

# Significance of the statements of belief in the nicene creed



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Explain the significance of the statements of belief in the Nicene Creed. What do these statements tell us a) about the nature of God and b) about the christological debates of the first centuries of the church?

## Introduction

For this assignment I will be looking at the Nicene Creed <sup>[1]</sup> and trying to explain some of the key statements within it; especially focusing on three particular key areas of the Creed, namely ‘ God the Father’, ‘ God the Son’ and ‘ God the Holy Spirit’. It is my intention to look at these three key areas and try to highlight something about the nature of God and about the Christological debate going on in the first centuries for each area.

To start the assignment off I will briefly look at what the Nicene Creed is and also look briefly at other Christological debates going on in the first centuries before bringing it all together in my conclusion.

## Intro into the Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is a statement of belief widely used within the Christian churches today. The origins of it were created at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD and it was then later amended in 381AD into a format more recognisable today. Brian Hebblethwaite tells us that “ The Nicene Creed still represents perhaps the most compelling as well as the most wide-ranging vision of the world and human life, and of their meaning and their destiny”.

<sup>[2]</sup> he goes on to say that the reason why the Nicene Creed is still around today is so that we can “ maintain continuity down through the ages” as the years go by. <sup>[3]</sup> David Ford in his book tells us that to him the Nicene is one

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of the most significant creeds because it deals with the “ true divinity of Jesus Christ as ‘ of one substance (or being) with the Father’ ”. <sup>[4]</sup> It is without doubt one of the key Creeds that we have around today but why do we have this Creed? There was so much division amongst the leaders and churches that the first council of Nicea was formed and it was during this council that a serious debate took place to try and sort out the “ terminology used to describe the Son.” <sup>[5]</sup>

What were the Christological debates of the 1st centuries of the church?

The Nicene Creed was not the only creed being debated in the first centuries. Many people had views not just about the church but especially about the person, nature and role of Jesus. Discussions raged on and on. We see other doctrines come into play like Arianism which denied the divinity of Christ or Apollinarism which believed that Jesus had a human mind and a divine soul. Because nobody could agree at first, councils like Nicea had to be formed, and later others such as the First Council of Ephesus in 431AD and the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. At these councils they debated and argued and other Creeds were formed. However the Nicene Creed is very much one that has stood the test of time. But why? To answer this I need to start looking at some of the key statements within the Nicene Creed.

One God

“ We believe in one God” is the first line of the Nicene Creed. This starts the whole process off. We believe in ONE God, not three, despite the fact that we have the Father, Son and Holy Spirit which to some may look like 3 gods. As

Willis quite rightly tells us, when looking at debates in the early centuries and especially within the Nicene Creed we are not being told that “ God is the Father” and that the Son and Holy Spirit are just the assistants. <sup>[6]</sup> They are three in one, the Trinity, One God. Hebblethwaite tells us that right from the beginning the most important start to the Creed is given to an affirmation that we believe in one God, and by ‘ we’ he means Christians. <sup>[7]</sup> In his book, Hunter starts off with the belief in one God the theme of oneness can then be made bigger and greater by saying – ‘ one God’ the Father, ‘ one Lord’ is Jesus and then ‘ the Lord’ is the Holy Spirit <sup>[8]</sup> and it is these three areas I would like to look at now in more detail.

### God the Father

‘ The Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible’. The very nature of calling God Father can be seen throughout the Old Testament. That is what he is addressed as and referred to, and “ it captures something of the oversight, care, concern and steadfast love that God is believed to exercise towards his ‘ children’ ” <sup>[9]</sup> exclaims Harold Hunter. It lies within the very nature of who God is, that he sustains and upholds his creation. Having a parental, caring God who is there for you and who does care for you through life and death is a powerful loving thing for a father to do. God the Father easily has those qualities and more. <sup>[10]</sup>

To say that God is the creator means that he did create all that exists, heaven and earth in its entirety and although debates about this enraged within the council Ford tells us that the issue of God as creator is a

discussion that would have gone on within the church itself before the Nicene Creed <sup>[11]</sup>. Within the discussions themselves Ford goes on to tell us that “ Gnostic forms of Christianity” tried to corrupt the thinking of bishops and to prove and try and deter thinkers to believe that God could not be the creator as how could he create something out of nothing. <sup>[12]</sup> Something had to be done and the Scholars decided to add the words ‘ maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible’ so that Gnostic thinking could be completely wiped out and disbanded of their thinking within this area. God was the God of creation of all the things that we can see and not see.

