

## **The Nicene Creed: An Exploration**

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### **I believe in one God, the Father almighty (May 23)**

At the very beginning of the chief creed of the Church we put ourselves in continuity with the Old Testament. The God of Christianity is also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the same God spoken of in Deuteronomy 6:4 (NIV): “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Humanity will claim Lordship and divinity for all sorts of other things – for idols, for fictions of our imagination, for governments or countries. But the Lord will not be defined *by* us – he comes to us through the prophets to reveal himself *to* us. So we begin our confession of faith by confessing that there is only one God.

This God is the Father, the almighty. Thousands of years of Christianity have made it easy for everyone to call God “Father.” Even Jews can heard praying “Our Father, who art in heaven”! The only way we know that God is Father is because we know his Son, Jesus Christ. Only Christians can truly call God “Father.” In fact, the Father is the absolute standard for “fatherhood,” against whom all earthly fathers pale in comparison. He is True Father, truly providing for his children. He is True Father, too, because he is *almighty*, and therefore always able to provide for his children. Earthly fathers can make all sorts of promises to their children – only our heavenly Father is always able to keep them! (Luke 11:13)

### **Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible (May 30)**

Believe it or not, there were times and places when god or the gods were *not* believed to be the maker of all things. To the ancient Greeks, for example, many of the gods were merely “caretakers” of the world, and often didn’t do a much better job than the humans. To others, god or the gods simply made the world out of what was already there. Even Plato, the great Greek philosopher, believed that the god made all things out of a preexistent “chaos.” But if something else existed at the same time as the Lord, where did *it* come from? God’s supremacy would be put into question. But Scripture is clear that of all things, only God had a beginning. Consider Psalm 90:2 (ESV): “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God,” or Colossians 1:17 (ESV): “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

The Lord also made all things, whether visible (the physical world) or invisible (the angels, even those who fell). Satan is not a rival to the Lord, as if God is on one side and the Devil is on the other. The Devil is a creature, and cannot create out of nothing as the Lord can. The same is true of the demons, who are also creatures. The Lord is alone, out of all things, uncreated. He is the Father, the almighty, and the creator of everything we see and even those we cannot.

### **And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God (June 6)**

The longest part of the Nicene Creed has to do with Jesus. We begin our confession about who Jesus is by making three statements about him: he is one, he is Lord, and he is Christ. By saying he is one we acknowledge that there are not multiple Jesuses. Many “new age” Christians believe that the Hindu Krishnas were also Jesus, and that Buddha was Jesus. I even came across a book last week that suggested that one of the Pharaohs of Egypt was really Jesus! To all these beliefs we say no! There is only *one*.

This Jesus is Lord. We have become so accustomed to the word *Lord* that we hardly think about what it means anymore. First of all, *Lord* is the title given to God in the Old Testament. For a Jew, to call someone *Lord* is also to give them the Old Testament title for God. For the Romans, the same was somewhat true. The only Lord was Caesar, and he was also “god”. To call Jesus “Lord,” for a Roman, was like calling him Caesar. When we call Jesus “Lord,” we are identifying him as the only sovereign authority and even as God.

Lastly, we identify Jesus as Christ. He is the Messiah, the one promised in the Old Testament. We are not a replacement to Israel, we are not a “new religion” beside Judaism. Christians *are* Israel – we *are* the only true Jews! We claim all the titles and privileges and promises of the Old Testament people of God by calling Jesus “Christ”.

### **Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father (June 13)**

Some of you may have heard the expression, “it doesn’t make an iota of difference.” In the 300s AD, when the Nicene Creed was being written, three words were proposed to describe the relationship of Jesus to his Father. The first word meant “of a different substance.” The other two words meant “of a similar substance” and “of the same substance.” The difference between these last two words was only one letter – the Greek letter “iota.” In the end, the two groups resolved their differences and settled on the word meaning “of the same substance,” since *it didn’t make an iota of difference!*

The word we translate as “being of one substance” is not found in the Scriptures. But the idea that Jesus is “begotten of his Father before all worlds” most certainly is. John said Jesus “was God” (John 1:1) and that he was “in the beginning with God.” (John 1:2). Jesus himself said “whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9). Paul said when we see Christ we see “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). John called him “the only Son from the Father,” (John 1:14) and that he is “at the Father’s side.” (John 1:18). The whole phrase of the Nicene Creed written above confesses this incredible mystery: that as the Father is God, in the same way is the Son God. The only difference is that the Son is begotten of the Father, so in that sense, and in that sense only, the Father is greater than the Son. In every other sense, they are “of one substance.”

