

Council of Nicaea, Nicea (325)

General Information

The two councils of Nicaea were ecumenical councils of the Christian church held in 325 and 787, respectively. The First Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council held by the church, is best known for its **formulation of the Nicene Creed, the earliest dogmatic statement of Christian orthodoxy**. The council was convened in 325 by the Roman emperor Constantine I in an attempt to settle the controversy raised by Arianism over the nature of the Trinity. Nearly all those who attended came from the eastern Mediterranean region.

It was the decision of the council, formalized in the Nicene Creed, that **God the Father and God the Son were consubstantial and coeternal and that the Arian belief in a Christ created by and thus inferior to the Father was heretical**. Arius himself was excommunicated and banished. The council was also important for its disciplinary decisions concerning the status and jurisdiction of the clergy in the early church and for establishing the date on which Easter is celebrated.

The Second Council of Nicaea, the seventh ecumenical council of the Christian church, was convoked by the Byzantine empress Irene in 787 to rule on the use of saints' images and icons in religious devotion. At that time a strong movement known as Iconoclasm, which opposed the pictorial representation of saints or of the Trinity, existed in the Greek church. At the prompting of Irene, the council declared that whereas the veneration of images was legitimate and the intercession of saints efficacious, their veneration must be carefully distinguished from the worship due God alone.

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Council of Nicaea (325)

Advanced Information

The first ecumenical council in the history of the church was convened by the emperor Constantine at Nicaea in Bithynia (now Isnik, Turkey). The main purpose of the council was to attempt to heal the schism in the church provoked by Arianism. This it proceeded to do theologically and politically by the almost unanimous production of a theological confession (the Nicene Creed) by over three hundred bishops representing almost all the eastern provinces of the empire (where the heresy was chiefly centered) and by a token representation from the West. The creed thus produced was the first that could legally claim universal authority as it was sent throughout the empire to receive the agreement of the churches (with the alternative consequences of excommunication and imperial banishment).

The issue which culminated at Nicaea arose out of an unresolved tension within the theological legacy of Origen concerning the relation of the Son to the Father. On the one hand there was the attribution of deity to the Son in a relationship with the Father described as eternal generation. On the other hand there was clear subordinationism. Almost appropriately, the dispute erupted at Alexandria about 318, with Arius, a popular presbyter of the church district of Baucalis, developing the latter strain of Origenism against Bishop Alexander, who advocated the former line of thinking. Arius was a quite capable logician who attacked Alexander (with motives not entirely scholarly) on the charge of Sabellianism. After a local synod heard his own views and dismissed them and him as unsound, Arius demonstrated his popularizing literary and political talents, gathering support beyond Alexandria.

His theological views appealed to left - wing Origenists, including the respected Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea. His closest and most helpful ally was his former fellow student in the school of Lucian, Eusebius, bishop at the imperial residence of Nicomedia. After Constantine's personal envoy, Hosius of Cordova, failed to effect a reconciliation in 322 between the two parties in Alexandria, the emperor decided to convene an ecumenical council.

The teaching of Arianism is well documented. The central controlling idea is the unique, incommunicable, indivisible, transcendent nature of the singular divine being. This is what the Arians referred to as the Father. Logically pressing this definition of the Father and making use of certain biblical language, the Arians argued that if the error of Sabellius was to be avoided (and everyone was anxious to avoid it), then certain conclusions about the Son were inescapable. And it is this view of the Son which is the central significance of Arianism. He cannot be of the Father's being or essence (otherwise that essence would be divisible or communicable or in some way not unique or simple, which is impossible by definition). He therefore exists only by the Father's will, as do all other creatures and things. The biblical description of his being begotten does imply a

special relationship between the Father and the Word or Son, but it cannot be an ontological relationship.

"Begotten" is to be taken in the sense of "made," so that the Son is a ktisma or poiema, a creature. Being begotten or made, he must have had a beginning, and this leads to the famous Arian phrase, "there was when he was not." Since he was not generated out of the Father's being and he was, as they accorded him, the first of God's creation, then he must have been created out of nothing. Not being of perfect or immutable substance, he was subject to moral change. And because of the extreme transcendence of God, in the final respect the Son has no real communion or knowledge of the Father at all. The ascription of theos to Christ in Scripture was deemed merely functional.

The council of Nicaea opened June 19, 325, with Hosius of Cordova presiding and the emperor in attendance. Despite the absence of official minutes a sketch of the proceedings can be reconstructed. Following an opening address by the emperor in which the need for unity was stressed, Eusebius of Nicomedia, leading the Arian party, presented a formula of faith which candidly marked a radical departure from traditional formularies. The disapproval was so strong that most of the Arian party abandoned their support of the document and it was torn to shreds before the eyes of everyone present. Soon thereafter Eusebius of Caesarea, anxious to clear his name, read a lengthy statement of faith that included what was probably a baptismal creed of the church of Caesarea. Eusebius had been provisionally excommunicated earlier in the year by a synod in Antioch for refusing to sign an anti - Arian creed. The emperor himself pronounced him orthodox with only the suggestion that he adopt the word homoousios.

