



Lesson 2.

The Content and Use of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed of 325

Introduction

- What is the purpose of a creed?

The word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means "I believe." Creeds allow Christians to clearly and succinctly express the doctrines they confess, especially in contrast to false teachers who twist the meaning of Bible passages or pull them out of context to support their errors. Creeds also can be used as a way of expressing unity of belief.

- Why do you think we regularly include creeds in our worship services?

The three creeds that we recite are faithful explanations of what Scripture teaches, so we include them in worship to publicly confess our faith in the teachings of the Bible. When we confess the creeds, we express our unity of faith on multiple levels. We are in unity with the members of the congregation we are professing/praising with. We are in unity with Christians around the world who are members of the invisible church. We are in unity with Christians of all ages now in the glory of heaven who have confessed the same faith that we confess.

- Why do we recite the Nicene Creed on some Sundays and the Apostles' Creed on others?

The liturgies printed in our hymnbook follow the tradition of using the Nicene Creed as part of the Communion liturgy and using the Apostles' Creed for non-Communion services.

2.1 The Teaching of Arius

The controversy surrounding the teaching of Arius was the single most important reason for calling together the Council of Nicaea. Arius was a Christian priest in a suburban church of Alexandria in Egypt. He had been educated to be a clear and rational thinker in the tradition of Greek philosophy. When Bishop Alexander (bishop of Alexandria) explicitly stated that God the Father and Jesus the Son were equally divine and eternal, Arius' logic took him in a different direction. Since Jesus was the Son and begotten of the Father, Arius believed Jesus could not be eternal in the same sense the Father was and thus could not be equally divine. Arius' logic found favor with a number of other church leaders and teachers, especially in the Eastern Empire. Sometime in the early years of the controversy, Arius put his theology into verse in a writing called the Thalia (Banquet). Here are a few of the surviving lines:

We praise him [the Father] as without beginning in contrast to him [the Son] who has a beginning.
We worship him as timeless, in contrast to him who in time has come to exist.

He who is without beginning made the Son a beginning of created things.

He [the Son] has none of the distinct characteristics of God's own being.
For he is not equal to, nor is he of the same being as him.

As far as their glories, one infinitely more glorious than the other.

The Father in his essence is a foreigner to the Son, because he exists without beginning.

Hence the Son, not being [eternal] came into existence by the Father's will.

For it is impossible for him to fathom the Father, who is by himself.

For the Son himself does not even know his own essence. *Perhaps the best summary of his teachings is found in the concluding paragraph of the 325 creed of Nicaea (see below).]*

1. Proverbs 8:22-25 and Hebrews 1:1-5 may have been among the Bible passages Arius and his comrades used to support their theology. Read those passages and explain how Arius might have used them in his arguments. Do you see alternative ways of understanding them? *Proverbs is speaking of wisdom, not Jesus. Hebrews 1:5 quotes from Psalm 2:7, where "today" is the eternal "today" in which God has always existed without past, present, or future. Besides, Hebrews chapter 1 speaks of Jesus as a "radiance of God's glory" and "exact representation" of the Father's "being."*
2. Luther made a distinction between the ministerial and magisterial use of reason: We use reason as a servant (ministerial) in interpreting Scripture but not to judge (magisterial) what Scripture says. How might that distinction be applied to the discussion of Father and Son at the time of Arius? *The Arians reasoned that according to natural order, fathers must exist before their sons; a father cannot beget a son unless he exists before the son. Therefore, if God the Father is truly Father and God the Son is truly Son, then it stands to reason that the Father must have existed before the Son, and therefore the Son was a creation of the Father. This is logical but not biblical.*
3. Consider the following doctrinal statements and explain how a misuse of reason or logic led to its false teaching. Think of Scripture passages that give the correct understanding.
 - A. Jesus has a real human body that is in heaven, and a human body cannot be in multiple places at once. Therefore, Jesus' body cannot be present in the Lord's Supper; the bread and wine must be symbolic. *As Martin Luther indicated, Scripture clearly records Jesus' words when he instituted the Sacrament: "This is my body." (not a reminder or symbol) I can't understand how Jesus' body can pass through walls, or be with me wherever I am, but that's what he says!*
 - B. Science has clearly demonstrated that all living creatures share similarities, indicating that they evolved from a common ancestor. Because of this undeniable fact, we must conclude that the Bible's description of creation in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 is true spiritually and allegorically but not literally or scientifically. *The theory of evolution may indeed make logical sense to us, but ultimately, truth is not established based on what seems logical. Rather, truth is established based on what God reveals in his Word. Nothing in the context of Genesis chapters 1 and 2 would lead us to conclude that the creation account is supposed to be taken figuratively, and New Testament writers (such as Paul, writing in Romans chapter 5) clearly understood Adam and Eve to be real, historical people. (See Exodus 20:11; 31:17 and Romans 5:14.)*
 - C. The Bible clearly teaches that God has elected (chosen) some people to be saved. It logically follows that God also therefore elects some people to be damned to hell.

Yes, it's logical that our eternal destiny is either all God's doing, or all our doing, but that's not scriptural. Scripture says that if we're saved, it's to God's credit; if we're damned, it's our fault.

2.2 The Council and the Creed

Constantine called the bishops to meet in A.D. 325 at his summer palace in the city of Nicaea, located on a beautiful lake about 60 miles southeast of present-day Istanbul. Some 250 or more bishops attended, along with their assistants and other priests and observers. The bishops began meeting in late May or early June, with the emperor himself arriving on June 14. The council adjourned in August after the bishops had remained for the festivities celebrating the 20th anniversary of Constantine's rule. Although detailed minutes of the meetings have not survived, we can piece together what took place from the accounts of several participants and other early church historians.