In the Gospel of John we can see a number of areas where God the Father and God the Son are one. Scripture speaks of the relationship between Father and Son: “ oneness (John 1: 1-3 and John 10: 30), their terms of pre-existence (1: 1-2), intimacy (1: 1-2, 18) co-labour in creation (1: 3) and shared glory (1: 14)”. <sup>[13]</sup> Christian tradition may dictate that God the Father is the senior and first person of the Trinity but in reality this is one God in all modes of his being. <sup>[14]</sup> The Father is the a-temporal ‘ source’ of the son. God the Father and God the Son are one despite the numerous debates, both now and then, Nicea claims. However, I am sure, says Hebblethwaite, that early Christians saw “ Jesus Christ as God made man for the world’s salvation.”

God the Son

‘ We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God’. Was Jesus God, or not? A question that had many people debating and arguing even today but

especially in the first centuries. Councils were setup to discuss and debate many issues but it was the council of Nicea that really confirmed the heresies about Jesus were wrong. The Nicene creed tells us that at no point was God the Father ever seen as a “ solitary” being, a Father without a Son. Jesus has always been there. “ What the Father is and does, the Son is and also does”. <sup>[15]</sup> However, this had to come into being because of people like Arius who constantly debated and caused trouble in the early church. He was one of the reasons that the council of Nicea had to be formed so as to deal with these different beliefs. Arius really did believe that God the Father was alone and that he didn’t need a son or spirit, and if Jesus did exist then there was no connection with God himself. Fortunately this teaching “ was rejected by the Church at the Council of Nicea”. <sup>[16]</sup> Arius was not alone in a different way of thinking. It is well known that the very early Christians thought one God was the Father, however Jesus tried to teach them a new way to look at things and to open their eyes. “ Just as his God was their God, so his Father would be their Father too” <sup>[17]</sup> and in fact it was the Council of Nicea that once and for all “ settled the Arian controversy’ that Jesus was *homoousios* with the Father”. <sup>[18]</sup> This is also confirmed by Migliore who says that the creed speaks of the Son as being “ of one substance with God the Father and Chalcedon affirms that Jesus Christ is ‘ fully divine and fully human’ <sup>[19]</sup> and Macquarrie who tells us that because of Nicea we “ now say of Jesus Christ that he is ‘ of one being’ with the Father, rather than ‘ of one substance’. <sup>[20]</sup>

When structuring the Nicene Creed it is notable that the paragraphs on each of the main points are very uneven and far more weight is give to ‘ God the

Son' and yet they are "three in one and one in three" they are equal and all work together. <sup>[21]</sup> However, we know that there were many heresies and ideas going around at the time of the first centuries so when coming up with the Nicene Creed the "Church and the Creed affirmed: the Father of Jesus Christ, and none other is *Pantokrator*". <sup>[22]</sup> meaning Almighty. Jesus was divine and we can see within scripture the relationship between the Father and the Son in (Mark 8: 29 and 1 Corinthians 12: 3). These would have helped scholars in their arguments for the Nicene creed to be written.

