

Nicene Creed – Line by Line

- Rev LTC Hap Arnold

Each Sunday at least, we say the Nicene Creed, normally following the exhortation to "... Let's turn to page 71 and say together the Nicene Creed, the expression of our Christian faith." So, what is it?

The Nicene Creed is the concise statement of belief for Christians in all regions and denominations. If you do not believe the Creed, you are not a Christian. Simple. So, what is it and what does it say?

The word Creed comes from the Latin word **Credo**, which means *I believe*. The Creed as adopted by the Church at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and modified at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD reads:

I BELIEVE in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man: And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried: And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures: And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father: And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets: And I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church: I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins: And I look for the Resurrection of the dead: And the Life of the world to come. Amen.

How did it come about?

The Nicene Creed is also called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, because the complete present form of the creed was defined by over three hundred bishops, representing the entire Christian church at the time, both East and West, including three from the Britannic Isles, in both Nicaea (325AD) and Constantinople (381AD). Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians all accept the ancient Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was written in 325AD and completed in its present form in 381AD. The Creed started as a response to the Arian heresy that denied Jesus was fully God. The Nicene Creed is about the Trinity, and recounts the historical realities of Jesus' life. The creed is a summary of the concepts and truths found in Scripture.

Here is the Creed broken down line by line with explanations.

I believe in one God

The Greek, Latin and proper English translations begin with "I" believe, because reciting the creed is an individual expression of belief. Some "contemporary" translations use "we" in an attempt to moderate the Creed. The creed states the assumption of the ancient Shema: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.

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the Father Almighty

Jesus frequently calls God "Father" in the Scriptures, and this usage tells us God is a loving God active within His creation. God the Father is the first person (Greek hypostasis, "individual reality"), or distinction, within the Godhead. The Father is the "origin" or "source" of the Trinity. From Him, came somehow the other two. God the Father is often called "God Unbegotten" in early Christian thought.

Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible:

If you are a Christian you must believe God created the entire universe, those visible and those invisible. Everything that is was created by God. Some early sects, the Gnostics and Marcionites, believed that God the Father created the spirit world, but that an "evil" god (called the demiurge) created the similarly evil material world. No.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,

Jesus Christ is the Lord of all. The title Lord has connotations of deity, since the Hebrew word adonai and Greek word kyrios (both meaning Lord) were applied to Yahweh in the Old Testament. Jesus is Lord and Master of all this creation. No tyrant, Jesus is Lord, teacher, counselor, friend and servant.

the only-begotten Son of God

Jesus is in a unique relationship with God the Father, His only Son. While Hebrew kings were sons of God symbolically, Jesus is the only Son of God by nature.

Begotten of his Father before all worlds

Begotten has the meaning of born, generated, or produced. God the Son is out of the essence of God the Father. Just as a child shares the same humanness as his or her parents, the Son shares the essential nature of God with the Father. Since God is eternal, the Son, being begotten of God, is also eternal. The Son is often called the Only-Begotten God in early Christian literature. Jesus was begotten of the Father before this world came into being and was present at its creation.

God of God, Light of Light

God the Son exists in relation to God the Father. The Son is not the Father, but they both are God. Just as a torch is lit one to another, the Father and Son are distinct, but both light to the world. Add in the Holy Ghost. Three in one. One of three. Not one, three, yet one. Scriptures have all three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in action at the same time at Jesus' baptism. Scripture has the Father and Son as two as well as one. In John's gospel, the Father and Son testify as two witnesses, not one (John 8:17-18). Related to this, St. Athanasius, writing during the Nicene era, said that the Father and Son are one as "the sight of two eyes is one," probably the best analogy. Another analogy is the musical C-chord. The C, E, and G notes are all distinct notes, but joined together as one chord, the sound is richer and more dynamic than had the notes been played

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individually. The chords are all equally important in producing the full, dynamic, sound of the chord, but the sound is lacking and thin if one of the notes is left out.