Arius and Alexander were both present. They and their supporters were given opportunities to speak. Eusebius of Caesarea also presented a creed for consideration, but it was rejected for being insufficiently detailed on the areas of controversy. After days of additional discussion, a creed was adopted on June 19, and some 230 bishops signed their names to the document to show their agreement. Only a handful of bishops, including Arius, refused to sign and were deposed from office.

4. Some Christians, congregations, and church bodies proudly say that they have “no creed but the Bible.” Do you agree that this is a good position to hold? Why or why not?

As the statement stands on its own, we might be inclined to agree with it; after all, we confess “*sola scriptura*.” However, this statement can be used by Christians who refuse to acknowledge any doctrinal statement apart from the Bible on the grounds that doing so divides people. This position results from a misunderstanding of the purpose of creeds or doctrinal statements, which seek first and foremost to unite Christians around shared truth. Creeds divide only insofar as people insist on rejecting the scriptural truths that the creeds express. Rejecting (or ignoring) creeds can cause confusion or lead people to overlook important biblical teachings and the significance of doctrinal controversies.

6. Our society produces many examples of sermons, podcasts, and songs that use biblical ideas and terminology but in a vague or superficial way. Should we like or share such ideas, or is there some danger in doing so? Defend your answer.

As long as such content does not contain anything that is openly false, we may share it, especially if we believe it could benefit people's faith or help lead them to the gospel.

However, superficial or ambiguous language is dangerous because it allows people to interpret the message in various ways. For example, a song with the theme “God is love” could certainly be understood correctly; but if the artist intended that phrase to mean that we should never convict someone of sin because God loves everyone and does not judge, then it would be inappropriate to promote such a song.

2.3 The Contents of the Creed

Compare below the texts of the Apostles' Creed with the Nicene Creed of 325. (You will probably notice immediately that the creed approved by the council in 325, as given below, is not identical with the Nicene Creed we recite in church today. That difference will be discussed in the next lesson.)

The Apostles' Creed	The Nicene Creed of 325
I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things seen and unseen.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,	And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God,
<p>who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,</p> <p>suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell.</p> <p>The third day he rose again from the dead.</p> <p>He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.</p> <p>From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.</p>	<p>begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being [<i>homoousios</i>] with the Father. Through him all things were made, the things in heaven and on earth. For us and for our salvation he came down and was incarnate, and became truly human.</p> <p>He suffered;</p> <p>on the third day he rose again;</p> <p>He ascended into heaven;</p> <p>He will come to judge the living and the dead.</p>
I believe in the Holy Spirit;	And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.
<p>the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.</p>	

	<p>The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was a time when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence or a creation or changeable or alterable.</p>
--	--

7. Identify the phrases in the Nicene Creed of 325 that were included to clarify the proper teaching in opposition to Arius.

Note especially the christological phrases in the Second Article: *begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father*. Also note the concluding paragraph of anathemas.

8. The last paragraph of the creed of 325 consists of a series of condemnations (called *anathemas* in Greek). Why do you think that paragraph was added rather than having just a positive summary of the correct teaching? Can you think of any other examples from church history when anathemas were proclaimed?

Truths are often expressed or clarified by contrasting them with untruths. This is especially the case when discussing abstract ideas. So in addition to clarifying what they did believe, the bishops at Nicaea expressed precisely what they did not believe. They did not want the Arians to be able to deliberately misunderstand their creed in order to agree with it. By including anathemas, they eliminated this possibility. Our Lutheran Confessions also clearly express the doctrinal beliefs that we reject. See also our own synod’s [This We Believe](#).

2.4 The Nicene Christology

The new creed did not answer all the questions about the relationship between the Father and the Son, but it did clarify what Scripture teaches. First of all, because the Son is “begotten of the Father,” it can be said that he has the same essence (or “being”) as the Father. The *begetting* cannot be a temporal concept either, for Scripture makes it clear that the Son is eternal; he has always existed and was already present at creation. Thus, the Father did not exist before the Son. The *begetting* also means that the Son is not created like other beings. And since he is from the Father, he does not come *from nothing*, as is true with the created world.

Does this all make sense? Not entirely. Our minds can’t understand how it can be true that the Son was begotten and, at the same time, that he coexisted with the Father from eternity. But Scripture teaches both of these truths, so the Nicene council accepted both of them. In doing so, it reinforced an important aspect of Christian teaching: Scripture is to be believed even when it doesn’t make sense according to our human reason. That is why we can call many church teachings “mysteries”: that God could become man; that God could die on the cross; that the death of Christ can atone for the sins of the whole world; that water plus the Word can wash away sins; that we receive Christ’s body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. We believe these and other truths because the Bible teaches them. By teaching that the Son was equal to his Father and equally eternal, the Council of Nicaea set an example of how the church must stand by biblical teaching even when it is beyond our rational understanding.

Closing Thought and Prayer

The bishops who convened at Nicaea discussed and debated the Arian question in great detail. They took their stand on the truth of Scripture as they declared that Jesus was indeed equal to the Father in his essence and eternity. In order to clearly confess their faith and instruct others in correct doctrine, they drew up a statement of faith that became the basis for our Nicene Creed. By giving such careful attention to this christological question, they followed Paul's command to Timothy: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). In the next lesson we will learn about the aftermath of the council and how the creed continued to develop.

Prayer: Dear Jesus Christ, you are true God: eternal, immortal, unchangeable. We thank and praise you that you have preserved the truth of your Word against false teaching throughout the ages. We thank you for all those faithful Christian leaders whom you have raised up to teach your people and who have taken their stand on pure doctrine and have passed it down to us. Grant us strength and faithfulness to cherish your Word, defend it, and pass it on to the next generation. We pray in your name. Amen.