### God the Holy Spirit

'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life' is a big statement to make and the creed goes on to say that, with the Father and the Son, the Spirit is to be worshipped together, all as one. At first many of the early church thinkers thought at one point there was a binitarian God, looking at specifically God the Father and God the Son. <sup>[23]</sup> The third part of the trinity was, according to McGrath, was recognised in the aftermath of the councils with the help of the "writings of Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea". <sup>[24]</sup> Athanasius referred to it as the 'Divine nature of the Spirit'...but also that he "developed a framework within which the Spirit and the Son could both be affirmed to be divine". <sup>[25]</sup> While Willis believes that the Holy Spirit really became recognised in the "creed of 381". <sup>[26]</sup> Yet this part of the creed informs us "that God is not only over us and for us but also at work in us". <sup>[27]</sup> Migliore also goes on to say that you can't have a Father and a Son without the "affirmation of faith in the the Holy Spirit". <sup>[28]</sup> It was at the

council of Constantinople in 381 that the trinitarian doctrine made the Holy Spirit equal with the Father and Son.

The early church, it seems, didn't have as much of a problem with Jesus and the Holy Spirit as they did with Jesus and the Father. It seems they firmly believed that they were living in a time " of the long-promised outpouring of the Spirit" <sup>[29]</sup> especially as this can be seen in the working through of Pentecost ( Acts 2: 1-31). However, to be absolutely sure of the co-equality of a triune God, the Nicene Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son are to be worshiped together. <sup>[30]</sup>

## Conclusion

This has been a fascinating but sadly brief look at first centuries arguments from scholars with a number of councils, but especially the Council of Nicea. In 2000 words I can not do it justice, but, as Willis tells us, the church really had to put up a fight in these early arguments and debates and despite each of the persons having their own names or titles (for example Jesus Christ is the " Eternal Son" and the Holy Spirit is the " Lord and giver of life"), it is the Holy Triune, Father, Son and Spirit who is the " Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier." <sup>[31]</sup> We are looking at One true God. However, even though there were still dissenters, eventually even they had to accept the trinitarian view of the decision being made at councils, so that all Christians now confess that " God is three persons in one being". <sup>[32]</sup> I hope that I have been able to bring some explanation to some of the statements within the creed and give



justice to each one in regards to the nature of God and some of the debates going on.

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[1] All references and quotations from the Nicene Creed are taken from the 325AD version as printed in Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity* , page 1

[2] Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 1996, 7.

[3] Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 7.

[4] David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 93.

[5] Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World* (Langham Global Library, 2015), 26.

[6] David E. Willis, *Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 44.

[7] Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 33.

[8] Harold D. Hunter, “ Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) Faith and Order Paper, No. 153 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, Revised Edition, 1991), 139 Pp. ISBN 2-8254-1036-5,” *Pneuma* , 1992, 14: 18, [http://dx. doi. org/10. 1163/157007492x00177](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157007492x00177). <https://assignbuster.com/significance-of-the-statements-of-belief-in-the-nicene-creed/>

[9] Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 41.

[10] Hunter, “ Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) Faith and Order Paper, No. 153 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, Revised Edition, 1991), 139 Pp. ISBN 2-8254-1036-5,” 14: 27.

[11] Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* , 16.

[12] Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* , 17.

[13] Adesola Joan Akala, *The Son-Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 110.

[14] Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 44.

[15] Hunter, “ Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) Faith and Order Paper, No. 153 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, Revised Edition, 1991), 139 Pp. ISBN 2-8254-1036-5,” 14: 44.

[16] Hunter, “ Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) Faith and Order Paper, No. 153 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, Revised Edition, 1991), 139 Pp. ISBN 2-8254-1036-5,” 14: 45.

[17] Green, Pardue, and Yeo, *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World* , 25.

[18] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 17.

[19] Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 140.

[20] John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited* , 1998, 46.

[21] Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 55.

[22] Hunter, “ Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) Faith and Order Paper, No. 153 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, Revised Edition, 1991), 139 Pp. ISBN 2-8254-1036-5,” 14: 29.

[23] McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* , 281.

[24] McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* , 17.

[25] McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* , 283.

[26] Willis, *Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith* , 103.

[27] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* , 165.

[28] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* , 165.

[29] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* , 168.

[30] Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look at the Nicene Creed* , 129.

[31] Willis, *Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith* , 44.

[32] Green, Pardue, and Yeo, *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World* , 29.