



WE BELIEVE ...



*Celebrating the 1700th Anniversary
of the Nicene Creed*



Rev Dr Mark Garner
Rev Matthew Jones

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

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 world to come.

1. What is a creed?

To put it simply, a creed is a concise summary of the essential elements of the Christian faith. (The word “creed” comes from *credo*, meaning “I believe”, which is the first word in the original Latin.) Since the early centuries of the church’s history many, possibly hundreds, of creeds have been formulated, at various times and in various places, by church councils or prominent individuals. A few are still widely used today; they include the Apostles’ Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed, whose seventeen hundredth anniversary we acknowledge this year, is probably the best-known and most widely used creed in the worldwide church. It is an indispensable part of the liturgy in many Eucharistic services throughout the Anglican communion, and is used by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and most Protestant churches.

The reasons for formulating each creed varied according to the cultural, historical, and theological contexts of the time. As a consequence, they differ a little in their emphasis and attention to detail, as is the case with the four creeds mentioned above. But, with these small variations, they are all summary statements of the core beliefs of the church. In section 3 below, we consider how the cultural and theological context, in which the Nicene Creed was formulated by the ecumenical council of Nicaea, is reflected in the wording.

You may wonder why so many creeds have been written throughout history. There seems to be a deep-seated human desire for memorable summaries of what we believe in. The Bible contains several examples of such summaries, which was no doubt an encouragement to those who constructed the creeds, and those who recited them. For example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ... (1 Cor 15: 3ff)¹

Writing to the Philippians, the apostle appears to quote a kind of credal statement that was in current use:

... Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant ... (Phil 2: 5ff)

About a millennium and a half earlier, Moses had formulated something like a creed for the Israelites, for example:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4—6)

¹ The translation used for all quotations from Scripture is the New International Version (UK)

In the manner of the later Christian creed writers, Moses exhorted the people to become totally familiar with, and to recite over and over again, his “creed”:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them ... tie them as symbols on your hands ... write them on the door-frames of your houses. (Deut 6:6—9)

No doubt the people followed his advice with enthusiasm. Repeating a summary of one’s faith in a standard form helps to ingrain its true nature in the heart, which is deeply reassuring for the believer. That is why churches of so many denominations include the Apostles’ or the Nicene Creed in their worship services. Reciting a creed helps us to focus on what we are doing in the service, and to draw deep comfort from it. There are other spiritual benefits, too, some of which are discussed below.

Nonetheless, some Christians have reservations, amounting at times to open antagonism, about the role of creeds in church life and practice. Such attitudes are most prevalent among members of nonconformist, independent, evangelical, and/or charismatic congregations. Before we explore the history and content of the Nicene Creed, let us briefly consider some reasons people give for avoiding creeds, and how we might respond to them.

2. Some reservations about creeds

Those who feel that creeds are unimportant, or even harmful, in the life of the church commonly do so for one or more of the following reasons.

i. Creeds are legalistic

The fixed and unambiguous wording of a creed can appear somewhat legalistic, by defining what is (and, by implication, what is not) doctrinally permissible. Creeds can appear to be a sort of tick-the-box check of orthodoxy. This may lead to divisions between those who accept the definition and those who do not:

“If you agree with the creed, you are OK, one of us; if not, you are not a real Christian, and we will have nothing to do with you.”

The function of a creed is, in fact, the opposite. By reciting the essentials of our faith using the same form of words as the other members of the congregation, we remind ourselves of what we have in common, and rejoice in being of one mind. Beyond that, we are quoting the same creed as people in thousands of churches all over the world regularly do, in many different languages. Further, since the creed has been recited by faithful believers all down the centuries, we are celebrating the legacy of faith left by those who have gone before. This is a wonderful and humbling reminder of what it means to be members of the Body of Christ.

ii. Creeds inhibit spontaneity

Some Christians regard it as essential always to describe their faith spontaneously, using words that come into the speaker's head at the time. After all, in everyday conversation, this is how we communicate what is on our minds. Couching our faith in our own words shows that it is really personal and meaningful to us. This is the very opposite of allowing someone else, who lived in an entirely different time and place, to explain what we believe, using words that we wouldn't have chosen, and may not even properly understand.

