

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

A 1700 Year History



Athanasius

Session 1: Early Church Unity

Introduction

We say the Nicene Creed twice a month in church. Many Christians have said it their whole life. On a scale of 1–10, how well do you understand what you’re saying?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>just going through the motions ...</i>				<i>the basics but not the details ...</i>				<i>I could teach a class on it ...</i>	

The Christian Church around 325 A.D.

Historical Explanation

Two hundred and fifty years had passed since Pentecost. The Christian church had spread to all the major and minor cities of the Roman Empire, throughout the Middle East, and even to India. In most urban areas Christians made up no more than 5 percent of the population and probably considerably less in the countryside. During this period, the church had become less Jewish in its ethnic makeup and predominantly Greek-speaking within the Roman Empire. A significant body of Christian literature had been penned, and adherents to Christianity could be found at all levels of society.

Christians did not take part in civic religious rituals, attend theatrical performances, or go to the gladiatorial or wild beast fights. Instead, they spent a considerable amount of their free time in one another’s company. This made them a target of rumor and speculation. And since the imperial government had made it clear early on that their local groups (*collegia*) were not to be legally recognized, Christians also became easy scapegoats in their communities. Emperor Nero (ruled A.D. 54–68) used this as a convenient excuse when he rounded up and executed Christians in Italy, blaming them for the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64.

From then on, anyone who became upset by a Christian neighbor could report that person to the government, and a trial and execution often followed. But the government as a whole did not go hunting for Christians again until the mid-third century. Then, with the empire reeling from inflation and military setbacks, Emperor Decius (ruled 249–251) ordered everyone to perform pagan sacrifices “for the safety of the empire.” Christian leaders were singled out for compliance, and those who refused were executed. Although persecution came again under Emperor Valerian (ruled 257–260), the worst of all formal persecutions took place at the beginning of the next century—the Great Persecution of Diocletian (ruled 303–313).

Read 1 Peter 5:9. In physically dangerous situations like these, why might it be comforting for Christians to make use of a creed?

Mention the Nicene Creed in your response: “Redeemer is such a small congregation. I feel lonely. Being a Christian in our world today makes me feel so isolated.”

Leadership & Organization in the Early Church

Historical Background

Despite the setbacks brought about by persecution, the church continued to grow. Following these persecutions, imperial edicts ordered some restitution to Christians whose property had been seized. This confirms that despite the lack of any official standing as a group, the church had its own church buildings and cemeteries by this period. A uniform church structure had also developed, with the Christians in each city being led by a single head called the bishop. He was assisted by priests who conducted worship at numerous locations and deacons who oversaw the church’s charitable work in the congregation and the community. In some rural areas, a chorepiscopus, that is, a country bishop, was appointed. The bishop of one of the older and larger cities of a region would serve as a regional leader. By the fourth century, the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch in Syria, and Rome (and eventually the new eastern capital of Constantinople) would be called patriarchs and would oversee larger regions. Members of the clergy within a city would meet regularly to discuss their work, and bishops within a region would likewise meet in council. While these meetings originally were held ad hoc when special problems arose, eventually they became regularly scheduled meetings, called *councils* in Latin and *synods* in Greek.

Compare the church offices of bishop, priest, deacon, etc. to the church offices we have today.

Agree/disagree: “A hierarchical system of church offices is bad. It undermines my personal freedom and the freedom of my own local church.”

The Apostles’ Creed

Historical Background

Before becoming a member of the church through baptism, adults were required to study the church’s beliefs and teachings. This catechetical study involved learning the meaning of short summaries of Christian teaching. These summaries, which we call baptismal creeds, were memorized to ensure that new members understood and agreed with the common faith of the community. The baptismal creed used in the city of Rome came to be referred to as the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Christian church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

Evaluate the Apostles’ Creed. What makes it good? What makes it lacking?

Baptismal Creeds and Rival Churches

Historical Background

Already in the second century, however, some teachers and communities began deviating from accepted teaching and left (or were expelled from) the larger church. They set up opposition communities, claiming the superiority of their own teachings. A number of these groups separated into rival church bodies. To distinguish itself from these breakaway groups, the larger church came to call itself the catholic (universal) church.

During the persecutions, some Christians caved under the pressure to perform sacrifices. Many later repented and wished to be readmitted to the church. The catholic church leaders welcomed back such Christians after an appropriate period of repentance. Those who disagreed, wishing to keep the church “pure” of such apostates, formed new breakaway churches. The Novatians (centered in Rome), the Donatists (primarily in northwest Africa), and the Melitians (in Egypt) all became rival groups that lasted for several centuries.

Empathize and respond: “I’m sick of all these Christians who have all these doctrinal differences. They are so internally divided! It seems like they just argue with each other all the time.”

How would you handle a situation today when a person wants to rejoin the church who has previously left the church and denied the faith?

Conclusion

“Deeds, not creeds.” Respond to this common view by making the case for why we really do need to have creeds.