

CHURCH HISTORY: THE NICENE CREED

Ancient Greeks believed in a wide variety of gods and goddesses – beings who fought one another, were immoral, dishonest and only partly powerful. But eventually Greek philosophers began to teach that there was a supreme God, a being who had all power, wisdom and perfection. Since there could be only one being who had all power, there was only one supreme God. Since perfection does not change, this God did not change. This God was above all other gods, not swayed by human-like emotions, not affected by physical things that change.

This philosophy eventually affected Christianity. At first, it was a convenient tool for the gospel. Christians who were criticized for having an invisible God could point out that even sophisticated Greek philosophers believed in an invisible, omnipotent God. The Christians then claimed to teach more information about this God whom the Greeks knew only imperfectly.

But sometimes it worked the other way around. Some Christians began to assume that the Christian God was like the philosophers' God – he was perfect, unchangeable, totally unlike physical beings. Such a perfect God would have nothing to do with flawed human beings. Nor would an unchangeable spirit being have anything to do with the changing world of matter.

So some Christians began to speculate that the supreme God created angels, and that these angels were the ones who created the physical world and interacted with the physical world. They were intermediaries between physical humans and God. In this way of thinking, Jesus simply became an intermediary, more like an angel than like God.

The Arian heresy

One of the people who was affected by this philosophy was Arius, an elder in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. He taught that there was one Creator, who created the Logos, the Word or Wisdom of God, who in turn created everything else. This Logos became Jesus Christ.

According to Arius, Jesus was the Son of God because God had created him. Moreover, because he is the closest thing to God that we can relate to, he could also be called God even though strictly speaking, he was not God. He was a unique created being, created even before time itself was created. He was an intermediary between the perfect spiritual world and the ever-changing physical world.

But Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, said that the Word was eternal, not created. "If asked to draw a line between God and creation, Arius would draw that line so as to include the Word in creation, while Alexander would draw it so as to separate all of creation on one side from the Father and the eternal Word on the other" (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 161).

Alexander tried to remove Arius from his position. However, Arius was a popular church leader. The people of Alexandria, as well as several other church leaders, greatly respected Arius for his strict morality, his self-discipline and his teaching abilities. The people took to the streets in public demonstrations, chanting slogans of Arius.

Christians had been debating theology and the nature of Christ for centuries. But now there was a new element in the debate: the Roman Emperor Constantine. Constantine had just finished a war to unite a divided empire. He did not want religious debates to divide the people again, so he ordered all the Christian bishops to meet together to decide the issue.

The emperor was not then a Christian, but he was favorably disposed toward Christianity, and he wanted this rapidly growing religion to support peace within the empire. Constantine thought that an official council could settle the matter once and for all. So he called a meeting in the year 325 at the city of Nicea, in Asia Minor near Constantinople.

About 300 bishops came, almost all from the Eastern Empire. The bishop of Rome could not come because of his age, but he sent some elders to represent Italy. “Most of the bishops from the Latin-speaking West had only a secondary interest in the debate, which appeared to them as a controversy among eastern followers of Origen” (Gonzalez, p. 164). Even many of the Eastern bishops were not too concerned about the controversy.

The Nicene Council

The bishops met to discuss the nature of God and Jesus Christ. They reviewed previous controversies and the new arguments of Arius and his supporters. Most of the bishops could not accept the idea that Jesus was a created being. When they worshiped Jesus, they did not worship a creature – they worshiped God. They were saved not by a created being, but by God. They were convinced that Scripture taught that Jesus Christ was God.

So the bishops wrote a statement of faith concerning what they believed about the Son of God. They wanted to make it clear that they believed Jesus Christ to be fully divine, not created. So they said he was “God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father.” The last portion was particularly significant in the debate: “of one substance” is a translation of the Greek *homoousios*, which means of the same substance, same essence, or one being. What God is in his essence, the Son of God is, too.

Two bishops at the council could not agree with this statement, and the council deposed them. The controversy was seemingly resolved, Constantine was happy and everyone went home.

But one of the chief supporters of Arius happened to live near the emperor, and it was not long before he was able to convince Constantine to support the Arian idea. (Constantine wasn't a Christian and had no training in theology. He was more interested in political stability than in any particular doctrine.) With Constantine's support, some new bishops were appointed who supported the teachings of Arius.

Several smaller councils approved Arian statements of faith. Nicene supporters were thrown out of office, banished or killed. For several decades, theological and political intrigues swirled, opinions went back and forth, bishops were reinstated, deposed and reinstated again. The tides of opinion changed quickly as nine emperors fought for power over the next 50 years.

In time, more of the issues were given a fair hearing. Nicene supporters made it clear that they believed the Father and the Son to be distinct, even though of one substance. They supported their views from Scripture.

The Holy Spirit also came under discussion. The Nicene council had merely said that "we believe in the Holy Spirit," without saying anything about who or what the Spirit is. Arius had taught that the Holy Spirit was a created spirit being; bishops such as Athanasius of Alexandria made it clear that the Holy Spirit is divine in the same way that the Son is.

Council of Constantinople

Eventually, Theodosius became emperor, and the council of Constantinople was called in 381. Theodosius expelled the Arian supporters, and Nicene bishops were appointed. The council agreed that Jesus is fully divine, eternal, not created. They accepted the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They taught that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there is only one God – one God in three *Persons*.¹ They did not explain how this is so – they just said that it *is* so. They felt compelled by Scripture to come to this conclusion.

The result is a creed, called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, more commonly known by the shorter and more pronounceable name Nicene Creed. It is based on the creed of Nicea, reportedly edited at the council of Constantinople, but first seen in its final form 70 years later. Notice in it some phrases from Nicea, quoted above, and some phrases similar to the Apostles'

Creed:

We believe in one God the Father, the Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son).² With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one, holy, catholic³ and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

(Translation by the International Consultation on English Texts, 1975, published in appendix A of Gerald Bray, *Creeeds, Councils and Christ*, InterVarsity Press, 1984.)

The Nicene Creed is accepted by almost all Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and it offers a basis for unity. Unfortunately, however, it has also been at the center of a controversy between Western and Eastern churches (see note 2). The church has its flaws. Doctrinal controversies are not always resolved in a Christlike way. The Nicene Creed is testimony to that. And yet truth wins in the end. Scripture supports the teaching of the Nicene Creed.

¹ *Persona* is a Latin word that originally referred to masks worn by actors on a stage. Theologians adopted the term to indicate three ways of being, not to imply three separate beings. The Greek term is *hypostasis*.

² The words “and the Son” were not in the Greek text of the creed, but they were added later in the Latin. The Eastern churches objected to this addition because it had not been approved by the council.

³ *catholic* (with a small c) means “universal” or “worldwide.” In the creed, it is not a reference to the Roman church, which later claimed to be universal.

Nicene Myths	Truth
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Roman Catholic Church called the Nicene Council to enforce Trinitarian teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Rome did not call the council and was poorly represented.▪ The council did not have a complete doctrine of the Trinity, and gave scant mention of the Holy Spirit.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Constantine forced the council to accept a pagan doctrine.▪ Constantine forced all Christians to accept the Nicene Creed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Arius' idea of God was shaped by the ideas of pagan philosophers; the orthodox view was based on Scripture.▪ Constantine cared more about uniformity than doctrine, and he soon supported the Arians and tried to enforce Arianism.