

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

A 1700 Year History



Athanasius

Session 4: The Content & Use of Nicene Creed

Introduction

In your small groups, give your first impression to churches that say, “We don’t have creeds. We have the Bible.”

The Council of Nicaea

Historical Explanation

Constantine called the bishops to meet in A.D. 325 at his summer palace in the city of Nicaea, located on a beautiful lake about 60 miles southeast of present-day Istanbul. Some 250 or more bishops attended, along with their assistants and other priests and observers. The bishops began meeting in late May or early June, with the emperor himself arriving on June 14. The council adjourned in August after the bishops had remained for the festivities celebrating the 20th anniversary of Constantine’s rule. Although detailed minutes of the meetings have not survived, we can piece together what took place from the accounts of several participants and other early church historians.

Arius and Alexander were both present. They and their supporters were given opportunities to speak. Eusebius of Caesarea also presented a creed for consideration, but it was rejected for being insufficiently detailed on the areas of controversy. After days of additional discussion, a creed was adopted on June 19, and some 230 bishops signed their names to the document to show their agreement. Only a handful of bishops, including Arius, refused to sign and were deposed from office.

Read Eusebius' creed below. It seems to be very orthodox. Take a side and defend it: "It is proper/not proper to reject a doctrinal statement that sounds biblical on the grounds that it is insufficient."

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, Only-begotten Son, first-born of every creature, begotten from the Father before all the ages, by whom also all things were made; who for our salvation was made flesh, and lived among men, and suffered, and rose again the third day, and ascended to the Father, and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

And we believe also in one Holy Spirit. We believe each of these to be and to exist, the Father truly Father, and the Son truly Son, and the Holy Spirit truly Holy Spirit, as also our Lord said when he sent forth his disciples to preach, 'Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' [Matt. 28:19]. Concerning which things we also confidently affirm that this is what we maintain, how we think, and what we have held up until now, and that we will maintain this faith unto death, anathematizing every ungodly heresy.

We testify that we have ever thought these things from our hearts and souls, from earliest memory, and now think and confess the truth before God Almighty and our Lord Jesus Christ. We are able to provide evidence that will assure you that even in times past we have believed and preached the same.¹

Our society produces many examples of sermons, podcasts, and songs that use biblical ideas and terminology but in a vague or superficial way. Should we like or share such ideas, or is there some danger in doing so? Defend your answer.

The Contents of the Creed

Compare below the texts of the Apostles' Creed with the Nicene Creed of 325. (You will probably notice immediately that the creed approved by the council in 325, as given below, is not identical with the Nicene Creed we recite in church today. That difference will be discussed later in this study.) **Circle** the phrases in the Nicene Creed of 325 that were included to clarify the proper teaching in opposition to Arius.

¹ Glen Thompson, "Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his church regarding the Nicene Creed," fourthcentury.com.

The Apostles' Creed	The Nicene Creed of 325
I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things seen and unseen.
I believe 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.	And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being [<i>homoousios</i>] with the Father. Through him all things were made, the things in heaven and on earth. For us and for our salvation he came down and was incarnate, and became truly human. He suffered; on the third day he rose again; He ascended into heaven; 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.	And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.
	The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was a time when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence or a creation or changeable or alterable.

The last paragraph of the Nicene Creed of 325 consists of a series of condemnations (called *anathemas* in Greek). Discuss reasons for why that paragraph was added, instead of just stating the correct teaching positively.

Summarize Nicene Christology (the doctrine of who Christ is) as fully yet concisely as possible:

Conclusion

In light of the content of the Nicene Creed, give a fuller response to the churches that say, “We don’t have creeds. We have the Bible.”