

Nicene Creed

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19 January 2014

Is the Nicene Creed an accurate summary of Christian beliefs?

Part 1

The Nicene Creed was written as a summary of the Christian faith by the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. This was about 1200 years before the Roman Catholic Church became so corrupt that it sparked the Protestant Reformation. Since it was written more than a millennium before the split, it is recited by some Protestant and Catholic congregations every Sunday. Is it an accurate summary of Christian doctrines? Or had the Roman Catholic Church become so corrupted by 325 A.D. that that Nicene Creed contains serious theological errors that should not be recited by Protestants?

Some Protestant churches use the Apostles Creed instead. The Apostles Creed is just a shortened version of the Nicene Creed that can be more easily memorized and recited more quickly. There are no doctrinal differences.

The primary controversy at the time the Creed was written had to do with the deity of Jesus, and his relationship to the Father. The Nicene Creed was primarily written as the official church position on this subject; but other doctrines were addressed as well.

There are several different English translations of the Nicene Creed in use today. They differ only slightly in wording, with no meaningful differences. But, we had to pick one, so here is the version from the 1979 Episcopal Church (United States) Book of Common Prayer.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen. ¹

Let's look at the Nicene Creed one piece at a time.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

This statement about God being the creator does not mention evolution because the silly idea that people evolved from apes hadn't been thought of yet. The prevailing pagan creation myth of the day was that Prometheus sculpted a man out of a clump of earth to resemble gods, and gave man fire to fight against Zeus. Zeus retaliated by giving Pandora a box containing evil, which she unwittingly opened, releasing all manner of evil on the Earth. According to Roman mythology, the gods were continually fighting amongst themselves, and human beings were caught up in the conflict.

The bishops wanted to dispel the prevailing pagan notion of a whole pantheon of gods and Titans who were roughly equal in power, constantly struggling for supremacy through force and cunning. They didn't want a similar notion to infect Christianity, where the nice god Jesus fights against the bad, more powerful god the Father. Consequently, the Nicene Creed clearly states that there is a single, almighty God, responsible for the creation of heaven and earth, and everything else, seen and unseen. There are no other gods.

The Creed says the Father made heaven and Earth. The Bible says that Jesus, in his pre-incarnate form, actually did the job. John begins his gospel by calling Jesus "The Word," and says this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [John 1:1-5, NIV]

Paul told the Colossians the same thing.

¹ Episcopal Church Book of Common Prayer (1979), The Book of Common Prayer. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated. 2007. pp. 326–327.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. [Colossians 1:15-20, NIV]

So, the Bible is clear that Jesus was the active agent in creation. But those very same passages also say that Jesus and the Father are the same. Jesus, the Word, was with God the Father, and Jesus, the Word was God the Father. All the fullness of God the Father dwelt in Jesus. So, whether it was the Son or the Father who actually made everything is irrelevant because the Father and the Son are, in essence, the same, according to the Bible.

The Nicene Creed goes on to say,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

Here it specifically says that Jesus is “of one Being with Father.” The Creed previously said that the Father is maker of Heaven and Earth; but here it says that through Jesus all things were made. The previous statement that the Father is the maker of Heaven and Earth isn’t really a contradiction because the Father and Son are one Being.

The paradoxical idea that the Son and the Father are separate individuals, but one Being, is a difficult one to grasp. That’s why there was a controversy about the nature of Jesus that caused the Council of Nicaea to convene. Jesus explained the paradox this way:

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. [John 14:8-12, NIV]

The Father was in Jesus; but Jesus was going to the Father. So, somehow they are together, but yet separate.

Whether or not we can understand how that works exactly, we can understand this: The Father and the Son were not battling like the pagan Roman Gods. They are completely united in spirit. The idea that

God the Father is the mean, Old Testament God who is looking for any excuse to punish men, and Jesus is the nice, New Testament God who is begging the Father for mercy, is not Biblical. The God described in the Old Testament is the same God as is described in the New Testament. Despite uninformed claims to the contrary, careful reading of the whole Bible reveals a merciful God in the Old Testament, who is the same righteous God who will punish sinners in the New Testament. The Father and the Son are one God. They do not have conflicting personalities, and their common personality did not change at the cross. They both have had the same agenda since before the world began. The Nicene Creed goes on to tell us what that agenda was, and still is.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

This section tells us that Jesus was not just an ordinary man who was an extraordinary teacher, like Buddha or Gandhi. He really was the Son of God, who took human flesh by being born of the virgin, Mary. Furthermore, it tells us that Jesus came to Earth on a mission. That mission was to save man from sin. The Creed goes on to summarize how He accomplished that mission.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

Modern Christians are very familiar with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It was his death in our place which paid the penalty for our sin, and gives us eternal life. But many Christians seem to have forgotten the last part, about Jesus coming again to judge the living and the dead.