For a long time the confession of Eusebius was believed to have formed the basis of the Nicene Creed, which was then modified by the council. However, it seems clear that such was not the case, the structure and content of the latter being significantly different from the former. Most likely a creed was introduced under the direction of Hosius, discussed (especially the term homoousia), and drafted in its final form requiring the signatures of the bishops. All those present (including Eusebius of Nicomedia) signed except two who were subsequently exiled.

It should be noted that this creed is not that which is recited in churches today as the Nicene Creed. Although similar in many respects, the latter is significantly longer than the former and is missing some key Nicene phrases.

The theology expressed in the Nicene Creed is decisively anti-Arian. At the beginning the unity of God is affirmed. But the Son is said to be "true God from true God." Although confessing that the Son is begotten, the creed adds the words, "from the Father" and "not made." It is positively asserted that he is "from the being (ousia) of the Father" and "of one substance (homoousia) with the Father." A list of Arian phrases, including "there was

when he was not" and assertions that the Son is a creature or out of nothing, are expressly anathematized. Thus an ontological rather than merely functional deity of the Son was upheld at Nicaea. The only thing confessed the Spirit, however, is faith in him.

Among other things achieved at Nicaea were the agreement on a date to celebrate Easter and a ruling on the Melitian Schism in Egypt. Arius and his most resolute followers were banished, but only for a short time. In the majority at Nicaea was Athanasius, then a young deacon, soon to succeed Alexander as bishop and carry on what would become a minority challenge to a resurgent Arianism in the East. However, the orthodoxy of Nicaea would eventually and decisively be reaffirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

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The Nicene Creed

NOTE: The notes that appear in small type on this page were written by James E. Kiefer, and originally posted to Christia.

The Nicene Creed is the most widely accepted and used brief statements of the Christian Faith. In liturgical churches, it is said every Sunday as part of the Liturgy. It is Common Ground to East Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists, and many other Christian groups. Many groups that do not have a tradition of using it in their services nevertheless are committed to the doctrines it teaches.

(Someone may ask, "What about the Apostles' Creed?" Traditionally, in the West, the Apostles' Creed is used at Baptisms, and the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist [AKA the Mass, the Liturgy, the Lord's Supper, or the Holy Communion.] The East uses only the Nicene Creed.)

I here present the Nicene Creed in two English translations, The first is the traditional one, in use with minor variations since 1549, The second is a modern version, that of The Interdenominational Committee on Liturgical Texts. Notes and comment by [James E. Kiefer] follow.

Traditional Wording

I believe in one God,
the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made;
who for us men and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost
of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried;
and the third day he rose again
according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come again, with glory,
to judge both the quick and the dead;

whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, and Giver of Life,
who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son];
who with the Father and the Son together
is worshipped and glorified;
who spake by the Prophets.

And I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church;
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
and I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. AMEN.

Modern Wording

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:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

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].
With the Father and the Son
he is worshipped and glorified.
He 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. AMEN.

NOTES AND COMMENT:

When the Apostles' Creed was drawn up, the chief enemy was Gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was truly Man; and the emphases of the Apostles' Creed reflect a concern with repudiating this error.

When the Nicene Creed was drawn up, the chief enemy was Arianism, which denied that Jesus was fully God. Arius was a presbyter (elder) in Alexandria in Egypt, in the early 300's. He taught that the Father, in the beginning, created (or begot) the Son, and that the Son, in conjunction with the Father, then proceeded to create the world. The result of this was to make the Son a created being, and hence not God in any meaningful sense. It was also suspiciously like the theories of those Gnostics and pagans who held that God was too perfect to create something like a material world, and so introduced one or more intermediate beings between God and the world. God created A, who created B, who created C, . . . who created Z, who created the world. Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, sent for Arius and questioned him. Arius stuck to his position, and was finally excommunicated by a council of Egyptian bishops. He went to Nicomedia in Asia, where he wrote letters defending his position to various bishops. Finally, the Emperor Constantine summoned a council of Bishops in Nicea (across the straits from modern Istanbul), and there in 325 the Bishops of the Church, by a decided majority, repudiated Arius and produced the first draft of what is now called the Nicene Creed. A chief spokesman for the full deity of Christ was Athanasius, deacon of Alexandria, assistant (and later successor) to the aging Alexander. The Arian position has been revived in our own day by the Watchtower Society (the JW's), who explicitly hail Arius as a great witness to the truth.

