

Early Heresies and the Nicene Creed

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November 15, 2018

In the history of Christianity, as different people read Scripture and developed their own interpretation of it, there have been myriad conflicting interpretations. The dominant interpretation at any given time became doctrine, while any differing interpretations were labeled as heresies. The more prevalent and entrenched the various heresies became, so too grew the need to address and solve the problems presented by them. The ultimate answer to the major heresies of the early Christian church, specifically during the period between the first and fifth centuries, was the Nicene Creed, an affirmation of beliefs discussed first at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, then later at the First Council of Constantinople in 381, before finally being amended and officially adopted by Christianity as a whole during the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Specifically, the major heresies addressed by the Nicene Creed are Arianism, Gnosticism, and Macedonianism. Each of the major heresies the Nicene Creed refutes had distinct ideas about Christ and divinity that departed from what was commonly accepted at the time, as there was not yet an official, orthodox interpretation of scripture. Today, the Nicene Creed is often recited by rote, with the laity reading it as part of their Church service, but rarely taking time to examine it more deeply. If the exact phrases and wording used are examined, the Nicene Creed's purpose of addressing the dominant heresies of the era and providing an official stance on the questions they presented becomes clear. The insight granted by studying the Nicene Creed in this way deepens understanding of the beliefs it affirms far beyond that of someone who simply memorizes and recites the Nicene Creed.

While not the first major heresy that troubled the Church, Arianism was the most concerning for the bishops in Constantinople and Alexandria and was the primary reason for the assembling of the First Council of Nicaea by Emperor Constantine I. Arianism was the teachings of a priest named Arius who, in 319, disputed with the Bishop of Alexandria as to how it was possible that Christ was the Son of God, but also existed before Creation. For this disagreement, he was declared a heretic. Following that, “Arius, gathering adherents among the clergy and laypeople, taught... the belief that God the Father is primary and the Son and Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father.”¹ He believed that since God was eternal and Christ was not, as he and his followers believed that to be God’s Son meant that Jesus could not be eternal, that Christ was inherently subordinate to God. Understandably, this belief clashed with that of the Christian church. During the First Council of Nicaea, debate between the assembled bishops grew heated, ultimately boiling down to an argument between whether Jesus was of the same essence as God, called homoousios, or whether Jesus was of similar essence as God, called homoiousios. This debate is where the term “one iota of difference” comes from, since iota is Greek letter analogous to the letter I and was the only spelling difference between the two clashing ideas.²

Another heresy under discussion at the First Council of Nicaea was Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a curious system of beliefs that does not get its roots from Christianity. Rather, it is based on a merging of Jewish spiritual teachings and Greek philosophy. By the time of the First Council of Nicaea, however, Gnostic Christianity had emerged, which further merged together Gnostic ideas with Christian Scripture and beliefs. At its core, Gnosticism believes that Earth and

¹ Chas S. Clifton, *Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics* (Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), 15.

² Thomas H. Keene, "Homoousios and Homoiousios." Accessed November 14, 2018. <http://ksuweb.kennesaw.edu/~tkeene/ogtHomoousios&Homoiousios.htm>.

earthly things are to be rejected in favor of a purer, spiritual way of living. One of the basic beliefs is that there exists a “true, unknowable high God and a lesser god who rules [the] world... called the Demiurge.”³ Gnostic Christianity believed that the God of the Old Testament was this Demiurge and that the God of the New Testament was the high God, who had sent Jesus to Earth in order to instruct people on how to resist Demiurge’s influence and purify themselves enough to join the high God after death. Understandably, this clashed heavily with the beliefs of Orthodox Christianity and was an important point of discussion during the First Council of Nicaea.

In the end, conclusions were reached by the bishops of the First Council and they wrote and released the original Nicene Creed, which read:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

By whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth;

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

³ Chas S. Clifton, *Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics* (Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), 50.

And in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Knowing now what heresies the First Council had convened to discuss, this version of the Nicene Creed reads as a direct refutation of their beliefs and an affirmation of what would be the new doctrine. The first and third lines reject the Gnostic belief in two different Gods, while the fourth clearly states that Jesus was not only divine, but also man. The second, third, and last lines directly address Arianism and its belief that Jesus was subordinate to God, was not present at the beginning of all things, and that he was lesser due to having been created by God. The second and last lines also directly state that God and Christ are of the same essence, rather than being of similar essence. Following this, Arius and his followers were declared heretics and excommunicated.

However, while the original Nicene Creed clearly stated the natures of both God and Jesus, it was significantly less clear regarding that of the Holy Spirit. With the matter of the Holy Spirit open to interpretation, a new heresy grew, the Macedonians. The Macedonians, also known as the Pneumatomachi, followed the teachings of Bishop Macedonius, who in the later years of his life wrote on the nature of the Holy Spirit. He rejected the Divine nature of the Holy Spirit while also reasserting the earlier belief of Arianism that Christ was of similar essence to God, rather than of the same essence. As an extension of that, they believed that much in the same way Jesus was of similar essence to and was created by God, the Holy Spirit was of similar essence to and was created by Jesus. To them, the Holy Spirit was subordinate to both Jesus and

God, while Jesus was subordinate to God.⁴ The conflict and arguing between the Orthodox Church and both the recently strengthened Arianism and the newly formed Macedonians led to great strife for many decades, until a new council was convened in 381 by Emperor Theodosius I, in Constantinople. This First Council of Constantinople, among its many proceedings, discussed the original Nicene Creed, debating ways to rewrite it to address the new heresy and current conflicts. By the end, a new version of the Nicene Creed had been written, one that omitted parts of the earlier Creed in favor of new sections that spelled out doctrine in opposition to the Macedonians. This version, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, now read:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;

⁴ John Arendzen. "Pneumatomachi." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 12. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12174a.htm>

from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead. ;

whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This new version of the Nicene Creed rephrases parts of the earlier Creed to include language that further reinforced the Divine nature of Christ and his existence before Creation. It also contains new sections spelling out the nature of the Holy Spirit and how it too existed before Creation, had a hand in the birth of Christ, and also was created by God and was of the same essence as God, in exactly the same way as Christ. In the years following the First Council of Constantinople, the Macedonians splintered off into smaller fragments, with slightly differing beliefs and none of the unity they had prior. Within a few decades, the Macedonians as a whole faded away.

Despite this, in the century following the First Council of Constantinople, there was little unity between the disparate branches of the Church, with some areas affirming the original Nicene Creed, while others supported the newer Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Eventually, the issue would be settled at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. While the Nicene Creed was not one of the primary issues the Council of Chalcedon was assembled to address, it remains one of the many topics they decided upon that has lasting consequences to this day. They further

adjusted the Nicene Creed, into the version still in use today, though with minor changes being added later in history as the Church splintered further, and reaffirmed it as the core belief and doctrine of the Christian Church as a whole. While problems arose later down the line, this was the end of the early heresies questioning the divinity and nature of the different pieces of the Holy Trinity.

Contrary to how many today might think, the Nicene Creed is more than just a recitation and affirmation of beliefs. In truth, it was written specifically to address questions and conflicting beliefs regarding God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, as a line by line statement of doctrine opposing the core beliefs of many heresies, primarily Arianism, Gnosticism, and the Macedonians. Though it took nearly a century of arguing, convening councils, and debate, the Nicene Creed effectively accomplished its original goal and set forth a unifying doctrine that the entire Church could follow when it was affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon. Studying its words and the heresies that caused it to exist can give great insight into the beliefs within its lines, deepening understanding far beyond the rote recitation practiced by so many.

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