The dead are not now in Heaven or Hell. That notion comes from Roman mythology, and was one of the doctrinal errors adopted by the Church after the Nicene Creed was written. The pagan notion of departed friends and relatives living in Heaven or Hell was incorporated later into Christianity for two reasons. First, it made it easier for pagans to join the church, allowing them to believe their dead loved ones were in the Elysian Fields, now called "Heaven." They could pray to dead saints, allegedly alive in Heaven, the way they used to pray to various Roman gods. It made it easy to join the church because they didn't have to change their belief about death. Second, it made it possible for the church to sell pagan converts indulgences to get their less virtuous dead loved ones out of Erebus or Tartarus, now called Purgatory and Hell.

When the Nicene Creed was written, the pagan doctrine that people go to Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell immediately when they die had not yet infected the Church. In 325 A.D. the Church still taught the Biblical truth about death. Specifically, the Bible says that the dead are sleeping until Jesus shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, so that's what the Creed says, too.

Jesus died on the cross so that his followers can be raised to eternal life with perfect, immortal bodies some time in the future when He returns. But if Jesus never comes back, they won't awaken to enjoy the

reward He promised them. That's why the Second Coming is of such importance and is specifically included in the Nicene Creed.

The next part of the Creed deals with the Holy Spirit.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.

This completes the doctrine of the Trinity. It is the Holy Spirit who answers our prayers, sometimes before we even pray them. It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets to write the Bible. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us life.

Having addressed the nature and mission of God, the Creed goes on to address the nature and mission of the Church.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

That's the adjective "catholic" with a lower case C—not the proper noun "Catholic" with a capital C. The adjective "catholic" is a synonym for "universal." The Creed says there is one universal, true church—and that church is the one established by Jesus' apostles at Jesus' personal direction.

God has always had one church. It is the church God established in the Garden of Eden before it became so corrupt in Noah's day that the world had to be destroyed. Then that same church sprouted from Abraham's seed before it became so corrupt that its leaders did not recognize the Son of God had come in the flesh. That same universal church was reestablished by Jesus and given to His apostles to lead. God's one true church is a community of believers—not a particular denomination. Members of God's true church obtain their beliefs and practices from the Holy Bible, not from a denominational creed. Anyone who believes God's word is a member of God's church, regardless of whether or not he belongs to a particular denominational structure.

Adam was the first leader of God's true church; but his descendants fell away from the truth until the only members of the church left on Earth were the members of Noah's family.

Moses was the leader of God's true church. Unfortunately, the members of that congregation strayed from God's ideal, so God had to send them prophets, and sometimes foreign invaders like the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans, to bring them back to the truth from time to time.

The apostolic church of the first century was God true church—but it evolved into the Roman Catholic Church which incorporated so many pagan customs, traditions, and doctrines that it no longer bears any resemblance to God's one true holy church.

The Protestant Reformation was a result of the recognition of this fact. The Protestants protested the many false doctrines that have crept into Catholicism over the centuries. The Protestant Church has reformed many of these doctrines; but there are reforms that still need to be made. We will talk about these in the second segment of today's broadcast, after we finish this review of the Nicene Creed, which goes on to say,

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Some people think this means one can only be baptized once. Other's think it means, "Once saved, always saved." Others think it means only baptism into one particular denomination is valid.

To find the truth, we should search the scriptures to see what they say. The only verse in the Bible with any relevance comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. [Ephesians 4:3-6, NIV]

The clear intent of this passage is to say that there is only one true religion, and one savior. Paul's words clearly contradict the notion that it doesn't really matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. There is only one way to be saved—that's by accepting Jesus' sacrifice on your behalf, and living your life in accordance with the new life He want to give you.

The Nicene Creed's statement "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." is consistent with this scriptural truth. Unfortunately, it could be taken to mean, "We acknowledge only baptism by in our denomination for forgiveness of sins." That's not what Paul said.

The Creed ends with the words,

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Sadly, many Christians don't look for the resurrection of the dead any more, even after reciting the Nicene Creed every week. They have accepted the Roman myth about people going to Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell as soon as they die. Some denominations have concocted a doctrine about Jesus coming back every time someone dies to try to reconcile their teachings with the Bible. These Christians don't know anything at all about the New Earth, and expect to live forever in Heaven, playing a harp. They don't live their lives looking for the future resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, even though they recited a Creed saying they do.

The Nicene Creed is an excellent, accurate summary of Christian beliefs—as far as it goes. But it leaves out some important doctrines, isn't really believed by some Christians who recite it every week, and doesn't say anything about the practical application of these abstract theological truths. So, let's talk about those things after this short break.

[music – One Church, One Faith]

Part 2

In the first segment of our broadcast today, we looked at the Nicene Creed. We saw that it touched on most of fundamental Christian doctrines. Specifically, it mentions creation, the Trinity, the pre-incarnate existence of Jesus, His miraculous birth, the plan of salvation involving His death and resurrection, the state of the dead, and the Second Coming. But although many Christians recite the Creed every week, some Protestant doctrines and practices are in conflict with the Creed because pagan ideas crept into the

Roman Catholic Church over the centuries after the Creed was written, and were not eliminated in the Protestant Reformation or subsequent years.