Very God of very God

God the Son is fully and utterly God, distinct but not separate from the Father. The ancient Arians believed that Jesus could be called god but not true God. In other words, they believed the Logos (the "Word," a popular title for Jesus in early Christian literature) was the first creation of God, necessary to mediate between the unknowable distant God (a concept borrowed from Platonic thought) and creation. Because God knew that the Logos would be perfect, the title god could be bestowed upon the Son "by participation," but "true God" was a title reserved only for the unknowable Father. This is the Ante-Nicene "Logos Theology" of St. Justin and Athenagoras taken to an unintended extreme.

Begotten, not made

Some today (Jehovah's Witnesses) and in the past (Arians) have suggested God created Jesus like God would an angel. The creed tells us that just as when a woman gives birth she does not create a child out of nothing, being begotten of God, the Son is not created out of nothing. Since the Son's creation from the Father occurred before time was created, begotten refers to a permanent relationship as opposed to an event within time.

Being of one substance with the Father

Father and Son share the same substance or essence of divinity. That is, the Father and Son both share the qualities and essential nature that make one in reality God. However, sharing the same substance does not mean they share identity of person. While certainly an inadequate example, think of three humans: they share a common nature, the essential qualities and essence of humanity, but are not the same person (although unlike the persons of the Trinity, humans do not share one will).

By whom all things were made

Through The Son, as Word of God, all things have been created. As Logos, the Son is the agent and artificer of creation.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven

Jesus came from heaven, from a reality other than our own. While the creed says "down," it is important to remember that our language is limited by our very narrow view of the time space continuum. Heaven is may or may not be "up," just as God may or may not be a biologically male father. This is the best we can do within our limits.

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And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man

God the Son became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He was born of a virgin through the Holy Ghost. God truly became human in Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is a real human being, not simply a spirit or ghost. The incarnation of God in Christ is the ultimate act of love, because rather than sending an angel or good human to accomplish the redemption and restoration of creation, God Himself became human.

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried

Jesus died on a cross, suffered as humans do, truly died, and was laid in a tomb. The Nicene Creed is more than just metaphysical speculation and includes important historical details. Notice that in addition to being "true God from true God," Jesus is fully human as well. The early Docetists, named from the Greek word *dokeo*, "to seem," believed Jesus only seemed to be human, but was not, and simply went through the motions of being human. Thus, when Jesus ate, they said, he only pretended to eat. Docetism was a very early heresy, addressed by the Gospel and Letters of St. John, as well as in St. Ignatius' letters in AD 110 AD.

And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures

Jesus was resurrected bodily as the Scriptures say. Just as Jesus truly died, he truly rose from the dead three days later. The bodily resurrection is the keystone of Christian doctrine and experience. However, Jesus was not just physically resuscitated (as was Lazarus), but rather his body was transformed at the resurrection. Rejection of the bodily resurrection is a rejection of the foundation of Christianity.

And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father:

Jesus left this world after His resurrection in a manner likened to a Saturn V launch. In ancient science, heaven was thought to be above the sky (notice how on a starry night the sky looks like a dome that one could pierce through, if one could get that high). In the Scriptures, Jesus is said to ascend to heaven. Whatever happened that day, Luke had to render the event into his own scientific paradigm, so he said Jesus "went up" to heaven. Again, we are limited by our language and own time space experience. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, i.e. sharing authority with the Father, and not just literally sitting next to the Father.

And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.

Jesus will come again to judge both the living and dead. His kingdom will not be destroyed, despite all of humanity's efforts. Jesus, like God the Father, is timeless. He is, was and always will be. Likewise His Kingdom.