### **By whom all things were made (June 20)**

In the very beginning of the Nicene Creed we said that the Father is the maker of all things. Yet here we say that all things were made *by* our Lord Jesus Christ. In the last part of the Creed we confess that the Holy Spirit is “the Giver of Life.” Are we being repetitious, or contradicting ourselves? Neither. We are confessing one of the greatest mysteries of the Trinity – that when God acts in the world, it is never *solely* as the Father, the Spirit or the Son – all three persons always act together.

That’s why it is never correct, as some Christian churches have done, to replace the Name of God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – with functions like Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. If the Father is creating, he is creating by the Son through the power of the Spirit. In Genesis 1:1-3 God makes the heavens and the earth – the Father speaks his Word (Jesus – see John 1:3) and the Spirit “was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). If the Son is redeeming, it is because he was sent by the Father and empowered by the Spirit (remember Jesus’ baptism!). *The actions of God in the world involve all three persons of the Trinity.*

### **Who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven (June 27)**

Having confessed who we believe Christ to *be*, we now confess what we believe Christ to have *done*. First of all, we believe that Christ came “for us men,” or “for us humans.” Christ came to save the entire human race, whose sin has affected all creation (Romans 8:19-22). By redeeming the human race, Christ opened up the possibility of restoring all of creation – thorns, thistles and all. To do so he left his real “home” – heaven, the realm where God dwells in perfection, “spirit and truth” (John 4:23). In the words of one Christian song, “For you came to earth to wear the skin of all of us – and it’s easy to forget you left a throne.”

Some churches, such as the Episcopal Church and many other Lutheran churches, have removed the word “men” because it’s considered to be “sexist.” In so doing, they have made Christ’s suffering apply only to the people reciting the Creed: “Who for us and for our salvation.” This goes to show how important every word in the Creed is, and how easy it is to change its meaning by simply removing or altering one word.

### **And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man (July**

#### **4)**

Here we see the whole Trinity involved in the redemption of mankind. The Father sends his only-begotten Son, who is incarnate by the Holy Spirit. One may ask what the difference is between being “incarnate” and being “made man.” To be incarnate means simply to be part of the created order. Throughout the centuries, many Christian theologians have believed that Christ would have become incarnate *anyway*, whether humanity had fallen into sin or not. He would have come to bring humanity to a new perfected order. In that case, there would have been no crucifixion since there would have been no death in the world.

Because of our fall into sin, not only did Christ have to become incarnate, but he had to become *man*. He identified with our fallen nature. It’s for that reason that many

Christians bow at this part of the Creed, humbling ourselves as we realize that the Son of God left heaven to become part of our fallen world.

The Virgin Mary is one of two other humans other than Christ mentioned in the Creed. Because she is the God-bearer, the one who carried the Son of God in her womb and bore him into the world, she has a special place within the Church as “first sister.” She is, in a sense, the new Eve, obeying God’s command as Eve did not.

### **And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate (July 11)**

Pilate is the only other human being mentioned in the creed, next to the Virgin Mary. It might seem odd that both our creeds mention this cruel governor of Judea. Who would want to speak Hitler or Stalin’s name Sunday after Sunday in worship? But the inclusion of this name reveals something critical about the Christian faith: it is *historical*.

Christianity is about the Son of God – begotten of his Father before all worlds – who lived and died and rose again in a specific time and place. Identifying Christ’s death as at the hands of Pilate identifies both the place and time of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In a sense, when we confess he was “crucified under Pontius Pilate” we are saying along with the early apostles: “This really happened! It’s *history*, not just a legend.”

The verse also emphasizes once again the significance of Christ’s death, in case anyone wasn’t paying attention a few verses earlier. It was for us that Christ did these things. Christ’s crucifixion wasn’t a meaningless death that was an unfortunate end to a wonderful ministry on earth. It was the climax of everything Jesus did, accomplishing our salvation from sin, death and the power of Satan.

