

# THE NICENE CREED: A BRIEF LOOK

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*Abstract* — **The first major council of the Christian church convened in the year 325 C.E. to come to a consensus on several matters of disputed teachings within the church. Lead by Emperor Constantine, the council sought to discuss and agree upon a statement of faith to unify the church. The creed developed by the council centered on the nature and work of the Word (Logos) and the person of Jesus. This paper briefly discusses several important statements in the creed and some of the discussion surrounding the issues that the council was seeking to resolve. But the Council of Nicea was a politically-motivated venture for the Emperor.**

*General Research Topic(s)* — **The Nicene Creed, The Council of Nicea, Church Councils, Christian Doctrine, Christian History.**



Oldest Extant Manuscript of the Nicene Creed (6<sup>th</sup> cent. C.E.)<sup>1</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a result of new favor being bestowed upon the Christian church by Emperor Constantine in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christians experienced a sense of prominence by now being brought into the spotlight of the empire on good terms. With a relatively secure freedom to operate without fear of persecution, the church changed its focus from struggling against outside opponents, which formerly consumed much of their attention, as was the case with the early apologists, to settling more internal disputes and unifying the teachings of the church. Some issues pervaded surrounding the nature of God and how exactly to express it in terms that would not be too entangled with the ideas and terminology of classical philosophy.

The church had already faced numerous opponents who tried to show how different the Christian faith was from philosophy, but certain defenders of Christianity sought to win the argument by persuading such critics that the faith found in Christianity is not at complete odds with the wisdom of philosophy. But, there emerged differing views on significant teachings of Christian doctrine within the church that required just as much attention as defending the faith to outsiders, and perhaps, even more. One crucial argument that arose during this period of solidifying what would constitute “official” church doctrine was that of the church’s view of God and what was the precise relationship of the “Word” (Logos) to God, the Father?

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<sup>1</sup> Image used by permission from John Rylands University Library (<http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk/luna/servlet>).

The creed established at the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.) was explicitly directed at attempting to answer this very question. In particular, one might say the creed was designed to clarify the character and nature of the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus. But it was not until after the council that such nomenclature entered the church's teaching on a broad scale. The Nicene Creed gave a formal declaration of the teaching of the church on the nature of God that intentionally excluded certain dissident teachings that the church desired to label as heretical, namely Arianism.

## II. THE NICENE CREED (325 C.E.)

*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.*

*Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.*

*And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.*

*And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

## III. THE LOGOS

The controversy over the nature of God really arose between two divergent Christological views in Alexandria, Egypt. One view that was heavily promulgated in Alexandria was by a presbyter named Arius. Arius believed that the Logos, the Word of God, was not a coeternal being with God, the Father. He maintained that "before anything else was made, the Word had been created by God."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Arius associated the Word as part of creation and not as the Creator, declaring that the Word was the first component of all creation to be created. This position also implied that the Word was not deity and therefore was part of a sub-category of existence below God. Moreover, Arius' arguments were such that it instigated the notion that if the Word was not deity, then Jesus was not divine, and the worship of Jesus was then tantamount to idolatry since he was a creature, part of God's creation.

In the other corner of the debate was the presiding bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, who held very opposing views of God, especially regarding the Word (Logos). Alexander's basic premise was that the Word was coeternal with God, the Father. The Word was not a something created by God but existed eternally with God and therefore was not part of creation. In other words, Alexander saw the Word being inextricably associated with God and not being any part of creation. Naturally, this then drew the criticism of Arius who saw Alexander asserting there existed two gods, indicating a polytheistic view of God. Therefore, according to Arius, Alexander was suggesting to divide worship among multiple gods rather than the one True God.

When Constantine called the first ecumenical council of the Christian church in order to resolve this

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<sup>2</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (vol. 1; New York: Harper One, 2010), 184.

disagreement in 325 C.E., the outcome of the council was a statement of faith (known as the Nicene Creed) that addressed the issue at hand concerning the nature of God and the relationship of the Logos to God, the Father. The consensus reached at the council was that the Logos was “begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

As the creed begins by declaring that God is the “Maker of all this visible and invisible,” the terminology used to describe the Word then was not “made” but “begotten.” This language was intentional in order to make a subtle distinction in meaning. By “declaring that the Son is ‘begotten, not made’ he is being excluded from those things ‘visible and invisible’ made by the Father.”<sup>3</sup> This expression undermines the very premise of Arius’ argument that the Word was “created” by God in the beginning as the first creature. The following statements of the creed concerning the Word further bolster the council’s decision that it has existed eternally. The council deemed that the Logos was “of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” This string of descriptions was aimed at rejecting “any notion that the Son or Word – Logos – was a creature, or a being less divine than the Father.”<sup>4</sup> Basically, these formulas equate the Word on the level of God. They describe it in equivalent terms of being fully divine and eternal with God.