There is certainly a benefit in articulating our faith in our own way from time to time, but the great value of a creed is that it works like a sacrament, allowing us to touch a profound and life-changing reality that we could never fully capture in our own thoughts and words. The same is true of other parts of most church services, even those that do not follow a prescribed liturgy. For example, we find comfort in the familiar words and structures of prayers, blessings, hymns, and so on. Like all sacraments, the creed draws us into the great mystery of our faith. The creed is concise to allow us to memorise it. This helps us to get things right by expressing the vast and infinite truth in a well thought-out and highly crafted form.

iii. Creeds are not Scripture

Some who oppose the church's credal tradition do not want to replace the divinely inspired words of the Bible with human traditions and formulations. We must, they say, be committed to the words of Scripture alone.

In fact, as we have seen, there actually are a number of creed-like faith-summaries in the Bible. The creeds which were formalised after the Bible was written, such as the Nicene Creed, summarise the truths that are presented in these summaries. The fact that there is one God means that there is one reality. It is not that we *must* believe in the creeds: we don't *have* to use them. But by neatly encapsulating biblical truth they can lead us into the presence of God, the One in whom we *do* believe.

iv. Uncertainty about particular points

There are some Christians who hesitate to recite the creed because they have reservations about one or more specific statements in it. For example, to some modern minds the idea of a virgin birth is morally doubtful, and someone may be reluctant to claim to believe Jesus "was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary". (See the Appendix for a concise summary of various aspects of the Nicene Creed that a contemporary church-goer finds problematic.) Some people may hesitate to say they believe in something if the meaning of the word(s) used to express it is not entirely clear. What, for example, is a *catholic* and *apostolic* church?

We should respect these people for not simply rattling off the familiar words without giving them any thought. Nonetheless, the creed states the essentials of our faith in a form that has been endorsed by the church for so many centuries. It can prompt each of us to consider what are the core aspects of our personal understanding of that faith, encourage us to discuss

any uncertainties with wise and faithful fellow-believers, and lead us to accept the mystery of faith.

We will now look more closely at the origins and development of the Nicene Creed.

3. The creation of the Nicene Creed

Constantine became Roman emperor early in the fourth century AD (306); he reigned until 337. Up until then, Christianity had been severely restricted by law, and under some emperors had suffered savage persecution. By contrast with his predecessors, Constantine sympathised with Christianity; he removed the legal limits imposed on it and granted many favours to church leaders. Although it was, and remained for a long time, the religion of a minority, Christianity became a major player in imperial society.

Constantine was concerned that there were various versions of the faith, which sometimes led to open schism. Several prominent church figures were striving to overcome these differences, and Constantine supported them by calling the first ecumenical church council. To make it easier for leaders from all over the vast empire to attend, the council was held in Nicaea, an ancient Greek city (now in Turkey). More than 300 bishops, and other senior churchmen from all parts of the church, along with their many assistants, participated in the council: the total attendance was in the hundreds, possibly over a thousand.

The council resolved a number of organisational and theological uncertainties that had troubled the church for years. (For example, they decided on how to calculate the date of Easter.) Most of their time, however, was taken up addressing one major doctrinal problem. Throughout the church a serious debate was taking place about the true nature of Jesus Christ. The generally accepted view was that the Scriptures clearly taught that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human: he was God who became a man in order to save humanity.

An alternative idea was being proposed, however. Along with every human being, Jesus had been created by God: he came into being through the will of the Father. He had been created before all time, but was not eternal. He was certainly the finest example of humanity, but not divine. Christians therefore should respect and imitate him, but not worship him as they worship God. Because this view was promoted by an Egyptian presbyter called Arius, it became known as the *Arian controversy*.

