

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

A 1700 Year History



Athanasius

Session 7: The Legacy of the Nicene Creed

Introduction

Read selections below from Robert Wendland's article, "We Still Confess: The Council of Nicaea (325)." Although the Nicene Creed seems quite abstract, **brainstorm** some reasons in your small groups for why it is practical today.

The Council of Nicaea was no abstract theological seminar. It was a gathering of shepherds, summoned to defend the faith God delivered to his Church. Their context was different, but their struggle was familiar: to preserve the truth that there is one true, triune God from eternity to eternity; to proclaim that humanity's forgiveness and eternal life depend on God himself—truly and fully—becoming human, Immanuel, despite all human logic and sophisticated denial; and to speak with one biblically informed voice in a fragmented world.

We still confess what they confessed: one Lord Jesus Christ, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father. These are not merely the words of a past generation. They are the voice of the church through the ages, declaring the eternal truth of God who became man for our salvation.

In our time, as in theirs, the temptation persists to accommodate the faith to the spirit of the age, to trade clarity for inclusivity, and to downplay doctrine in favor of experience. But the legacy of Nicaea calls us to testify faithfully to the truths plainly revealed in God's Word. It calls us to a bold and joyful confession of Christ crucified and risen, fully divine and fully human, the only name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.¹

¹ Robert Wendland, "We Still Confess: The Council of Nicaea (325)," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 122, no. 4 (Fall 2025), 303–304.

The Use of the Nicene Creed after A.D. 381

Historical Explanation

As we have seen, the 381 version of the Nicene Creed was first approved at a council in Constantinople, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire that was increasingly becoming one of the most important centers of the Christian church. In Constantinople, within the next century, this creed became the normal creed used for baptisms and then part of the communion liturgy. By the sixth century it was used for both baptisms and the communion liturgy by all of the Greek-speaking churches of the Eastern Roman Empire and their daughter churches—the churches we call Orthodox yet today (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Serbian Orthodox). The Nicene Creed is usually recited near the beginning of the communion portion of the liturgy, after the Gospel reading (and after the sermon, if there is one).

In the Latin West, the Apostles' Creed retained great importance, but a Latin version of the Nicene Creed of 381 came into common use as well. During the fifth century, the Western Empire was being overrun by Germanic invaders, many of whom were Arian Christians. This was most likely one of the reasons that the expanded Nicene Creed of 381 saw increased use in the West. In 589, a council at Toledo in Spain resolved that “before the Lord’s Prayer is said, the creed shall be chanted aloud by the congregation; this will be a witness to the true faith and will enable the people to approach and partake of Christ’s body and blood with hearts cleansed by faith” (Canon 2 of the Council of Toledo, 589). In the following centuries, while the threat of Arianism gradually died out, the practice of reciting the creed of 381 after the Gospel reading and before the Lord’s Prayer spread throughout the western Latin church.

What do you think of the rationale for reciting the Nicene Creed from the Council of Toledo?

A Further Development: The Filioque Controversy

Historical Explanation

Sometime in the centuries immediately following the council of 381, another phrase was added to the Third Article of the creed. After stating that the Holy Spirit was “the Lord and giver of life,” the creed stated that he “proceeds from the Father,” wording taken directly from John 15:26 (KJV). Western theologians like St. Augustine, however, citing verses such as John 16:14-15, explained that the Son was also involved in the procession of the Spirit. Therefore, the Latin version of the creed’s statement was augmented by the single Latin word *filioque* (“and the Son”). It thus read that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

Theologians in the Greek-speaking east did not question the Son’s involvement with the Spirit. They did not see the Latin addition as wrong, but they preferred to say that the Spirit proceeded from the Father through the Son. While the new addition was used at times in the

West in the later fourth and fifth centuries, it wasn't until about 800 that its use became more widespread. Meanwhile, the Greek-speaking east continued to recite the creed without the addition. Over the centuries the Eastern and Western churches continued to drift further apart culturally and politically. When the two churches experienced times of tension and anger, this small addition to the creed became an easy weapon to throw against the opposing side. To this day, the added phrase remains a point of dispute and disagreement between the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Both sides had drifted apart well before the Great Schism of 1054, but the *filioque* controversy was one factor (among many) involved.

Read John 15:26 and 16:14–15. The difference between the two statements, “The Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son,” and “The Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son,” might seem to be inconsequential. How does the former better emphasize the full deity of the Son compared to the latter?

Agree/disagree: “Even if the West was theologically correct, they didn't have the right to change an ecumenical creed by themselves. They should've waited until the East was ready for it.”

Pick a side and complete your rationale:

1. “Our Lutheran sister synod in Ukraine should use the Nicene Creed with *filioque* in it because ...”
2. “Our Lutheran sister synod in Ukraine should use the Nicene Creed without *filioque* in it because ...”

