

What the Nicene Creed says about the relationship between Jesus and the Father

The historical context of the Nicene Creed

What we call the Nicene Creed is actually the product of two ecumenical councils—one in Nicaea (present-day Iznik, Turkey) in AD 325, and one in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in AD 381—and a century of debate over the nature of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In AD 324, Constantine reunited the Roman Empire under a single throne. Constantine was himself a recent convert to Christianity, having (temporarily) ended all persecution by decree in AD 313 after he claimed that he won a battle by calling out to the Christian God. It was Constantine who convened the first ecumenical, fully representative, universally recognized council of the Christian church.

While it is common today to overemphasize Constantine's role and authority in influencing the shape of Christianity as we know it (he did not declare that Jesus is God or decide the books of the New Testament by any stretch of the imagination), there is no doubt that this was one of the critical turning points in Christianity.

Arianism

The council was summoned to resolve a problem that had sprung up seven years earlier and had left the Christian church fiercely divided. In Alexandria in AD 318, a presbyter named **Arius** began publicly proclaiming his theory that Jesus was not God at all, only a celestial servant of the true Most High God, who alone was almighty, transcendent, the creator and first cause of all things.

After all, Jesus was prone to emotion (as opposed to the Father, who was always in control of his emotions), grew and learned (as opposed to the Father, who never changed), and died (as opposed to the Father, who is immortal).

The main difference between this creed and the Apostles' Creed, however, is a new, expanded section on the relationship between Jesus and the Father, since the chief concern of the council was to defend the true divinity of the Son against Arius. The creed asserts this by professing the "Lord Jesus Christ" to be the "Son of God," "begotten of the Father," "only-begotten." These are biblical assertions (Mark 1:1 and 1 John 4:15 call Jesus the Son of God; Acts 13:33 and Heb. 5:5 speak of him as begotten of the Father; John 1:14 and 3:18 both use the Greek word monogenous, which means "only-begotten"). Jesus, they claim, is God: "God from God."

If you need an analogy, the next phrase serves. It's like light. How can you separate light from light? You can't. (This was a traditional example in early Christian writings, usually concerning the ray of the sun and the sun itself.) Neither can the Father and the Son be separated.

Then it repeats for emphasis that Jesus is "very God of very God"; he is not made or created or a product of the true God. Jesus is the true God.

Athanasius was at the council as a deacon in the service of Alexander. He later recounted that up to this point, the Arians were still on board. In fact, they were winking and snickering at one another, as if to say, "This is fine. We can still get around this."

Something more had to be added to defend orthodoxy, even if it could not be stated using only biblical terminology. Something was needed that would settle once and for all that the divinity of Jesus is the divinity of the Father, one and the same. It was agreed to make it clear that this Jesus is forever and eternally "of one substance with the Father." By insisting that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father, the Arian view was rejected and the council affirmed that the Father is not "more God" than the Son. God is God, in trinity.

What the Nicene Creed says about the Holy Spirit

Because the council was primarily interested in discussing Jesus, the original form of the creed did not have much to say about the Holy Spirit. (The creed was updated after the first Council of Constantinople to reflect the deity of the Holy Spirit.)

However, there is a great deal that is said implicitly about his divinity. It is best to read the Nicene Creed as three articles. It begins, “We believe in . . .” and then suspends two subparagraphs: “. . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ,” “. . . and in the Holy Spirit.” It is Trinitarian in form.

Understanding it this way, we see all that follows as part of the third article of the creed — the Holy Spirit’s article.

To the Holy Spirit, and to his activity, belong the holy catholic and apostolic church, its teaching, its confession, its sacraments, and its ultimate new birth into the resurrection of everlasting life.

Put simply, the Holy Spirit is the one who leads the church in its worship and its confession of the triune God.

Why the Nicene Creed matters

Because it is recited in many churches every Sunday, the Nicene Creed is familiar to many Christians.

Like the Apostles’ Creed, it encapsulates the entire good news of the gospel into a short and rich summary. It describes the triune God, who turns toward humanity in the person of Jesus, the God-man who suffered, died, rose again, and ascended. Additionally, the creed goes on to express our future hope, the purpose of living the Christian life.

However, it is the Nicene Creed, not the Apostles’ Creed, that describes the minimum of Christian belief.

By sad experience, the leaders of the church found that there were areas in the “rule of faith” that left too much open to personal interpretation. The fact that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are just as much God as the Father is a nonnegotiable part of Christianity. It is not that Christians are expected to have a perfectly precise Trinitarian theology to be considered orthodox, but since questions about the relationship between Jesus and God the Father are inevitable, they needed to be answered well.

The Nicene Creed encapsulates what Scripture says about that relationship and acknowledges the mystery of it.

If Christianity had agreed with Arius that Jesus could be a lesser god—if it had failed to defend monotheism, if it had fallen into the trench of professing three unrelated deities—it may have dissolved into the religion of Rome and its pantheons of false gods.

If the early Christians had lost their nerve and conceded the “lesser divinity” of Jesus, whatever that might mean, then the work of God in Christ for our salvation would have been rendered meaningless. No mere man, nor half god, could possibly intervene to save fallen and sinful humanity, let alone restore all of creation. Only the Creator can enter creation to fix its brokenness and redeem its original, latent purpose.

Athanasius explored this truth in *On the Incarnation*, defending the claim that the Father and the Son share one common substance (*homoousios*). Only the Creator can recreate. Only the Maker can remake. Only God can save us from our sins.

Because the Father and the Son are one substance, we can also be assured that we actually know God in Jesus Christ. After all, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3), and so when we look on Jesus, we look on God. Without confidence that Jesus is God, united in substance with the Father, we could not be sure that Jesus can speak for God, forgive sins for God, declare righteousness for God, or do anything to make us children of the