I here print the Creed modern wording) a second time, with notes inserted.

- * 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,

Here and elsewhere (such as John 1:14) where the Greek has MONOGENETOS HUIOS, an English translation may read either "only Son" or "only begotten Son." The Greek is ambiguous. The root GEN is found in words like "genital, genetics, generation," and suggests begetting. However, it is also found in words like "genus" and suggests family or sort or kind. Accordingly, we may take MONOGENETOS to mean either "only begotten" or "one-of-a-kind, only, sole, unique."

- * eternally begotten of the Father,

Here the older translation has "begotten of the Father before all worlds." One might suppose that this means, "before the galaxies were formed," or something of the kind. But in fact the English word "world" used to mean something a little different. It is related to "were" (pronounced "weer"), an old word for "man," as in "werewolf" or

"weregild." (Compare with Latin VIR.) Hence a "world" was originally a span of time equal to the normal lifespan of a man. Often in the KJV Bible, one finds "world" translating the Greek AION ("eon"), and a better translation today would be "age." (Thus, for example, in Matthew 24:3, the question is one of "the end of the age," which makes it possible to understand what follows as a description of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, and of the end of an era in the spiritual history of mankind. But I digress.) So here we have "begotten of the Father before all times, before all ages." Arius was fond of saying, "The Logos is not eternal. God begat him, and before he was begotten, he did not exist." The Athanasians replied that the begetting of the Logos was not an event in time, but an eternal relationship.

* God from God, Light from Light,

A favorite analogy of the Athanasians was the following: Light is continuously streaming forth from the sun. (In those days, it was generally assumed that light was instantaneous, so that there was no delay at all between the time that a ray of light left the sun and the time it struck the earth.) The rays of light are derived from the sun, and not vice versa. But it is not the case that first the sun existed and afterwards the Light. It is possible to imagine that the sun has always existed, and always emitted light. The Light, then, is derived from the sun, but the Light and the sun exist simultaneously throughout eternity. They are co-eternal. Just so, the Son exists because the Father exists, but there was never a time before the Father produced the Son. The analogy is further appropriate because we can know the sun only through the rays of light that it emits. To see the sunlight is to see the sun. Just so, Jesus says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9)

* true God from true God,

* begotten, not made,

This line was inserted by way of repudiating Arius' teaching that the Son was the first thing that the Father created, and that to say that the Father begets the Son is simply another way of saying that the Father has created the Son.

Arius said that if the Father has begotten the Son, then the Son must be inferior to the Father, as a prince is inferior to a king. Athanasius replied that a son is precisely the same sort of being as his father, and that the only son of a king is destined himself to be a king. It is true that an earthly son is younger than his father, and that there is a time when he is not yet what he will be. But God is not in time. Time, like distance, is a relation between physical events, and has meaning only in the context of the physical universe. When we say that the Son is begotten of the Father, we do not refer to an event in the remote past, but to an eternal and timeless relation between the Persons of the Godhead. Thus, while we say of an earthly prince that he may some day hope to become what his father is now, we say of God the Son that He is eternally what God the Father is eternally.

* of one being with the Father.

This line: "of one essence with the Father, of one substance with the Father, consubstantial with the Father," (in Greek, HOMO-OUSIOS TW PATRI) was the crucial one, the acid test. It was the one formula that the Arians could not interpret as meaning what they believed. Without it, they would have continued to teach that the Son is good, and glorious, and holy, and a Mighty Power, and God's chief agent in creating the world, and the means by which God chiefly reveals Himself to us, and therefore deserving in some sense to be called divine. But they would have continued to deny that the Son was God in the same sense in which the Father is God. And they would have pointed out that, since the Council of Nicea had not issued any declaration that they could not accept, it followed that there was room for their position inside the tent of Christian doctrine, as that tent had been defined at Nicea. Arius and his immediate followers would have denied that they were reducing the Son to the position of a high-ranking angel. But their doctrine left no safeguard against it, and if they had triumphed at Nicea, even in the negative sense of having their position acknowledged as a permissible one within the limits of Christian orthodoxy, the damage to the Christian witness to Christ as God made flesh would have been irreparable.

Incidentally, HOMOOUSIOS is generally written without the hyphen. The OU (in Greek as in French) is pronounced as in "soup", "group", and so on, and the word has five syllables HO-mo-OU-si-os, with accents on first and third, as shown. The Greek root HOMO, meaning "same," is found in English words like "homosexual" and "homogenized", and is not to be confused with the Latin word HOMO, meaning "man, human".