The Council of Nicaea utterly repudiated this teaching, and decided to make an official announcement on behalf of the whole church. The core of the faith, it was decreed, was that Jesus was God in human form; the Father and the Son, along with the Holy Spirit, were the totality of God. Christians believe in one God: the Holy Trinity. This was written as a creed, to make it clear and concise and easy to memorise. Creeds were already quite common in various branches of the church, but the Nicene was probably the first creed that was intended to

be recited and faithfully followed by every Christian in the world, then and ever afterwards into the future. The bishops in council appended a series of curses on those who did not agree with the creed, and a list of names of Arian heretics who were to be excommunicated.

The fact that the Nicene Creed is still in widespread use today shows that the council's wishes were abundantly fulfilled. Strictly speaking, however, what we know as the Nicene Creed is a slightly amended version of what was produced in 325. Despite the great authority of that creed, it did not succeed in completely resolving disagreements. The Arian controversy continued. A second ecumenical council was therefore summoned in Constantinople in 381 by the then emperor, Theodosius. This council agreed to modify the earlier version a little. It added a few phrases to the section about Jesus, expanded on the original very simple statement "And [we believe] in the Holy spirit", and added the final short section that begins with "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church ..." (As a result of these extensions, the technical name of the creed is the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*—for obvious reasons, the name *Nicene Creed* has stuck!)

The authoritative nature of the Nicene Creed, its persistence throughout the church's history, and its continuing positive role in most liturgies, are very good reasons for celebrating its 1700th anniversary this year. The Ministry Development Committee of the Ballarat Diocese will make available to all parishes some suggestions about how that anniversary might be a truly joyful aspect of church life.

To conclude our reflections on the creed, there follow a few brief notes about its text.

4. The structure and content of the Nicene Creed

There are four deeply interrelated sections in the creed, each introduced by "We believe in ...". Let us consider them in turn.

i. ... one God

The opening sentence states unreservedly that, unlike many in the modern world, we believe there is a God. This is the foundation, and from it, as the creed affirms, the totality of our faith is derived. In the ancient world, as we can see in the Old Testament, it was widely believed that there were many gods, and they struggled with one another to gain power. This is not a view held much these days, but in the modern world we are encouraged to look to a variety of sources for power, status, and self-confidence. This is quite contrary to Christian faith: our God is the "Almighty", who created every part, "seen and unseen", of the entire universe. There is no mental or physical situation we find ourselves in which is too bleak or remote for us to find God there and enjoy the loving presence of our Father.

ii. ... one Lord, Jesus Christ

At this point, the creed reminds us forcefully that the essence of our faith is the Trinity. God, as we have just confessed, is "the Almighty": in other words, the Lord of all. This is also true of Jesus (whose name means "God saves") and who is the

Christ, the universal chosen one. He has a profound and unique relationship with God, who fathered him long before the creation of the universe. Jesus faithfully reflects God's true being, in the way that a light derives from its source.

In Jesus, God became a real human being, and lived among us to save us, by re-establishing our relationship with the Father, to reveal his infinite love, and to show us how to be holy in order to share in God's nature. The pattern of his earthly life, lived "for our sake", is revealed in the gospels. He was "crucified", "suffered death and was buried"; he "rose again", and "ascended into heaven", where he is with God. But that is not the end: he will come to earth again. Ours is a faith for the future, as well as the past and present. Jesus' return will be majestic, "in glory"; he will "judge" (assess, evaluate) everyone who ever lived, and will establish his kingdom of freedom, love, and righteousness, that "will have no end".

iii. ... the Holy Spirit

In John's gospel, Jesus promises he will send to the disciples an advocate—someone to support and strengthen them to live holy lives. This is the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus breathed upon his disciples after his resurrection (John 20:19—23), and who came down upon the church at Pentecost, and has been with all Jesus' followers ever since. However, he has been at work in the world since time immemorial. He is the "giver of life"; in Old Testament times, he "spoke through the prophets". Jesus is not on earth at present (although, as has been stated, he will return), so we need the Spirit, who comes from the Father and

the Son, to enable us to love and serve all our fellow humans, and thus to show them God's life. That is why we worship the Holy Spirit along with God and Jesus.

