

The Creeds of the Church

Session 2—The History of the Nicene Creed

I. The Apostolic Age to the Nicene Age

After the apostolic age, the church endured various periods of persecution. By the second and third century it was officially illegal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire, punishable by death. Nevertheless, Christianity was becoming more and more popular. More and more people were joining the church.

All through the second century, the church was developing extra “positions” to meet perceived needs. They added “sub-deacons,” “acolytes,” “precentors,” “sextons,” etc. They also started using the language of “priests” rather than just pastors or elders. Before long, these became not merely functional, but bureaucratic layers of hierarchy. Certainly, by the time of the Edict of Milan, the term “bishop” had come to denote not only an elder (as in the New Testament) but an elder who oversaw all the other elders within a city.

Constantine was declared emperor by his army in 306 AD and defeated his last adversary in battle in 312. The legend states that he had a vision on the night before the battle saying, *in hoc signo vinces* (“in this sign, conquer”). At any rate, Constantine declared for Christianity at that point and codified his position one year later with the Edict of Milan.

II. The Arian Controversy

Arius was a priest in a district of Alexandria in the early fourth century. Arius had already been excommunicated once, for supporting a bishop named Meletius, who refused to accept back into communion those who had denied the faith under threat of persecution and then repented. Arius was himself received back into Christian communion in 313 AD. The controversy that bears his name began when his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, preached a sermon explaining the Trinitarian nature of God. Arius objected to Alexander’s theology, believing that Alexander was blurring the lines between the Father and the Son.

Arius began to teach and write that the Son was not equal with the Father, even in essence. Arius taught that the Son was God’s first created being, through whom God created everything else. The Son was invested with godhood at a later point in time and consequently subordinate to the Father (not just in his earthly ministry, or in terms of function, but in eternity and in essence).

This began a decade-long dispute between Alexander and Arius, which culminated in an appeal that Arius made to the Roman Emperor, Constantine. Constantine’s response was to call for a church-wide council to discuss the issue. This council met at Nicaea in 325 AD.

III. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

Nicaea was the first church-wide council to be held, though there had been many regional councils of a similar nature (cf. Acts 15). By this time, there were some 1800 bishops who presided over the churches in Roman cities throughout the Empire. All were invited to attend the council, though only 318 bishops actually did attend.

At this council, Arius presented his views and his writings were publically read. Alexander of Alexandria appointed one of his deacons to represent his point of view. This deacon's name was Athanasius. Athanasius did much more than simply represent Alexander however. Athanasius rigorously defended the biblical doctrine of the deity of the Son. He argued strenuously that the idea that the Son was not God denied such passages as John 1:1 and John 10:30, etc.

When Arius' views were clearly understood, they were resoundingly rejected. Arius himself was excommunicated until such time as he should repent of his heresy. The council then affirmed the statement of faith which we now call the Nicene Creed in order to clarify the church's position on the Son's deity.

IV. The Council of Constantinople (381 AD)

It would be nice to say that, after Nicaea, the doctrine of the deity of the Son was no longer in dispute. Unfortunately, heresies do not disappear overnight. Constantine himself was deeply influenced in his later life by an Arian-leaning bishop. After Constantine's death, the battles between Arian and "Athanasian" groups continued. Even after the Arians themselves were defeated, another, softer form ("semi-Arianism") persisted. Since the theological differences seemed minor, only careful theologians continued to debate the question.

The semi-Arians, who, although they rejected Arius' teaching that the Son was a created being, still refused to confess that he was of the same substance as the Father, had a big problem confessing the Holy Spirit to be equal with the Father. This led to the rise of a new heresy: Macedonianism, after Macedonius, its main proponent. They taught that the Holy Spirit was merely a biblical way of speaking about the movement of God, not a person in his own right.

The debate over this issue gave rise to the council of Constantinople in 381. 150 bishops gathered to discuss the question and, rather than creating a new creed, they edited the existing Nicene Creed by adding several statements about the Holy Spirit. The result is a Creed that strongly expresses the Trinitarian faith of the Bible.

The Text of the Nicene Creed

<u>Greek</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Latin</u>
Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἓνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀορατῶν·	We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;	Credimus in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium,
καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν Μονογενῆ τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων Φῶς ἐκ Φωτὸς Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντά ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί δι οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο· τὸν δι ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντά σταυρωθέντα τε ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου καὶ παθόντά καὶ ταφέντά καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς καὶ ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ καθεζόμενον ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ πάλιν ἐρχόμενον μετὰ δόξης κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς οὗ τῆς βασιλείας οὐκ ἔσται τέλος·	And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from the heavens, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;	et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unicum, de Patre natum ante omnia saecula; Deum verum de Deo vero; natum, non factum; ejusdemque substantiae qua Pater est; per quem omnia facta sunt; qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit, incarnatus est de Spiritu sancto, in Maria virgine homo factus, crucifixus pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, sepultus, resurrexit tertia die, ascendit ad coelos, sedet ad dexteram Patris; inde venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos ac mortuos, cujus regni non erit finis.
καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιόν τὸ Κύριον καὶ Ζωοποιόν τὸ ἐκ τοῦ	And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father,	Et in Spiritum sanctum, Dominum ac vivificantem a Patre procedentem, qui cum Patre et Filio adoratur

Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον
τὸ σὺν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ
συμπροσκυνούμενον καὶ
συνδοξαζόμενον τὸ
λαλήσαν διὰ τῶν
προφητῶν·

εἰς μίαν ἁγίαν καθολικὴν
καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν·
ὁμολογοῦμεν ἓν βάπτισμα
εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν·
προσδοκῶμεν ἀνάστασιν
νεκρῶν καὶ ζωὴν τοῦ
μέλλοντος αἰῶνος ἀμήν

Who with the Father and the
Son is together worshipped
and together glorified,
Who spoke through the
prophets;

in one holy Catholic and
apostolic Church.
We confess one baptism to
the remission of sins;
we look forward to the
resurrection of the dead and
the life of the world to come.
Amen.

et glorificatur, qui locutus est
per Prophetas;

in unam catholicam atque
apostolicam Ecclesiam.
Confitemur unum baptismum
in remissionem peccatorum;
speramus resurrectionem
mortuorum, vitam futuri
saeculi. Amen.