The language finally adopted in the East was that the Trinity consists of three HYPOSTASES (singular HYPOSTASIS) united in one OUSIA. The formula used in the West, and going back at least to Tertullian (who wrote around 200, and whose writings are the oldest surviving Christian treatises written in Latin), is that the Trinity consists of three PERSONAE (singular PERSONA) united in one SUBSTANTIA. In English, we say "Three Persons in one Substance." Unfortunately, the Greek HYPO-STASIS and the Latin SUB-STANTIA each consists of an element meaning "under, below" (as in "hypodermic", "hypothermia", etc) followed by an element meaning "stand". Thus it was natural for a Greek-speaker, reading a Latin document that referred to One SUBSTANTIA to substitute mentally a reference to One HYPOSTASIS, and to be very uncomfortable, while a Latin-speaker would have the same problem in reverse. Thus the seeds were sown for a breakdown of communication.

* Through him all things were made.

This is a direct quote from John 1:3. Before the insertion of the HOMO-OUSIOS clause, this line immediately followed "begotten, not made." The two lines go naturally together. The Son is not a created thing. Rather, He is the agent through Whom all created things come to be. Inserting the HOMO-OUSIOS at this point breaks up the flow, and if I had been present at the Council of Nicea, I would have urged the bishops to insert it one line further down instead. In the older translation, in particular, someone reading the Creed is likely to understand it as referring to "The Father by whom all things were made." The newer translation, by revising the English wording, makes this misreading less likely.

* For us and for our salvation

The older translation has, "for us men." Now, while English has in common current usage the one word "man" to do duty both for gender-inclusive ("human") and for gender-specific ("male"), Latin has "homo, homin-" for gender-inclusive and "vir" for gender-specific, while Greek has "anthropos" for gender-inclusive and "aner, andro-" for gender-specific. (Given the demand for a similar distinction in English, I have been arguing for a gender-inclusive use of "man", and the revival of the older word "were" (as in "werewolf" and "weregild") in the gender-specific sense. But so far I have had but scant success.) Where the older translation of the Creed is used, with its "for us men" at this point, a feminist might consider complaining of sexist language. But the Greek and Latin wording here are both gender-inclusive, and so a feminist, reading the Creed in either of those languages, ought to find nothing that will upset him.

* he came down from heaven:

* by the power of the Holy Spirit

* he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,

* and was made man.

* For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

* he suffered death and was buried.

You will note that the older translation has here simply, "He suffered and was buried" (Latin, "passus et sepultus est"). Apparently by the time of Nicea, it was no longer necessary to emphasize, to spell out unmistakably, that Christ had really died at Calvary, as it had been spelled out in the Apostles' Creed. And indeed, I have never heard anyone try to argue that the Creed here leaves a loophole for those who want to believe that Jesus merely swooned on the Cross. So apparently the Nicene Fathers were right in supposing that their language would not be misunderstood. However, the framers of the new translation decided to make the meaning unmistakable and to close this particular loophole. And I for one am not sorry.

- * On the third day he rose again
- * in accordance with the Scriptures;

The wording here is borrowed from 1 Corinthians 15:4. The older translation has "according to the Scriptures," which in terms of modern language is misleading. Today, when we say, "It will rain tomorrow, according to the weatherman," we mean, "The weatherman says that it will rain, but whether he is right is another question." And this is clearly not what either St. Paul or the Nicene Fathers had in mind. The newer translation is an improvement. I would have suggested, "in fulfillment of the Scriptures," which is clearly what is meant.

- * 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].

The words shown in brackets, "and from the Son," are a Western addition to the Creed as it was originally agreed on by a Council representing the whole Church, East and West. They correspond to the Latin word FILIOQUE (FILI = Son, -O = from, -QUE = and; pronounced with accent on the O), and the controversy about them is accordingly known as the Filioque controversy.

If we are looking for a statement that can be taken as common ground by all Christians, East and West alike, it clearly cannot include the FILIOQUE. On the other hand, Western Christians will be unwilling to have it supposed that they are repudiating the statement that the Spirit proceeds jointly from Father and Son. I accordingly suggest that we print the Creed with the FILIOQUE either in brackets or omitted altogether, but with the understanding that, while assenting to the resulting statement does not commit anyone to belief in the Dual Procession of the Spirit, neither does it commit anyone to disbelief in the Dual Procession.

I reserve extensive comments on the Dual Procession, the history of the belief, and the reasons for and against believing in it, for a separate essay, called [CREED FILIOQUE](#).

- * With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
- * He has spoken through the Prophets.

This line was directed against the view that the Holy Spirit did not exist, or was not active, before Pentecost.

- * We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Many Christians from various backgrounds will want to know, "Precisely what would I be agreeing to if I signed this?" The definition of catholic and catholicity is contained in the introduction to this book.

- * 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. AMEN.