

History of the Nicene Creed

Creed

The word Creed comes from the Latin word Credo, which means I believe.

Nicene Creed

A creed that was the result of the Council of Nicaea in ad 325. While early forms of the Apostles' Creed may have predated it, this was the first creed to be officially recognized by an ecumenical council. It was later revised at the Council of Constantinople in 381, and this revised version is sometimes referred to as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, but more commonly is simply called the Nicene Creed.

The Creed of 325

The Nicene Creed was developed by the early Church largely in response to the teachings of Arius. Arianism taught that Jesus was not truly divine and of a different "substance" than God, which challenged the developing doctrine of the Trinity in the early church. The emperor Constantine, newly converted to Christianity, called a Church Council at Nicea in AD 325 to bring some unity to the church amid developing controversies and false teachings. The Council at Nicea adopted an early form of the creed, although the basic present form emerged from the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. The Council of Chalcedon officially adopted it in AD 451.

Arianism is an ancient heresy which denies the divinity of Jesus Christ.

As with many of the classical heresies, Arianism emerged from the struggle to reach a consensus on the Trinity. It is named after Arius, whose main concern was that it did not seem fitting that God should have a son. His solution, which became known as Arianism, was to propose that the Son (Jesus) was somewhere between God and man.

"Such is the genuine doctrine of Arius. Using Greek terms, it denies that the Son is of one essence, nature, or substance with God; He is not consubstantial (homoousios) with the Father, and therefore not like Him, or equal in dignity, or co-eternal, or within the real sphere of Deity."

Modern Arianism shares the ancient belief that Jesus was not (and thus is not) divine, but goes much further — reducing Jesus to "just a guy". Influenced perhaps by Naturalism and Materialism, and thus uncomfortable with any supernatural elements, modern Arianism advocates that Jesus was a good and wise man, perhaps even a prophet, but certainly not divine.



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The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

A major controversy in the church has swirled around one phrase of the creed, the so-called filioque clause. In the phrase, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son" the debate concerned whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from only the Father, or from the Father and the Son [filioque in Latin]. The phrase "and the Son" was not in the original Greek version of the Creed accepted at Nicea and Constantinople. It was added in the Latin versions used in the Western (Roman) church in AD 589 as an attempt to clarify the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity. The concern was that the original wording made Jesus the Christ subordinate to the Father, a view that the Western church felt endangered the doctrine of the Trinity. The filioque clause has part of the great schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic Church in the West, with its seat of power in Rome, and the Orthodox Church in the East, with its seat of power in Constantinople.

In AD 598, at the Council of Toledo, the Western church officially adopted the phrase and amended the Nicene Creed (from 325/381) accordingly. Since 598, the churches in the West have said the extra Latin word when reciting the creed. Christ's teaching in John 16:7 offers biblical warrant for the phrase. Eastern churches, however, never appreciated that argument.

The Eastern churches, while affirming the Trinity as three persons in one substance, tend to emphasize the threeness of the Trinity, the individual persons. The West, again while affirming the orthodox definition of the Trinity, tends to emphasize the unity of the Godhead.

What we use today

The Church has widely used the Nicene Creed since the fifth century. In some liturgical churches, for example the Episcopal/Anglican Churches, it is recited every Sunday. In others, the Nicene Creed is alternated with the Apostles' Creed for Sunday worship, although the Apostles' Creed is more often used at Baptismal services. The Eastern Orthodox tradition uses only the Nicene Creed. While most non-liturgical Protestant churches prefer the shorter Apostles' Creed, none would object to the doctrines the Nicene Creed summarizes. It is the only creed accepted by all three major branches of Christendom: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox.¹

¹ <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/55692-the-nicene-creed>

