

“The Story of the Nicene Creed”

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Mason, Michigan

May 30, 2021 • Trinity Sunday

We’re going to take a look this morning at the origins and the lasting significance of one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith, the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is one of a dozen confessional documents that are found in our *Book of Confessions*, which are our primary theological foundations, second only to the Bible itself. The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of all Christian creeds; it is considered authoritative in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Reformed, and Presbyterian traditions. No other creed is used by so many different branches of the Christian family.

Yet this creed is somewhat difficult to comprehend. What does it mean that Jesus is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father”? Why does this creed stress those details? I’ve stumbled over those lines before. Maybe you have too.

This creed, like all other Christian creeds, did not emerge in a vacuum. There was a particular context, a specific period in history, some key issues, and some specific people that led to its creation.

Step back in time to the early fourth century. The time of persecutions is over. Christians are no longer dying gruesome deaths, or going into hiding, because of their refusal to perform sacrifices to the Roman gods and bow down to the Emperor. Emperor Constantine had brought an end to all that; he had granted Christians full legal equality and had returned property that had been taken from Christians.

But the Christian Church was not at peace. There were tensions and disputes that were tearing the body asunder. Christianity had grown up in different ways in different parts of the Roman Empire. There were different theological emphases, different biblical interpretations, different baptismal rites, different liturgical traditions, different ways of calculating the date of Easter. Most problematic was the fact that there was not one standard set of theological teachings about the most basic elements of the faith. The biggest question had always been: who, exactly, was Jesus? What was his relationship to God the Father Almighty, and how do you *describe* that relationship in words? This wasn’t just an academic exercise. Christianity was growing; it was in the process of becoming the dominant religion in the Roman Empire; new converts to the faith needed to know what the church taught. There were also heated debates; bishops were being elected or condemned on the basis of their theological views.

There was one particular church leader who was at the center of much of the controversy. His name was Arius. He was a presbyter who had been given pastoral responsibilities in one of the churches in Alexandria, in northern Egypt, along the Mediterranean coast. He was a popular preacher, partly because of his high moral character, partly because of his strong convictions, and partly because of his interpretive skill and intellectual rigor in the pulpit. But he held some views that put him in conflict with other Christian leaders. We don’t have any of his original writings – everything he wrote was later burned – but it appears that the controversy began when he heard a sermon in the year 318 given by his

bishop, a man named Alexander. Alexander evidently had said that Jesus was eternal, like God the Father. Arius objected, on the grounds that the scriptures say that the Father had *begotten* the Son (John 1:4; 1:18; 3:16; 3:18; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; 1 John 4:9; cf. Psalm 2:7). If the Father had begotten the Son, Arius said, then Jesus' existence had a beginning; and if Jesus' existence had a beginning, then that means there was once when Jesus was not. Jesus therefore, in Arius's mind, was not eternal, like God the Father. Arius thought that his bishop was teaching things that weren't true.

Arius called Alexander out, publicly. That led to a series of meetings and conferences. From Alexander's point of view, Arius's claim that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father deprived Jesus of his divine nature. Alexander was also concerned that a Jesus who was not eternal would not have been able to grant salvation to the human race. That had serious implications for every single Christian believer! So at local council, Arius was stripped of his responsibilities, and excluded from communion.

But Arius was popular. His followers vehemently objected to this use of church power to depose a man they saw as a virtuous and gifted teacher of the faith. Discord and division spread throughout the church. It extended far beyond Alexandria. There was a bishop in northwestern Turkey, near Istanbul, known as Eusebius of Nicomedia, who believed Alexander was just wrong. He and some other bishops wrote to Alexander, asking him to reinstate Arius. Alexander responded with a letter of his own, which explained the situation from his point of view. By this point supporters of Arius were holding protests and demonstrations in the streets, chanting verses from a hymn that Arius had written.

Ultimately, Emperor Constantine decided that something had to be done. The situation was wildly out of control, and for the good of the Empire he believed that this matter, and some other matters in the church where there were strongly differing opinions, needed to be resolved. Constantine sent invitations to every bishop throughout the entire Empire – all 1800 of them! – asking them to convene in the city of Nicaea, which is also near modern Istanbul, in the summer of 325. It was to be the first worldwide council of the Church. More than 250 bishops accepted the invitation, some from as far away as Britain. Among them were Alexander, from Alexandria; and Eusebius, from Nicomedia; and another Eusebius, from Caesarea in Palestine, who wrote a very important history of the church. Some reports say that Nicholas of Myra was present; we know him better as Saint Nicholas – that is, “Santa Claus.” Also in attendance was a young deacon from Alexandria named Athanasius, who later became one of the most important theologians of the church, sometimes called “Athanasius the Great.”