The Athanasian Creed

Historical Explanation

Sometime in the late fifth or early sixth century, a much more elaborate statement about the Trinity was composed, probably in southern France. Often the name of Athanasius was attached to it, but since it was composed in Latin a century or more after his death, he was only the inspiration for its formulations. It begins with the words “Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all, keep the catholic faith.” Since the first two words in Latin are *Quicumque vult* (“Whoever wishes”), that Latin phrase is often used as a more accurate name for this creed.

The Athanasian Creed is made up of 44 sentences, almost all about the relationship between the members of the Trinity. It became a standard document in the Latin church, although its

length kept it from being recited regularly in church services. It states unequivocally that “unless a person keeps this faith completely and entirely, he will undoubtedly be lost forever.” It also combines both positive and negative statements to emphasize that the biblical teaching about the Trinity must be believed, even though that teaching does not agree with our human logic. For example, “The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal; yet there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being.” Thus, it clearly spells out in great detail the same theology that was approved at Nicaea in 325, at Constantinople in 381, and in the writings of Athanasius. In this sense it is truly an “Athanasian” creed. Today this creed is sometimes recited in our services on Trinity Sunday.

The titles of the three ecumenical creeds—the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian creeds—are all interesting. How can the titles be understood properly? improperly?

The Nicene Creed Throughout the Centuries

Historical Explanation

The Nicene Creed would have been part of the liturgy Martin Luther heard and recited as a young man. When he became a monk, Luther also came to know the Apostles’ Creed, which was used in several of the daily services in his Augustinian monastery. As Luther struggled unsuccessfully to lead a pure life even in the monastery, he came to have a special love for the Apostles’ Creed, which proclaimed to him the forgiveness of sins each time he recited it. This may be one reason why he chose to include the Apostles’ Creed rather than the Nicene Creed in his Small Catechism. On the other hand, while he made many changes to the Sunday liturgy, he retained the chanting or singing of the Nicene Creed, although it was to be sung in German. Luther and his associates accepted these two creeds, together with the Athanasian Creed, as accurate statements of doctrine that should continue to be used in the church. The first article of the Augsburg Confession (1530) states, “Our churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting.”

In 1580, a generation after Luther’s death, when Lutheran theologians gathered the most important Lutheran theological writings into *The Book of Concord*, the three ecumenical creeds—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed (381), and the Athanasian Creed—were the opening documents in the volume. They were the oldest documents and the most widely accepted by Christians everywhere. Through the inclusion of the creeds, the Lutheran theologians of the 16th century confessed their connection to the teachings of the early church and the christological and trinitarian beliefs that are necessary for anyone who wishes to be saved.

In the 21st century, the Nicene Creed continues to be recited by Christians around the world every week. Except for the *filioque*, it remains the most ecumenical document in Christendom, that is, the writing that almost all who consider themselves Christians can agree with. This has caused some denominations to consider dropping the *filioque*—not because they no longer value it but in order to remove an obstacle for church fellowship. Because so many other differences exist, however, such an action would not have much practical effect. At the same time, the Nicene Creed still separates us from those who do not accept the biblical teaching of the Trinity or the scriptural doctrine that Jesus, God’s Son, is an equal member of the Trinity, “true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.” This creed continues to reject the teachings of Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and all other groups that confess a diminished Christ. The Nicene Creed in our liturgy is a continual reminder of who we are and what we believe—despite the fact that the concept of the Trinity is a mystery to our human minds.

The next time you recite the Nicene Creed, think of the innumerable other Christians who are confessing that faith around the world. Think also of all the Christians of the past who have confessed this creed—the bishops at Nicaea in 325, the bishops at Constantinople in 381, the medieval Christians in the Latin West, and the Greek-speaking Christians in Orthodox churches. Think of Luther and the reformers, our own synod’s founders, and our believing parents and grandparents. Revelation pictures a great multitude that no one could count—from every nation, tribe, people, and language—standing before the Lamb’s throne in their white robes with palm branches in their hands, crying aloud, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10). When we recite aloud the Nicene Creed with fellow Christians around the world, we are getting a small taste of what awaits us in heaven!

The three ecumenical creeds are included in the Lutheran confessions alongside of confessions that express distinctively Lutheran doctrine (e.g., justification by grace alone, the sacraments, predestination, etc.). What are the arguments for each of the following?

1. Pastors (and laypeople) need to study (and confess) the creeds that express shared beliefs across all of Christianity.
2. Pastors (and laypeople) need to study (and confess) the confessions that express distinctively Lutheran beliefs not shared across all of Christianity.

Conclusion

In your small groups, formulate a big picture answer. “Why should we care about the Nicene Creed today, 1700 years after it was written?”