Another concern of the dispute between Arius and Alexander pertained to salvation and the nature of how Christ saves, and since Christ is the Logos, this question is directly related to the former question of the nature of the Logos. Arius and his followers were proponents that Christ’s role as Savior of the world was brought about as

a result of his obedience to God, and therefore, such obedience to God “would be meaningless if he himself was divine, and not a creature.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Arius taught that if Jesus was divine then he could not be the Savior of the world who faithfully obeyed God to the point of the cross. Contrary to this, Alexander viewed Jesus as fully divine and as such believed that Jesus had “achieved our salvation because in him God has entered human history and opened the way for our return to him.”<sup>6</sup> Alexander’s position was further promoted by his successor Athanasius who viewed Jesus as “the restorer of that which had fallen” and to this end saw humanity’s salvation as an equal work with creation and therefore thought that, “the one responsible for our re-creation can be no lesser than the one responsible for our creation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, in Athanasius’ eyes Jesus must be a divine Savior in order to perform such a task as the redemption and restoration of fallen humanity.

#### IV. JESUS AND SALVATION

Another part of the Nicene Creed was dedicated to explicating the question of Jesus’ relationship to the rest of humanity. The Creed states, “Who [Jesus] for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man.” This description articulates how the Council of Nicea saw the way Jesus related to the rest of humanity. The statement of the Creed supports the view of Alexander and Athanasius that Jesus was divine and had entered human history as a way to redeem humanity. It seems the council’s view was that on behalf of humanity and for the purpose of saving humanity, Jesus, as a fully divine being, condescended to Earth and was incarnated (“begotten”) as a human being among fallen humanity. Through this declaration, the council was opposing Arius’ view of Jesus’ obedience as a creature being central in salvation but rather that it was

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 189-90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 205.

Jesus' divinity that made all the difference. Not only that, but the phrasing of the Nicene Creed excludes the understanding that Jesus was a creature in its entirety. Moreover, Jesus' obedience is really only alluded to through his passion in the next clause of the Creed, "He suffered, and the third day rose again, ascended into heaven...." The central point of the creed seems to be declaring that the divine Word was an eternally existing person who stepped down from heaven into the human realm on Earth and was born among humankind in the man Jesus in order to open a way for humanity to be saved and reconciled to God.

## V. CONCLUSION

Much turmoil and heated debates surrounded the nature of God and the question of how Jesus saves during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The first ecumenical council of Nicea convened and sought to end the conflicts by establishing a single confession of faith in response to various views and teachings that had arisen in the church. The council's decision in regard to these questions was that the Word (Logos) was a divine being that shared in the divine essence of God, the Father, being eternal and uncreated with the Father. The divine Word came down from heaven and was incarnate in the human Jesus who suffered and died for the salvation of humankind. From these statements, the Creed was not found to be in favor of Arius' position but instead favored the position of Alexander and Athanasius.

In summary, the second stanza of the Nicene Creed could be understood as, "And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came from the Father and is of the same essence as the Father, who is Light just as the Father is Light, and who is God just as the Father is God, he came from the Father and was not created by the Father because he consists of the same substance as the Father."

The confession devised and ratified by the Council of Nicea was the first major move the church made (as

mandated by the Emperor) to establish a single formulated doctrine that was to be taught throughout the empire. The creed from Nicea was aimed at purging all other views and teachings but one. Such a move was not motivated primarily on theological grounds or for the sake of improving the church and their teaching per se, but was a political move with Constantine forcing the hand of the church to act in this way and exiling any leaders who did not submit and yield to the council's decision.<sup>8</sup>

## VI. REFERENCES

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<sup>8</sup> Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity During the Last Days of Rome* (San Diego: Harourt, 1999), 68-88.