### **He suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures (July 18, 2004)**

This phrase is the heart of the second article of the creed. The heart of the church’s ministry is not the ethics or moral teachings of Jesus, but rather his deeds and claims about himself. The great “three days of Easter” – Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday – rightly have a central place in the Nicene Creed. It is on these days that he suffered his “pascha” – his passion. Thanks to Mel Gibson’s film, there should be little need to explain “The Passion of the Christ.” He did indeed die, and was buried, but on the third day he rose again. For generations the church repeated this great “mystery of the faith” before communion: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.”

The word “scriptures” in Greek could also be translated “the writings.” At the point in time when this creed was written, the New Testament as we now have it was commonly accepted around the Mediterranean. The reference to the Scriptures here defines these events, once again, as ones that have been written down as history.

### **And ascended into heaven, and sits at the right (hand) of the Father. (July 25, 2004)**

The ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father is a chief feature of Luke's accounts of his life and ministry. It is Luke's Gospel and his Acts of the Apostles that most clearly record this event. Carl Sagan, the late popularizer of science, once calculated that if Jesus was traveling at the speed of light, he had still not left our galaxy. That entirely misses the point. Christ's ascension is not away from earth, but rather to fill the earth with his presence, so that he might keep his promise "to be with us always." (Matthew 29:28). In the words of the ancient Easter hymn, "Christ our comfort fills the skies" - the one born of Mary now exercises all of his powers as God for you, wherever you are! Like God the Father, however, he is now hidden by the cloud of the glory of God, and we will not see him again with our eyes until the final judgment.

This point is made most clearly by the second phrase, "sits at the right hand of the Father." The "right hand" of God is the source of authority and power. All of God's power and authority is now exercised by Christ, our brother in human nature. What wonderful news, that the God who rules over us and will judge us also knows and has our human nature, but without the taint of sin!

### **And he will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose (and his) kingdom will have no end. (August 1, 2004)**

If there is any article of Christian faith that has been completely lost in the American Christian church, it is this one. Christ has been appointed judge over all creation (John 5:27). At the end of time, he will return in glory – in other words, he will return in the full splendor and awesomeness of God (1 Thess. 4:16). At the time the dead will be raised and all will be judged according to whether their names are in the Book of Life (Rev. 20:15, Luke 10:20). Those whose names are written will reign with Christ; those whose names are not written will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. From that point on, the rule of Christ will have no end.

Is your name written in the Book? Perhaps a better question is this: do you believe you have done enough to merit your name being written in that Book? If you believe you have, if you believe you are worthy to enter into Christ's kingdom, I can assure you that your name will not be found. If, however, you despair of finding your name in that book – if you stare into your soul and realize you do not deserve life – then I have good news! It is for you that Christ died, and he calls to you to cling to him in trust. For those who despair of their own worth in God's eyes, and cling instead to Christ's Word and his Holy Sacraments of Baptism and Communion, will indeed find that their name is written in the Lamb's book of Life Eternal.

### **And (I believe) in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Giver of Life (Aug 8, 2004)**

The confession of the Spirit and his work was the last part added to the Nicene Creed. The original creed formulated in 325 AD ended with the words: "And we believe in the Holy Spirit. Amen." This did not mean they ignored the Holy Spirit, or felt his work unimportant. It was simply an acknowledgment that everything they believed about Jesus and his Father came from the Spirit – to stop and think about the Spirit when talking about Jesus and his Father is like stopping to think about the fact that you're breathing. We breathe naturally – we don't have to think consciously about every breath we take. If we did, we wouldn't have any brain power left to do anything else! Talking about the Spirit is a bit like talking about breathing. It's no accident that the Greek word for Spirit and breath are the same!

We confess that the Holy Spirit is also God (the Lord) and that he also is responsible for creation (the Giver of Life). As the Father is Maker of heaven and earth, and all things were made through the Son, so to is the Holy Spirit responsible for creation. In this way there is only one God, but three Persons.

### **Who proceeds from the Father and the Son (August 22, 2004)**

One of the major criticisms the Roman church levels against Protestants is that every denomination has their own interpretation of Scripture, so which one is right? The Roman church, they claim, has always been one, so therefore they must be the true Church. This would be great, except that it is not true. In fact, the Roman church is the first “Protestant” church!

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, without consulting the other major churches of the time of the Mediterranean, the Roman church changed the Nicene Creed. The church had always confessed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father; now the Roman church added “and the Son.” In the end, this led to the Roman church “splitting” from the rest of the world’s Christian churches, whom we today call the “orthodox” churches.

