

Zion Lutheran Church, 15 S 4th St., Harrisburg, PA 17101

Tuesday Bible Study: February 15, 2022 – Nicene Creed

Historic Creeds of the Church: Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian

Opening Hymn of Praise:

St. Basil the Great writes in the fourth century: 'Our ancestors did not think it right to accept the blessings of the lamplight in the evening in silence. The moment it appeared, they would thank God for it. Who the author of this hymn of thanksgiving was we cannot say, but it is very old and the people still sing it.'

Now, as the sun sets in the west, soft lamplight glows as evening starts;
thus light from light, God's Son all blest comes from the immortal Father's heart;

We therefore sing our joyful songs to Father, Holy Spirit, Son,
to whom in every age belongs by right all praise from every tongue.

Lord Jesus, Son of God, from you all life, all joy come forth this night;
the world, and each soft glowing hue, reflect the glory of your light.

Phos Hilaron [ancient Christian hymn: "Hail Gladdening Light," translation of Koine Greek] (possibly second century) translation by Michael Counsell; 2000 Years of Prayer, compiled by Michael Counsell; Morehouse Publishing, 1999.

See also The Service of Light in Evening Prayer (Vespers) in the Lutheran Book of Worship

Nicene Creed

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.

The greatest doctrinal challenge to the church arose internally. Arius, a priest in Alexandria, suggested that if God begat Jesus, then Jesus had an origin. As such, Jesus did not share the same divine essence with the Father. Therefore, Jesus was a lesser god.

In AD 325, Constantine called the leaders of the church to participate in a council – that is, an assembly of bishops. They met in the city of Nicaea, in present-day Turkey. The Council of Nicaea, made up of about 300 participants, overwhelmingly voted against Arian teachings – ancient documents suggest that only 3 bishops refused to sign their agreement. The council expressed its views about God, Jesus, and the church in the Nicene Creed.

From: Rose Book of Bible Charts: Volume 3; Rose Publishing, 2014.

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

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.

adapted from material found in the Know the Creeds and Councils online course, taught by Justin Holcomb.

<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-nicene-creed-where-it-came-from-and-why-it-still-matters>