Father is a nonnegotiable part of Christianity”.⁹ At the same time, the Nicene Creed acknowledges and embraces the mystery embedded in the scriptures. Holcomb clarifies, “if Christianity would have agreed with Arius that Jesus could be a lesser god, if it had failed to defend monotheism, if it had fallen into the trench of professing three unrelated deities, it may have dissolved into the religion of Rome and its pantheons of false gods”¹⁰. It is therefore no understatement to say that demoting Jesus to a lesser deity would render His work on the cross meaningless.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Justin Holcomb, *The Nicene Creed: Where it came from and why it still matters*. (Orlando, Zondervan Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.

The New Testament and the Nicene Creed

The main objective of the creed was the defense of the Son's divinity. To profess the Lord Jesus Christ to be the "Son of God" (1 Jn. 4:15) or "begotten of the Father" (Heb. 5:5), the council reiterates biblical claims about him. Mario Baghos, Lecturer at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College writes "the creed then moves to a recapitulation of the main features of the divine economy; it is this very Son of God who is the agent of creation (cf. John 1:3), who assumed humanity suffered in the flesh, died, resurrected, ascended into heaven, and is coming again"¹¹. The debate was heated and intensely political throughout; however, defeating Monarchianism (the Trinity manifesting three different forms of a single divine Being), was critical in affirming Christ's co-equal and co-eternal position to God the Father.

Describing God the Son as 'Light of Light' in the formulation of the Nicene Creed should not be confused with the Hebrew superlative 'King of kings' or 'Lord of lords'¹². Rather, this eloquent description ascribes origin, like the Scriptures have done, about both the Father and the Son. Jesus says of Himself in John 8:12 "I am the light of the world" and the Book of James describes the Father as "the Father of lights" (1:17). Therefore, while using the same word, the council is implying that Father and Son are of the same substance and that the Son specifically has His origination in the Father.

A further agenda item included the recognition of the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together

¹¹ Mario Baghos, *The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed Part 2*.

¹² David Maxwell, *The Nicene Creed in the Church*, 4.

is worshiped and glorified who spoke by the prophets". Although the word homoousios is not used in this phrase, it describes the nature of God the Spirit. However, the word 'proceeds' does highlight the mystical and eternal relationship between them. This argument is elaborated, while the creed points to the Spirit's involvement in the ministry of the Old Testament prophets who spoke of the Son's incarnation.

Arians possessed a low-view Christology. Unlike the Nicenes, their understanding of Philippians 2:9 which reads, "Therefore, God has highly exalted him" is clear evidence that Jesus began with a lower status, but had then been raised to an exalted position. Maxwell summarizes the Arian argument by saying "if Christ's exaltation is a reward for his obedience, then he must not have exaltation by nature, and he cannot be God"¹³. However, for Athanasius and other Nicene theologians, Philippians 2:9 must be seen with the premise that Christ humbled himself first in the incarnation. Other passages follow the same logic for Arians. "The Father is greater than I" (Jn. 14:28) is another major piece of evidence for Arians, that Christ is ontologically inferior to the Father. However, Nicene theologians like Gregory of Nazianzus understand such declarations through the lens of the incarnation¹⁴. As the Holy Spirit's source, God the Son humbled Himself, to receive Him, not for his sake, but for ours.

¹³ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴ Edward Hardy, *Gregory of Nazianzus, Third Theological Oration*, (London: John Knox Press, 1954), 172-173.

Modernity and the Nicene Creed

Nicaea has not been exempt from criticism in the twentieth century. Theologians like Catherine LaCugna have asserted there to be a distinction drawn between the immanent and economic Trinity. More specifically, she charges Nicene theologians like Athanasius, of having attributed Christ's suffering only to His human nature and therefore, man's access is limited to Christ in his human nature, not God the Son¹⁵. However, such accusations resemble Nestorianism and do not rightly acknowledge the new situation the incarnation has brought about. Athanasius' position makes clear that not only Christ's human nature, but the Word suffered and died. Therefore he says "the incorporeal Word made his own the properties of the body"¹⁶. He sees a clear distinction between the incarnate Word and the Word itself. He reasoned that the only way for an impassible God to suffer is through the incarnation.

Another serious accusation levelled at the Nicene Creed is that it completely omits the Old Testament. Although creation and the prophets are mentioned in article one and three respectively, it leaves out Abraham, Israel and the Exodus. However, this too would be a false understanding of the scope of the creed. The fact that Christ rose from the dead "according to the Scriptures", specifically points to the Old Testament. Jesus rose again, just like the Old Testament prophesied he would. The most important hermeneutical presupposition in understanding the Nicene Creed is, that the Old Testament is about Jesus.

¹⁵ Catherine M. LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 42.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Letter 59 (to Epictetus). sec. 6 in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 572.

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