**The Nicene Creed (part one)**

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 9:6-7; Colossians 1:15-20

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 171, 238, 169, 467, 117

**Series:** Nicene Creed (#1)

**Theme:** The doctrine of the person of Christ expressed in the second part of the Nicene Creed

**Proposition:** Worship and confess Christ the glorious God-man

**Introduction**

The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed date from the early centuries of the Christian church. Creeds, also called “symbols of faith,” are concise and authorised statements of the essential tenets of the faith. The believing community of the church uses these creeds for testimony, instruction, and worship.

Although many kinds of creeds exist, the ecumenical creeds have the broadest recognition within the Christian church. They are called “ecumenical” because they have been approved and accepted by a large portion of the churches of Christendom. The Nicene Creed contains four parts:

1. Belief about God the Father
2. Belief about Jesus the Son
3. Belief about the Holy Spirit
4. Belief about the church universal

Other than the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed is likely the most universally accepted and recognised statements of the Christian faith. This sermon focusses on the second and largest part of the Nicene Creed which confesses Christ as the divine Son of God, incarnate by the Holy Spirit.

1. **Church confusion**

The first few hundred years following the life, death and resurrection of Christ was a period of much theological confusion in the church especially concerning the nature of the Trinity and the person of Christ. The Nicene creed was written to oppose false ideas which are in opposition to the Christian doctrine revealed in Scriptures. These heresies were developed as different groups of people wrestled to understand the Word of God. Let’s look at those who were confused about the person of Christ as this will help us to understand the wording of the second part of the Nicene Creed.

Firstly there were those who denied Christ’s deity (mainly from Jewish backgrounds):

1. **Judaism** taught that Jesus was merely the son of Mary and Joseph. Some might accept him as a prophet, but not as the promised Messiah, and certainly not as the Son of God.
2. **Ebionites** originated in the Qumran community. They denied the virgin birth and deity of Christ. They believed that Jesus had been chosen to be the Messiah and had received the Holy Spirit at His baptism.
3. **Alogi** –rejected the Biblical revelation that Jesus is the eternal Word. They believed in the virgin birth, but nevertheless saw Christ as a mere man, believing that He received the Holy Spirit at his baptism.
4. **Dynamic monarchians**. ‘Monarchianism’ (a compound word made up of mono, meaning "one" and arche meaning "rule") holds that there is one God as one person: God the Father. The Dynamic Monarchians held to an early form of ‘adoptionism’, believing Jesus to have been a perfect man. Some accepted that he was born of a virgin who was adopted to be the Son of God at his baptism and deified (made to be God) at his resurrection.

Secondly, there were those who denied Christ’s humanity:

1. **Gnostics** taught that the divine spirit of Christ had entered the man Jesus at his baptism and then left him again before his crucifixion.
2. **Docetists** believed that Christ never actually had a human body, but just appeared to be a physical being.
3. **Modalistic monarchians** believed that Jesus was one of the ‘modes’ in which the one person of God manifested Himself.

Thirdly there were those who proposed a ‘middle way’; attempting to bring together both the divine and human natures of Christ:

1. **The Alexandrian school** (including the church Fathers Clement and Origen) taught that Christ had always pre-existed with the Father but that he was subordinate (inferior) to the Father. This teaching preceded Arianism.
2. **Sabellianism** taught that the identity of God changed through time within different ‘dispensations’. In the Old Testament God appeared as the Father, then in New Testament times as the Son and then after Pentecost as the Holy Spirit.
3. **Arianism** is a heresy named after Arius, who was a priest in the early fourth century AD in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius taught that the Son of God is a super human creature made out of nothing, and that the nature of Christ is unlike that of God the Father. Arianism, then, is the view that Jesus is a finite created being with some divine attributes, but not eternal and not divine in and of Himself. The Nicene Creed directly refutes the false teaching of Arianism.
4. **Semi-Arianism** was a slight modification to Arianism and taught that Christ was of a similar, but not the same substance as God the Father.

After the divine and human natures of Christ were firmly established by the church, the question remained “*how do these two natures relate to each other?*” The following wrong answers were given:

1. Apollinarius minimized the difference between Christ’s divine and human natures by suggesting that the Logos replace the Spirit in Jesus.
2. Nestorius taught that Jesus had two separate personalities; one human and one divine.
3. Eutychus taught that in Christ the human and divine natures were fused together into a single nature.

