**Background to the Nicene Creed**

What is a Creed

* The word “creed” simply comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning “I believe.” So, it could be said that a creed is simply a statement of belief.
* J. N. D. Kelly provides a more robust definition:
  + A creed is “a fixed formula summarizing the essential articles of the Christian religion and enjoying the sanction of ecclesiastical [or church] authority.”[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Some very early creed-like statements can be found in Scripture itself (e.g., Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 12:3; 15:3-4; Matt. 28:19; 2 Thess. 2:15)
* Scripture consistently points to the truth of a central, basic teaching of the Christian faith, which good, biblically faithful creedal statements themselves seek to convey and pass on from one generation of believers to the next.

How were Creeds Used

* Creeds have been used throughout church history in many different ways (e.g., baptismal formulas, before and after Communion, teaching new converts, church liturgies, etc.)

Why Creeds are Important

* “[The] church of the past has given us a wealth of creeds, councils, confessions, and catechisms. These are tools that the church has used to speak about God clearly and faithfully, to guide its members closer to God, and [oftentimes] to distinguish authentic Christianity from the innovations, heresies, and false teachings the New Testament warns against.”[[2]](#footnote-2)
  + These creeds and confessions are not contrary to *sola Scriptura*, at least not when *sola Scriptura* is rightly understood.
    - Scripture alone is our final and authoritative norm in all matters of faith and practice; it is what has been called magisterial.[[3]](#footnote-3) It rules and norms our beliefs and our ethics.
    - That does not, however, contradict the truth that creeds and confessions are ministerial; they minister biblical truth to us faithfully and succinctly.
      * Insofar as creeds and confessions demonstrate biblical fidelity, we can rightly say that they minister to God’s people.
* Ultimately, creeds help lead us into worship and glorying in our great God.

The Nicene Creed in Particular

* **Biblical-Theological Background**
  + “The church had been wrestling since the death of the apostles with how to articulate the relationship between Father and Son, and these debates came to a head in the fourth century.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
  + Two predominant heresies prior to the fourth century dealing with the relationship between the Father and the Son, and, by extension, the Holy Spirit:[[5]](#footnote-5)
    - Dynamic Monarchianism
      * The Father is God, Jesus is a mere man whom the Christ comes over in power at his baptism, and the Spirit is an impersonal force.
    - Modalistic Monarchianism
      * There is one unipersonal God who shows up in history as the Father, then the Son, then the Spirit (think one actor with three masks).
  + In the early fourth century a new heresy arose and dethroned Monarchianism as preeminent. Arianism, named after the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, moved away from those two earlier heresies, and while seeking to affirm monotheism, resulted in a heretical understanding of both the Son and the Spirit.
    - The Son was the first created being, and as such the greatest, but was not true God of true God.
* **Social and Ecclesiastical Background**
  + Important dates, places, and people:[[6]](#footnote-6)
    - **AD 313** – Emperor Constantine (ruler of the Western Roman Empire) and Emperor Licinius (ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire) came together in Milan to officially establish a policy of freedom for all religions, Pagan and Christian.
    - **AD 318** – the teachings of an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius (AD 256-336) were being publicly proclaimed.
    - **AD 320** – Alexander gathers a group of Egyptian bishops to depose Arius for heresy.
    - **AD 324** – the Roman Empire was united under a single throne by Emperor Constantine through his defeat of Emperor Licinius.
    - **AD 325** – Constantine calls for the ecumenical Council of Nicaea. This council took place in Nicaea, which is in modern-day Turkey. It is from this council that we get the earliest forms of the Nicene Creed.
    - **AD 328** – Athanasius, formerly senior deacon to Alexander of Alexandria, was appointed as new bishop of Alexandria (by recommendation of Alexander).
    - **AD 337** – Constantine dies and the Roman Empire is divided between his two sons, Constans (who ruled in the West) and Constantius (who ruled in the East).
    - **AD 353** – Constantius defeated Magentius in battle, and once again the Roman Empire was under a single Emperor, only this time it was the pro-Arian Constantius.
    - **AD 356** – Hilary of Poitiers was exiled and banished to Asia Minor by Constantius.
    - **AD 356** – Hosius of Cordova was imprisoned and tortured (he was 100 years old at this point in time!).
    - **AD 364** – Valentinian became Emperor, and he proceeded to place the Eastern portion of the empire under the control of his brother, Valens.
    - **AD 373** – Athanasius died, but, it should be noted, not in exile.
    - **AD 380** – Theodosius, who was emperor of the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire, issued an edict declaring Nicene believers to be truly “Catholic,” thus giving them legal possession of all church buildings.
    - **AD 381** – Theodosius called for the ecumenical Council of Constantinople. This council took place in Constantinople, which is in modern-day Istanbul. It is from this council that we get the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, otherwise known as the more full edition of the Nicene Creed we are familiar with today.

The Earliest Form of the Nicene Creed

“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Creator of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the **essence** of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not created, of the **same essence** as the Father, through Whom [i.e., through Christ] all things were created both in heaven and on earth; Who for us human beings and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming again to judge the living and the dead; and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Later Form of the Nicene Creed

“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible; and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not created, of the **same essence** as the Father, through whom all things were created; who for us human beings and our salvation came down from the heavens and was mad flesh from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and comes again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of who kingdom there shall be no end; and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped together and glorified together, who spoke through the prophets; and [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 age to come.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London, 1950), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Justin Holcomb, “No Creed but the Bible?” *Credo* 6, no. 4 (2016): 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scripture is often described as *norman normans non normata* (i.e.,the norming norm that is not normed itself). This is a helpful distinction when considering the magisterial nature of Scripture and the ministerial nature of the ecumenical creeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Take note, here, that these were two *predominant* heresies that the church was facing in the fourth century; they were not the only heresies facing the church throughout the first three centuries (e.g. Ebionism, Origenist Subordinationism, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The dates and events listed come primarily from Nick Needham’s work, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: Volume 1 – The Age of the Early Church Fathers* (Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: Volume 1 – The Age of the Early Church Fathers* [Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publication, 2017]). Other resources will be footnoted when appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, 222-23. Nicaea also anathematized, or declared one to be outside of the universal and orthodox church, anyone who would say, ““There was a time when He [the Logos] was not; and, He was not before He was created; and, He was created out of nothing, or out of another essences or thing; and, The Son of God is created, or changeable, or can alter – the holy, catholic and apostolic Church anathematises [sic] those who say such things.” (Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, 223) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, 240-41. Trueman notes concerning the *filioque* clause, “Of course, the Western addition of the dual procession of the Spirit (‘Who proceeds from the Father and the Son’) at the Third Council of Toledo in 589 has been a source of East/West contention ever since, but, with this one exception, there is not debate about the rest of the creed’s teachings.” (Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 95) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)