

What Disagreements Led to the Nicene Creed?

The controversy over the relationship between the Father and the Son (and, later, the Spirit) broke out in the first half of the fourth century AD, but the source of the controversy goes back 1,700 years before that, to Moses.

While Moses was recounting the history of Israel's deliverance from slavery up to the entrance into the Land of Promise, he gave the people what essentially became their creed: "*Hear, O Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one*" (see Deuteronomy 6:4). This *Shema* (from the Hebrew word for "hear") is the fundamental confession of Israel: Yahweh is one God, He is our God, and you shall love this God with all your heart and soul and might. You shall have no others.

While there are indications in the Old Testament that the one God is plural in some way (e.g., Genesis 1:26; the personification of Wisdom, the Angel of Yahweh), the real "problem" begins when Jesus appears. Now here is someone, a man, who is identified as the Son of God at His Baptism. He is anointed with the Spirit, marking Him as the one whom God has sent into the world. He does the things God does, like forgive sins and heal people and raise the dead. For those who daily confessed the *Shema*, it was strange and significant that the disciples worshipped Jesus, saying, "*Truly You are the Son of God*" (Matthew 14:33; see also Luke 24:52). They knew better than anyone that you should never worship either a creature or another beside the one true God. So if they worship Him, they must believe He is God (the only God, who is to be worshipped), just as Thomas confesses in John 20:28, Peter does in 2 Peter 1:1, and Paul does in Titus 2:13.

That fact—that Jesus is called God and worshipped as God—creates a basic difficulty for the church. The Scriptures do not directly address how it is possible to have one God who is, at the same time, plural in person. They simply give us the revelation of God's actions, fulfilled and made explicit in the man Jesus. Jesus commands that people of all nations be baptised into the name of this triune God: Father and Son and Holy Spirit; three, but one.

The various attempts to make sense of this, after the time of the New Testament, all came to a head in an argument over how we can use human words to talk about God and what words we should use.

What words correctly describe the relationship of the Father and the Son, and what Scriptures describe that relationship? The Nicene Creed was not produced out of whole cloth in 325. It was the fruit of decades—even centuries—of regional creeds, local councils, and local controversies.

In 324, Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Around the same time, he wrote a letter to both Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, one of the priests there, imploring them to set aside what he saw as minor differences, which should not divide the church. When that did not quell the controversy, he sent another letter in 325, calling for a council to be convened in Nicaea (after originally wanting it in Ancyra).

The creed that came from Nicaea originally closed with words meant to explicitly condemn Arius and his sympathisers. That closing states that the catholic and apostolic church anathematises or condemns anyone who says there was a time when Christ was not, or that He did not exist before He was born, or that He came into existence from nothing, or that He is subject to change and being altered. How exactly these words and the rest of the creed came to be, and who was responsible for writing them down, is not very clear, except it seems to be in answer to at least one other confession, probably presented at the council by Eusebius of Nicomedia.

Nevertheless, the intention and impact are clear, especially when compared with the Apostles' Creed: the Son is eternally begotten from the Father, meaning that there never was a time when the Father existed without the Son, or vice versa. Further, the Greek word *ousia*, translated into English as "substance," was given a technical meaning, that the Father and the Son share the same divine being. None of this, of course, removed all the controversy over the relationship of the Son to the Father. In some ways, the conflict was only transferred to how the Spirit relates to the Father and the Son!

The Christian Faith was confessed by the Creed produced at Nicaea, and then it was modified and finished in 381 at the First Council of Constantinople.

Finally, however, the conclusion was not based on obscure philosophical words that we no longer understand; it was based on the triune God's active work of creation and redemption, and on how He brings us into that divine work and life, by Holy Baptism into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the heart of the controversy, while centred in the precise meaning of specific words (both scriptural and not), was really in Christian Baptism and Christian worship; that is, who we are and what we do.

It is helpful for many reasons to know the history and context of the creeds, and it is essential to know how the credal phrases flow out of and reflect the Scriptures. But the rubber hits the road when this ancient faith becomes our own and does not remain the creed only of those who were gathered in Nicaea or Constantinople. The God whom we confess in this creed is the same God into whose name we were baptised, and this God—and no other—is the God we worship by speaking of His great deeds of salvation for our ancestors, for us, and for our descendants.