The theological confusion of the early church was removed as God worked through the diligent efforts of church councils who met together to collectively think, pray, and discern the meaning of the Scriptures. The Word of God wisely states that there is safety and victory in an abundance of counsellors (Prov 11:14; 24:6). Just as the ‘Jerusalem council’, recorded in Acts 15, resulted in clear understanding for the early church about circumcision, so subsequent church gatherings resulted in further clarity in the interpretation of Scripture, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Council clarity**

Representatives from individual local churches and groups of churches have met together at many different places on many different occasions over the past two thousand years. Whilst there have been a number of notable people who have been gifted with extraordinary theological and pastoral insight (men like Augustine, Calvin and more recently R.C. Sproul) no one person has all the answers to the questions which arise from the study of the Bible.

In His perfect providence, the Lord has been pleased to bring clarity over time through the development of theological insight in the church as a whole. There have been a number of key church councils where clarity on particular Biblical teachings has been reached and then expressed in a carefully constructed pattern of sound words. This is the providential process by which we now have the Nicene Creed.

The Council of Nicea was a gathering of Christian church leaders convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325AD. This is often referred to as the ‘first ecumenical council’. They met for a whole month to discuss a range of issues including the teaching of Arius, the date for celebration of Easter, and various matters of church discipline. This council condemned the views of Arianism and Semi-Arianism. The first part of what we now know as the Nicene Creed resulted from the Council of Nicea. Nicea was a city in what is now Turkey, and is the place from which the creed’s name ‘Nicene’ is derived.

In 381 AD (56 years later) the Council of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul in Turkey) was convened by the Roman Emperor Theodosius who wanted to unite the whole Roman Empire with a single orthodox confession. This is often referred to as the ‘second ecumenical council’. Whilst the council took place in Constantinople, the imperial capital of the Eastern Empire, where the teaching of Arius was dominant, Theodosius himself had a strong commitment to the Nicene Creed.

Like Nicea, the Council of Constantinople strongly denounced Arianism. Council members also discussed the hierarchy of bishops, rules for bringing heretics back into the church, and disciplinary issues among church leaders. This council also condemned the teaching of Apollinarius who had minimised the different between the divine and human natures of Christ and also expanded the Nicene Creed into what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Niceno-Constantinople Creed’. Two articles were added to the shorter work of Nicea which summarised the person of the Holy Spirit and the nature of the church.

Whilst Theodosius had hoped that this Council would bring greater unity to the Eastern and Western branches of the church, the divide between these two parts was increased by the declaration that the Bishop of Constantinople would have secondary honour after the Bishop of Rome. When the ‘Great Schism’ occurred in 1054, with the division of the Western Roman Catholic Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church, one of the main disagreements was over the hierarchy of Rome and Constantinople.

The Council of Chalcedon was the fourth ecumenical council of the Christian church which was convened by the Emperor Marcian in 451AD. 520 church leaders took part. Chalcedon re-affirmed the third ecumenical council which was convened in Ephesus in 431AD and condemned the positions of Nestorius and Eutychus. Remember that Nestorius taught that Jesus had two separate personalities, one human and one divine. Whereas Eutychus had taught that in Christ the human and divine natures were fused together into a single nature. The Nicene Creed in its current form was approved at the Council of Chalcedon, which also produced its own confession of faith; the Creed of Chalcedon.

The "filioque" phrase in the Nicene Creed, that the Holy Spirit ‘proceeds from the Father **and the Son**’ was not added until AD 589.

In this very brief overview of some of the early church councils, we see the providential guidance of the Lord working through human gatherings, human frailties, and human divisions to bring about clarity about key doctrines of the Christian faith, especially the nature of Christ Himself. The Nicene Creed is a product of these councils and enables us to faithfully confess Christ both within the church and to the world. All creeds and confessions only have any value if they accurately reflect the truth of Scripture, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Christ confessed**

The Bible directly states that Jesus is God in a number of texts including Colossians 1:15-19 (also John 1:1, 20:28; Romans 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8; 1 John 5:20). Other passages include John 13:3, 17:5, 1 Timothy 3:16, and Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is eternal (Col 1:15,17 – also Isaiah 9:6; Micah 5:2; John 1:1–2; 8:58; 17:5; 24; 1 John 1:1; Revelation 1:8). Christ performed works which only God can do. He was active in Creation (Colossians 1:16) – also John 1:3, 10; Hebrews 1:2,10). He is the upholder of all things (Colossians 1:17 – also Hebrews 1:3; cf. Luke 10:22; John 3:35; 17:2; Ephesians 1:22). Taken by themselves, these verses provide enough evidence for the church to believe in and teach the deity of Jesus Christ.