We already noted that many Christians say,

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

But they believe their dead relatives are in heaven, as if the resurrection has already happened. The idea that people go to Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell as soon as they die doesn't come from the Bible. It comes from Greek mythology, and was adopted by Roman mythology, and then adopted by the Roman Catholic Church. The Nicene Creed was written before the Church adopted this pagan myth about death, so the Nicene Creed proclaims the Biblical view that all believers will be resurrected together at the second coming of Jesus.

In an attempt to reconcile this pagan belief with the clear Biblical teaching, some churches teach that Jesus comes back every time someone dies and resurrects them individually. This can be a stumbling block when their members read what the Bible says about death. The Bible clearly says that there will be one mass resurrection on the Day of the Lord, not countless individual resurrections. What's the point of Judgment Day if all the dead have already been sent to Heaven or Hell? This clear inconsistency makes it easy for atheists to ridicule Christianity.

Here's another example: The Nicene Creed begins by stating a belief in creation. But I visited a Protestant church where the Nicene Creed was recited; and then the female priest gave a sermon saying that we evolved from apes, and Christians should not appear foolish to the world by claiming that the world was created in six days about six thousand years ago. But if man is the product of natural selection, which depends upon species that are more fit driving less fit species to extinction, then death was in the world for millions of years before man evolved. Therefore, Adam's sin could not have caused death. That's just a myth. More to the point, the claim that Jesus death paid the penalty for man's sin is just a myth, too, because death wasn't the result of sin.

If a church has a policy of reciting the Nicene Creed regularly, that church ought to make sure its doctrines are in harmony with the Creed, and that her members understand what they are professing to believe. An inconsistent faith isn't very satisfying.

Of course, it would be even better if that church got its doctrines directly from the Bible, rather than a Creed written at a council meeting, or a focus group, or proposed by a church growth consultant.

There's nothing theologically wrong with the Nicene Creed. In fact, it is excellent, as far as it goes; but it doesn't go far enough. The Creed is theological, but not practical. In other words, it is long on reverence and short on relevance. For example, it includes the vitally important statement that Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead—but what does that have to do with me? How must I respond to that? Does that mean I have to attend mass every day? Do I have to confess my sins to a priest, who tells me how many “Hail Mary”s to say in order to be forgiven? Or, do I just have to say, “I accept Jesus as my Savior,” and go on with my life as if nothing has happened? How must I respond to the theological truths in the Nicene Creed?

The Council of Nicaea wrote an excellent, but practically useless, summary of the Christian faith. Jesus, on the other hand, was much more practical. He told the woman caught in adultery,

And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. [John 8:11, KJV]

She was a sinner, and she knew it. But she didn't understand repentance, forgiveness, or righteousness by faith. She did not understand,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [1 John 1:9, KJV]

The Bible tells us that forgiveness is conditional on repentance, and that God can give us the victory over sinful practices. The Nicene Creed fails to make that practical application.

Jesus told Nicodemus,

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. [John 3:3, KJV]

The Bible tells us that we need to be born again. That is, we need to reorient the priorities in our lives, in order to be saved. The Creed doesn't tell us that.

Jesus said,

No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God. [Luke 9:62, KJV]

Jesus also told parables about The Pearl of Great Price, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan. He stressed the importance of being a good servant when the master returns unexpectedly, because only a few will enter through the Narrow Gate. The Creed doesn't tell us that.

Jesus said that a tree is judged by its fruit.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. [John 14:12, KJV]

There's a wonderful power that God gives His children. When Paul told the Philippians

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. [Philippians 4:13, KJV]

Paul wasn't bragging about a power given exclusively to him. He was telling them that they, and we, can share in this power. There's no hint of that in the Nicene Creed.

The Bible tells us what to do with this power God wants to give us.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. [Ephesians 2:10, NIV]

That's not in the Creed, either.

So, although there isn't anything theologically wrong with the Nicene Creed, it falls far short of the Bible. If your religion consists of nothing more than reciting the Nicene Creed, it is inadequate for living a

satisfied, victorious life on this Earth, and eternal life on the New Earth. It takes more than just reciting a creed to be saved—it takes a new birth that results in an unselfish life of obedience.

Since the Nicene Creed doesn't give any practical guidance as to how to live a victorious life in Christ, the church has to supply that lack.

Preachers need to tell church members that the Ten Commandments are not Ten Suggestions. Church members should be reminded that they need to obey Christ 24/7, not just attend a ceremony one hour a week.

They need to be told that God forgives past sins that have truly been repented of, and God's grace gives them the power to overcome that sin in the future.

Church members need to be assured that God does answer prayers, so they should be listening for answers.

Your church should be giving you comfort, and encouragement to live a victorious life. If your church isn't doing that, you need to find another church, no matter how theologically correct its Creed is.