Who is right? A case can be made from Scripture for both beliefs (see John 14:26). But this teaches an important lesson about change – it should be done cautiously, and never unilaterally.

### **Who spoke by the prophets. (August 29, 2004)**

Like almost all of the lines of the Creeds, this one is taken directly from Scripture: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...” (Hebrews 1:1-2) You may recognize the words from the Vespers service we use Wednesday nights. We speak them after we have heard the Word of God from the Scriptures, and before we sing Mary’s “Magnificat,” her song of praise regarding the coming of her Son, our Lord.

We live in an area with an abundance of Lutheran churches. Few of them are part of our “synod,” or to put it another way, few of them are in agreement with us on the teachings of the Church. The single biggest difference is that we disagree on this article of the Creed. Did the Holy Spirit speak through the very words of the prophets of the Old Testament as we have them in Scripture, or only in the “ideas about God” those Scriptures contain? Are the Scriptures without error, or did the Holy Spirit make mistakes when speaking through the prophets? With the Nicene Creed we proclaim the former, while many other Lutherans, sadly, proclaim the latter.

### **And I believe in one, holy, Christian (catholic) and apostolic church (September 5)**

Notice that the Church is a statement of faith. This is an important point. We don’t claim to “believe” in things that are clear and obvious to everyone. It would be pointless for Christians to stand up on Sunday morning and confess “We believe in a round earth, the law of gravity, the eventual death of us all, and the life of those things that are alive.” We

“confess” things that we’ve come to learn, by the Holy Spirit, are true, even if we can’t see them.

In the same way, we can’t see “one, holy, Christian and apostolic church.” What we DO see is many churches, which are often very unholy, are not universal (or catholic, which is what the original creed says,) and often don’t teach what the apostles taught. Yet we believe that in God’s eyes, there is only one church, one Body of Christ, that he alone can see. At the end of time that Church will be revealed. For now, it is part of our belief, like the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, whom we also cannot see.

### **I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness (remission) of sins (September 12)**

This phrase, too, comes directly from Scripture: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Just as there is only one Church, there is also only one baptism for entrance into that Church. Of course, it is true that that one baptism must be done in accordance with Christ’s command (Matthew 28:19). In other words, it must be done with water and in the name of the Triune God. Second, belief is the hand that receives the benefits of baptism: “He that *believes* and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). One who is baptized has indeed had their sins forgiven, but if they are not brought up in the faith they may lose the *benefits* of that forgiveness: the resurrection from the dead and life everlasting. Nonetheless, if one departs from the faith and then returns it does not mean the baptism was invalid; there is only one baptism, and the promises God makes at baptism are always there for us to turn too, no matter what.

### **And I look for (expect) the resurrection of the dead (September 19)**

Ask anyone where they hope to go when they die, and they’ll probably say “heaven.” It may come as a surprise that the Christian hope for life after death is not for a life “in heaven.” We are not “heavenly creatures” by nature! The God who “made heaven and earth” made us flesh and blood. The Son of God is still “flesh and blood” and still bears the marks of his death for us (Revelation 5:6). The Christian hope is for a restored material world, without disease and death and destruction. Apologies to the hymn writer, but heaven is not our home, either.

What John saw as recorded in Revelation was a new heaven, *and a new earth*. The God who is Spirit and dwells in the heavenly places would come to this new earth to live with us (Revelation 21:1-3). This new, recreated earth would be our home. So we look forward, after our deaths, to *resurrection*, to being restored to physical life in a new perfected world, better even than the Garden of Eden.

### **And the life of the world (age) to come (September 26)**

Last week we talked about the new world to come where God would make his dwelling with us. That’s the hope of the Christian – the new age to come, where the old heaven and old earth will pass away and the new earth will into existence. In that world, the separation between heaven and earth will disappear, and the two will be joined in a glorious new existence. We can hardly imagine what that world will be like!

Our hope for a life in that new world comes from our one baptism, which brought us into the one Church. Often, in memory of the cross signed over us in baptism, people will make the sign of the cross at these last words of the creed. “Genuflecting,” or making the sign of the cross, if done reverently and not superstitiously, is a good way of reminding ourselves that it is Christ who has done everything for us in his cross. Amen! So be it.