However, the indirect evidence of Scripture is equally compelling. The names of God are often applied to Jesus. He is called "the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father" and "Immanuel" {meaning "God with us"} (Isaiah 9:6; Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22–23). Elsewhere Jesus is called "The Lord (Jehovah) our Righteousness," "God" and "Son of God."(Jeremiah 23:6; Isaiah 40:3; Hebrews 1:8; 1 Timothy 3:16; John 10:36).

The Bible ascribes the characteristics of deity to Jesus Christ. He is described as **omnipresent** (Matthew 18:20; 28:20; John 3:13), **omniscient** (John 2:24, 25; 16:30; 21:17; Revelation 2:23), **omnipotent** (Isaiah 9:6; Philippians 3:21; Revelation 1:8; cf. John 5:17; Hebrews 1:3; Matthew 28:18) and **immutable** (Hebrews 1:10–12; 13:8).

Jesus Christ is equal with God the Father. He is worshiped as God (John 20:28; Acts 7:59; Hebrews 1:6; cf. Exodus 34:14 and Matthew 4:10). His name is assigned equal standing with God the Father in the church's baptismal formula and in the apostolic benediction (Matthew 28:19; cf. Acts 2:38; 2 Corinthians 13:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2). He forgives sin (Matthew 9:2–7; cf. Mark 2:7; Luke 7:47, 48; Colossians 3:13). He will raise the dead and execute judgment (John 11:25; cf. John 5:25, 28–29; 6:39, 40, 54; John 5:22).

Jesus Christ Himself claimed deity. He taught His disciples to pray in His name (John 16:23, 24).He claimed that He and the Father were one and that He was the Son of God (John 10:30, 36; 14:9; 17:11). He claimed that to know Him was to know God, to see Him was to see God, to receive Him was to receive God, to believe Him was to believe in God and to honour Him was to honour God, while to hate Him was to hate God (John 8:18; 14:7; John 12:45; 14:9; Mark 9:37; John 12:44; 14:1; John 5:23; John 15:23).

The humanity that Christ assumed was complete. He took to himself all that it means to be human—body, soul, mind, and will; with only sin excepted. Jesus’s humanity is evident from the following in the New Testament:

* He was born. Although his conception was miraculous, his natural birth was typically human (Luke 2:7).
* He grew and developed. In his humanity, Jesus experienced ordinary human growth and development intellectually, physically, spiritually, and relationally (Luke 2:40).
* He experienced the limitations of being a finite human being. He hungered (Matt 4:2), thirsted (John 4:7; 19:28), grew tired (John 4:6), and experienced the full range of ordinary, non-sinful human emotions (Matt 26:37; John 2:15; 11:35). In his humanity, his knowledge was sometimes limited according to the will and purposes of God (e.g. Mark 5:30; 13:32).
* He was tempted, but He never sinned (Heb 4:15; 9:14; 1Pet 1:19).
* He suffered, died, and was buried. In His divine essence, God cannot die; He is immortal. However, because the God the Son assumed humanity, He is capable of suffering and dying as a part of his atoning work. He assumed the likeness of sinful flesh in order to condemn sin in his own body through death (Rom 8:3–4). He was legally reckoned to be a sinner, though He himself was without sin, so that He might pay the penalty for sin (2 Cor 5:21).
* He was raised from death in the same body in which He died, only now in glorified, immortal life. In this way Christ is, as Paul puts it, the last Adam, the true human who ushers in the age of the resurrection, the first fruits of all humanity, who will be raised on the last day (1 Cor 15:45).
* He continues his kingly and priestly work. The Son’s incarnation had a beginning in human history, but it has no end. He continues to reign as the exalted Son of God from the Father’s right hand (Rom 1:4; Col 3:1). He also continues his priestly work of intercession in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 7:24–25).
* He will return in his humanity. When Jesus ascended to heaven, the angel announced to the apostles that Christ would return just has he had been taken up into heaven (Acts 1:11).

In light of the revelation of Christ in Scripture, worship and confess Christ the all-sufficient glorious God-man: *One Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.*

AMEN