

The Creeds of the Church

Session 3—The Theology of the Nicene Creed

I. Review: Orthodoxy & Heresy

A. What is “orthodoxy”?

1. Literally, the word means “right teaching.”
2. With more nuance, it refers to that specific teaching that is central to the faith of the Christian church. So, this leads to the question: What beliefs are central to (necessary for) the faith of the Christian church?

Consideration of this question suggests a tentative hierarchy of doctrines:

- | | | |
|-----|---|-------------|
| a.) | The gospel | (Central) |
| b.) | The doctrines that support the gospel | (Primary) |
| c.) | The implicational doctrines | (Secondary) |
| d.) | Tertiary doctrines (often preferential) | (Tertiary) |

B. What is “heresy”?

1. The word derives from the Greek for “schism” or “division.” Its equivalent Latin word (corresponding to “orthodoxy”) is *heterodoxy* or “different teaching.”
2. By implication, heresy is the denial of orthodox doctrine. The severity of the heresy is determined by how close to central the doctrine is that is denied.
 - a.) Heresy should be differentiated from error. Error is the natural state of humanity until taught by the Spirit from the Word. But errors still persist due to our clouded thinking. Presumably, we will all have some admixture of error in our doctrine until we can be taught personally by Christ in the kingdom.
 - b.) An error only rises to the level of heresy if: (1) The error is a *central*, gospel issue; or (2) the error is *primary* and persistent, even when corrected.

C. Test cases.

How would we characterize the following positions?

1. Lack of belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Central)
2. Belief that the Trinity is different expressions of God’s being (Primary)
3. Belief in infant baptism (Secondary)
4. Belief that women should not be teaching pastors (Secondary)

5. Belief that the Bible contains God's Word but also some errors (Primary)
6. Belief that the earth evolved (Secondary)
7. Belief that only the Psalms should be sung in church (Preferences)
8. Belief in believer's baptism (Secondary)
9. Belief that only those baptized as believers can be saved (Central)

D. With these definitions in mind, we can understand the issues of Arianism (and Macedonianism) as Central and/or Primary issues. Therefore the creed is a distillation of the biblical truths of central and primary importance (with some secondary matters thrown in).

II. The Text of the Nicene Creed

*We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.*

So far, the Creed is taking language directly from the Apostles' Creed, with the single addition of the last phrase, which affirms the existence of angels and demons.

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,*

By explaining that the Son was "begotten...before all ages," the Creed is countering Arius' teaching that since the Son was begotten, he therefore had to have a beginning point in time. Arius taught that "there was a time when the Son was not." The Creed insists that begetting does not have to do with coming into existence but with the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Since God is eternally the Father, his begetting is eternal. The Son is eternally begotten.

Consider also the words of Hebrews 11:17:

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son.

Here, begetting certainly has nothing to do with the nature of Isaac's generation, but the nature of his particular relationship to his father. So it is with the Son of God.

*God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through him all things were made.*

These phrases are all somewhat redundant expressions of the divinity of the Son. Each is calculated to contradict the heresies of Arius. Of particular note is the phrase that declares the Son to be “of the same essence as the Father.” This was the phrase that Arius particularly disagreed with. It requires one to believe that the Son is equal to the Father in very nature.

*For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and was made human.*

With these phrases, the Creed explains what happened within time when the Son was incarnated as Jesus Christ. It provides thus for the passages where Jesus declares the Father’s sovereign control over all things, including his own life and ministry. As the incarnate Son, Jesus subordinated himself to the Father. As the eternal Son, he was equal to the Father. The Son is equal to the Father in nature and essence but subordinates himself to him in role.

*He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.*

These statements come almost right out of the Apostles’ Creed.

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
He spoke through the prophets.*

The Holy Spirit also is to be worshiped as God. He is involved in creation along with the Father and Son. But he is also distinct from the Father and Son in his role and specific ministry to humanity. These phrases, which were added to the creed during the Council

of Constantinople in 381, refute the Macedonianism of that era.

*We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We affirm one baptism for the remission of sins.
We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come.*

The final statements of the Creed express the catholic faith in much the same way as the Apostle's Creed did.

Amen.