The three represent one God in whom we believe. This is the core message of the Nicene Creed because, as we have seen, the creed was formulated in response to some people in the fourth century who were teaching that Jesus and, by implication, the Holy Spirit were not really God. The creed thus helps us to focus our attention on the very centre of the Christian faith: the threefold God.

iv. ... one holy catholic and apostolic church

Through God's love, the earthly life of Jesus, and the constant presence of the Holy Spirit, a huge worldwide body of followers of the true faith was raised up, and has continued to bear witness to that threefold God ever since. This is the church, which is universal ("catholic") and sent into the world to proclaim the good news ("apostolic"). The church "acknowledge[s] "one baptism", a sacrament practised by the church which enables us to partake in and celebrate God's "forgiveness of sin". Because of this, we look forward eagerly to the "resurrection of the dead"—the departed faithful, after which all of God's people will live forever in the "life of the world to come", the new world of Jesus' constant presence ("his kingdom will have no end").

5. Conclusion

Christianity appears to be the only world faith that is credal in nature. It is fitting that, during this anniversary of the Nicene Creed, we reflect at length and in depth upon what it tells us of the God we worship and all aspects of the faith we profess.

We have so much to thank God for in the creeds, because they bring many blessings to us as individuals and as the church community. The Nicene Creed is particularly significant: it has become an indispensable part of most liturgical services, especially the Eucharist, because, to note a few of its many benefits:

1. The creed reminds us of the core of our faith (why we are gathered in church for this service);
2. It acts as a sacrament: in other words, like the sacrament of the Eucharist, it is a ritual through which the Holy Spirit draws us into the living presence of Our Lord;
3. It helps us to recognise and celebrate what we have in common, thus binding in one the whole church community, both in the service we are attending, and throughout the world. Further, we identify and share with the countless members of the Body of Christ across the centuries;
4. It reinforces in our minds what Scripture tells us, that which is central to our faith;

5. It helps to guard against letting our minds wander off into our own highly idiosyncratic ideas.

It is a seventeen-centuries old gift, for which we can never adequately express our gratitude to God.

Appendix

*Some thoughts about issues in the creed
that may be problematic to the modern Christian,
contributed by John Manton in January 2025*

I have been long troubled by some of the concepts which we regularly affirm in the Creeds, and welcome this discussion to look at the Creeds (specifically, the Nicene Creed). I do not seek to promote heretical interpretations of the creeds. But I do need assistance in understanding the credal statements in the context of 21st century knowledge. That is the context we have no choice but to live in. Knowledge and science will continue to advance. Maybe this will throw up answers to some of these issues; but the last 500 years suggest that there will be more issues than answers. Many church teachings and beliefs honestly held at their time to be true have been demonstrated to have been wrong, and those challenging them have run into a closed wall of orthodoxy and inappropriate persecution. The more firmly we proclaim beliefs contrary to demonstrable fact (as far as understood at the time – which may also be subject to being overturned by further knowledge), on the basis of interpretation of 2000+ year old scriptural writings, the more the church will be seen as irrelevant. It would be helpful to set out our belief in a creed based in understandings of the 21st century, and accept that may need another review in the 23rd century.

Some Issues in the Nicene Creed

Credal statement

*We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

Comments and problems

Problem 1. What about the rest of the universe? Earth is not even as a speck of sand in the universe.

Problem 2: Related to problem 1, the whole system assumes the earth as the centre, and everything “above” the earth as heaven. It conflates “heaven” as a spiritual realm of God and the angels, with the material universe except earth.