The Council of Nicaea convened on May 20, and lasted until August 25. Most of the first month was entirely focused on the controversy surrounding Arius. The debate was intense. People on both sides of the issue had “proof-texts” from scripture to support their position, and they had a tendency of ignoring or glossing over passages that were favored by their opponents. The result was that there was a lot of *talking* and not enough *listening*. But the benefit of the lengthy Council was that it forced people from all sides to sit down and look carefully at *all* the relevant biblical passages. Arius's supporters pointed to passages like these: “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28); Jesus is “the firstborn within a large family” (Romans 8:29); Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15). They stressed the absolute perfection and transcendence of God, arguing that everything else in all creation is set apart from God, *including Jesus*. They granted that Jesus had a special role in the creation and redemption of the world, but said that Jesus had been one of God's creations, and was not actually divine. Arius's opponents, on the other hand, lifted up passages like these: Jesus was “in the form of God” (Philippians 2:6); Jesus is “the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being” (Hebrews 1:3);

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8); Jesus said “the Father and I are one” (John 10:30); and – perhaps most importantly – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The opponents of Arius also argued that if Christ were not truly divine, then it would not be possible for us to “become the righteousness of God” in him (2 Corinthians 5:21), nor would we be able to lift up prayers to God in the name of Jesus Christ.

In the end, almost every single delegate to the Council was persuaded: Jesus Christ *is* divine, in the same way that God the Father is divine. They share the same essential nature. Jesus was *begotten* by the Father, but was not *created* by the Father. Jesus became human for our salvation. Humanity could not bring itself up to God; God had to come to us on earth. The delegates took a creed that was used in baptism at Eusebius of Caesarea’s church, and expanded it to include these key points. They also added a sentence rejecting a few of Arius’s key claims which they believed were not supported by the scriptures. This revised creed received almost universal acclaim by the delegates; all but two of them agreed to sign it. Those two were removed from their posts, and excluded from communion.

That creed was *not quite* the Nicene Creed as we know it today. There was still widespread support for Arius and his views, even after the results of the Council were communicated to all the churches. Indeed, there were many Christians who were suspicious of the lines of the creed that used non-biblical language, like “being of one substance with the Father.” The result was that there was another fifty years of controversy, during which time Arius and his supporters came back into power. Eusebius of Nicomedia even baptized Emperor Constantine! Some of the most outspoken opponents of Arianism were deposed, including the young Athanasius, who by that point had succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius devoted his entire life to defending the affirmations of the Council of Nicaea. What he ultimately realized was that the biggest objection people had to the creed that the Council had adopted was its claim that God the Son was “of one substance” with the Father. People felt that that diminished the very different roles that God the Son and God the Father have in our salvation. The solution that was ultimately adopted – at a *second* council, in Constantinople, in 381 – was to expand each part of the creed and modify some of its wording. The section about God was expanded to include mention of God’s creation of heaven and earth; the section about Jesus was lengthened to include more details about his birth and death, and to clarify that he is God’s *only* Son and that he was begotten before God created anything; the section about the Holy Spirit was greatly expanded, stressing that the Spirit is also to be worshiped and glorified. This new creed is what we call the “Nicene Creed.”

So the Nicene Creed, as I said at the outset, did not emerge in a vacuum. There was a particular context, a specific time in history, some key issues, and some specific people that led to its creation. But it did, ultimately, win the hearts and minds of Christians across the entire Empire. It remains to this day the most universally accepted of all Christian creeds. Even some evangelical churches have stopped using their modern creeds and gone back to using this ancient one. There is a slight difference in wording between Eastern and Western churches – in the section about the Holy Spirit, whether the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father and the Son” (in the West) or just “from the Father” (in the East). Churches that do not affirm the doctrine of the Trinity – like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (i.e., the Mormons) – reject some portions of this creed. But, on the whole, if somebody were to ask you, “What do Christians believe?” you could point to this creed. It remains to this day the single best effort, *ever*, to articulate the faith of the worldwide Christian church.

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