

## The Creed

In the early years of the church, as today, controversies arose round definitions and interpretations. The leaders of the church were struggling with issues of Theology, Christology and Ecclesiology, issues that by and large are now resolved. In the early years various teachings would come up which were considered as wrong interpretations of what was received from the Apostles and the Gospels. These were examined and resolved at meetings called Ecumenical Councils. There are seven councils that can be truly called Ecumenical i.e., involving representatives from all the main centers of power in Christendom, the first was in 325 AD and the last in 789 AD. The Creed was formulated during the first four meetings, a time period of 126 years.

### Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

The emperor Constantine called an ecumenical council to meet at Nicaea, modern day Iznik in Asia minor, to resolve disagreements arising from within the Church of Alexandria over the nature of Jesus and his relationship to the Father: in particular, whether the Son had been 'begotten' by the Father from his own being, and therefore having no beginning, or else created out of nothing, and therefore having a beginning. The council agreed that Jesus was indeed 'begotten' by the father and therefore had no beginning. The cleric Arius promoting the opposite view and his supporters were excommunicated. The council formulated what is now called the Nicene creed so that there was no doubt about the true doctrine of the church. The creed was quite short and ended at the phrase 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'. Thus, the fathers hoped that what became known as the 'Arian heresy' was now resolved. One other important issue agreed at the council was the method of calculating the date for Pascha - Easter Sunday – which until then was based the Hebrew calculations of the Passover feast. This in practice took centuries to resolve, a bit like the 'offside rule' today we are happy to be told when Easter Sunday is and happy to go along with this.

### Council of Constantinople (381 AD)

Fifty-six years later it became necessary to call a second ecumenical council. The new emperor, Theodosius, had just taken over from one of Constantine the Great's sons Constantius who as a staunch supporter of the Arian heresy had imposed Arianism on most of the Empire. This was reversed by the council and the Nicene creed was revised to reinforce this but also clarify the church's doctrine on another heretical issue promoted by Nestorius. In very simple terms, this was concerned with whether Christ had a dual nature (human and divine) or a single nature dependent on where he was at the time, heaven (divine) or earth (human).

The text of the Nicene/ Constantinople creed is quoted below, the words in bold italic are the amendments and additions to the creed of Nicaea.

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 the Father ***before all worlds (æons)***, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial 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 and of the Virgin Mary***, and was made man; he ***was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and*** 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***; from thence he shall come ***again, with glory***, to judge the quick and the dead; ***whose kingdom shall have no end.***

And in the Holy Ghost, ***the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.***

***In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.***

### The 'filioque' controversy

When the fathers of the church assembled in Nicaea and later in Constantinople, they could not have imagined that the 250-word document they produced would eventually divide Christendom in two.

The Council of Ephesus in 431 decreed that the Creed as agreed by the two previous Ecumenical Councils was the true affirmation of the Christian faith and that no alterations or additions would be permitted by anybody – even an Ecumenical Council – from that day forward.

From about the sixth century Christian communities in the west, probably starting in Spain, started using the phrase ‘...from the Father and the Son’ as the proceeding point of the Holy Spirit. The authorities in the west and the Popes particularly, in whose jurisdiction these communities belonged were pretty relaxed about this change to the creed and eventually allowed the phrase to be inserted into the liturgical version of the creed.

Two verses in John, quoting Jesus, illustrate the argument against this change and why it became a difficulty in the church.

John 14:26 *“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”*

John 15:26 *“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.”*

There are four points which have led to the disagreement:

- the term itself
- the orthodoxy of the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, to which the term refers
- the legitimacy of inserting the term into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,
- the authority of the Pope to define the orthodoxy of the doctrine or to insert the term into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

As it is often the case in disagreements language got in the way. The subtle difference in the meaning of the Greek word meaning ‘having as a source’, as in water having a spring as its source, and the word ‘travelling on’ proved impossible to translate in to Latin. The distinction was lost in the word ‘proceed’ which carries both meanings.

Things begun to get serious in about 650 AD when Popes and Patriarchs of Constantinople started excommunicating each other. All this led to the final separation of the church to the churches of the east, Orthodox, and the churches in the west, Catholic, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The story as always is not as simple as this, vast tomes have been written on the subject and there is a lot of material online for those who want to pursue this further.

### **Present Position of the Anglican church**

Three Lambeth conferences, the last as recently as 1988, recommended that the ‘filioque’ be deleted from liturgical texts, a recommendation that has not been renewed recently and the change is yet to be implemented.

A translation of the creed of 1970 altered the phrase ‘I believe’ to ‘we believe’, a change that happened within memory of many in our community.

Does any of this matter to Christians today?

It does in as much as it keeps us divided from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It doesn't because the Almighty power of the Holy Trinity is so much bigger than our capacity to understand, our attempt to define any aspect of it does seem ridiculous.