Logically we may see God as coextensive with but separate from the material universe. I think it follows that Heaven would also be not part of but co-extensive with the universe.

We can see the “Big Bang”, about 13,500,000,000 earth-years ago, as creation.

Interpretation issue

All things seen and unseen: Rocks metal and gas, all elements, all forms of energy (electromagnetic, kinetic, heat, radiation), and forces which hold the universe together – such as gravity, black holes and time. And dark matter which can be detected but which is unseen and about which we know little. That is, the physical universe, everything we can see or detect with instruments, or which we could potentially detect with instruments we don’t have yet. It is just 500 years since Galileo

through use of a telescope saw extraterrestrial bodies and argued in support of Copernicus' understanding of the universe (an insight strongly disputed by the Church at the time). The physical universe, distinct from God, heaven, and heavenly beings.

Credal statement

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ
... through him all things were made.*

Problem 3: *Through him all things were made.* God is creator of the universe. How do we understand Jesus' role in creation? And how does Jesus, who came to live on earth, relate to the rest of the universe?

Credal statement

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human. ... On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

Problem 4: Jesus' coming down from and ascending into heaven: the spiritual realm is co-extensive with the universe. Perhaps *came from* and *returned to* heaven, but heaven is all around us. There is no down and up.

Problem 5: *seated at the right hand of the Father* is seeing God in human image. If this means anything at all, it is probably that Jesus is with God.

Problem 6: *Come again in glory* is somewhat contradictory to the understanding that Jesus is with us always, and Jesus lives in his Church. Should a latter-day Messiah appear on earth, would this be as a distinctly Christian arrival? How would we recognise this as Jesus and who would recognise him? Probably he/she would be condemned by the church as a heretic or dangerous (as was Jesus in his time).

Problem 7: Perhaps to understand Jesus as the messenger to this planet –runs somewhat counter to the credal understanding of Jesus in creation.

Credal statement

We look for the resurrection of the dead,

Problem 8: The whole pattern of the universe in creation, at least on this planet, is that organisms live and then die. Further organisms are born. Resurrection of the dead is highly problematic.

Yes, Jesus rose from the dead – an unusual or unique interaction between the material and spiritual worlds. But not as an event we can all look forward to. Rather, we each as a unique being get one turn at life. Otherwise this starts to get mixed up with Buddhist or Hindu concepts of reincarnation.

Credal statement

and the life of the world to come. Amen

Perhaps on death, we may move to a non-material state, heaven; is that *the world to come*?

Some questions for reflection

You may wish to reflect on these for yourself. You may also find it helpful to explore them in depth with others, in conversations and/or in church discussion groups.

Other questions, for personal meditation or discussion, may also occur to you.

1. How do you understand the Trinity? Do you find the Nicene Creed helpful in this respect?
2. Are there some words or phrases that you find it hard to make sense of? Some examples might be:
 - a. eternally begotten of the Father
 - b. incarnate
 - c. in accordance with the Scriptures
 - d. proceeds from the Father and the Son
 - e. catholic
 - f. apostolic
 - g. one baptism

NOTE

Don't simply try to give a definition of an item: consider in what ways it forms a significantly meaningful part of your faith. For example, it is true that "catholic" means "universal", but what does the universal church mean within your faith? How does it influence your relationship with God and with fellow-believers in your own community and throughout the world?

3. In what ways do you “look for the resurrection of the dead”, and prepare for when Jesus “will come again in glory”?
4. What does “the life of the world to come” mean to you?
5. What does it mean to call the Holy Spirit “the Lord, the giver of life”?
6. Why do you think that, in the final section of the creed, the members of the Council of Nicaea linked together the nature of the church, the sacrament of baptism, and resurrection and eternal life?
7. Has reading these notes caused you to think differently about the Nicene Creed? If so, in what ways?