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And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of Life

The Holy Ghost is the “breath” God breathed to give life to the world in Genesis. His light illuminates our path after our birth as Paul’s New Man in Christ. The original Nicene Creed of 325AD ended right here with the Holy Ghost. The remainder of the Creed was approved at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. However, most scholars believe that the text of the full creed dates prior to this council, and that the bishops simply gave their approval to a local creed already in use. The reason these additions were included in the Nicene Creed is that some 4th century Christians denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The names given to these heretics were Macedonians (named after a heretical bishop) or pneumatomachi (“fighters against the Spirit”).

Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son

The Son is said to be begotten, while the Spirit is said to proceed. Both words convey that the Son and Spirit are in special relationships to the Father, yet also fully divine.

Filioque Clause - the phrase "and the Son," in Latin, filioque, was not in the original text of the creed, but was added in Western Churches over time as a tool against Arians in the Gothic lands. There are theological and historical justifications for the addition or exclusion of the filioque. The Eastern Churches oppose the addition of the filioque, while Western churches accept it. Actually, despite current division on the matter, the issue has been pretty much theologically resolved. The Western Church acknowledges that the Father is the sole source within the Trinity, and admits that "proceeds from the Father and the Son" means "proceeds from the Father through the Son." The Western Church also acknowledge the procession through the Son is not metaphysical, but economic (i. e. describing the Spirit's actions). Also, Eastern Catholics (those Eastern Churches in communion with Rome) do not say the filioque, and remain in full communion with the Western Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches seem willing to allow the interpretation "through the Son," because it seemingly destroys the monarchy of the Father within the Holy Trinity. The filioque remains a major division between Eastern and Western Christianity, mainly because the Western Church added the filioque to the Nicene Creed without Eastern input. Much ado about nothing.

Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified

The Holy Spirit is God as are the Father and the Son, and is due the same worship as the Father and the Son.

Who spake by the Prophets

As the Holy Ghost gives us insight and understanding today, so it is believed He gave the same to the Old Testament prophets.

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And I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church

The creed affirms the belief in the Catholic (universal) Church, whose origins are ancient and historical, going back to the Apostles themselves. This is the universal church tracing its ancestry, roots and beliefs back to the apostles themselves. The ordained ministry claims an Apostolic Succession, wherein apostles appointed leaders, who themselves appointed new leaders to replace them, a process continuing to this day. Many churches claim this Apostolic Succession, however much of the so-called Apostolic Succession appears to be more properly termed Apostate Succession. Apostolic Succession is only valid with valid spiritual successors. Many lay their claim to Apostolic Succession based on a theological succession of adherence to the Word, rather than a pedigree of hand to hand contact, many a hand of which could be correctly said was at best misguided.

The claim to literal Apostolic line today is found primarily in the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

It should also be pointed out that deacons, priests and bishops do not have special powers. What they have are special responsibilities that are given to them along with their title. If they carry out those particular special responsibilities in the proper manner, they will achieve extraordinary results. An awesome responsibility and challenge that, if accepted and met, produces awesome results. If not, they are just substandard men in black or purple shirts.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins

Baptism or initiation has often been called Christening and the name we are given there is our Christian name, our last name being our surname. In Baptism, our life is dedicated to Christ. Hence the term Christening. Christians believe through the waters of baptism, God forgives us of our sins, and we are born again. This belief in baptism's saving power is ancient and universally acknowledged in the early Christian writings. If someone has been validly baptized in the name of the Trinity, then baptism has definitely "taken" and re-baptism is unnecessary.

And the Life of the world to come

The end of the Creed addresses the end of life here on earth and talks about the world to come. Christians have the promise of a bodily resurrection with a new and glorified physical body from Christ. The Creed affirms that bodily resurrection, as promised by Christ. Heaven is a place to look forward to, not to fear. Christ describes the experience of this world as "looking darkly, as through a glass." This came from the time when "glass" was translucent, rather than transparent. CS Lewis describes Earth as The Shadowlands, in comparison to the reality of heaven. We are not sure what to expect in heaven, except He will see us their tonight and we will not be disappointed.

Amen

So be it.