

The Nicene Creed

A great church controversy began as a local conflict in 318 AD between a priest named Arius, and the bishop, Alexander, of Alexandria. The issue at stake was whether the *Word* of God (i.e. Jesus) was co-eternal with God. Arius argued that Jesus was not God, but only the first of all creatures, and since Jesus was a created being, there was a “time” when He did not exist.¹ According to Arius, Jesus did not have the quality of immortality, sovereignty, or any other attributes that could be claimed by deity alone. Jesus, seen as a mortal man, had only received the favor of God to reveal the Father to mankind. He believed Jesus to be sinless in practice, but not as a consequence of his perfectly sinless nature. Arius contended that Alexander was denying Christian monotheism by his insistence that both the Father and the Son were deity.

Athanasius served as a deacon of the church in Alexandria Egypt under Alexander, later succeeding him as bishop in 328. Athanasius had written *On the Incarnation of the Word* in which he stated that the Word, Jesus Christ, became flesh (i.e. fully human; cf. Jn.1:14). In a second work, *Against the Arians*, he stated that Jesus had to be fully a man in order to bring about the renewal of mankind through a perfect sacrifice yet fully God to accomplish the reconciliation of God and man. Athanasius went before Constantine to personally plead his case in an attempt to settle the Arian issue. Due to false accusations and Constantine’s own Arian leanings, Athanasius was banished from Alexandria – leaving the issue unsettled. After the death of Constantine Athanasius was returned to Alexandria by Constantine’s three sons who had divided the empire among themselves. Unfortunately, Arianism had gained influence in his absence to the extent that church leaders banished him again three times before at age 70 he finally came home to stay.

Constantine intervened in the Arian conflict in 325 AD by calling a council of Christian bishops from all parts of the empire to assemble in Nicaea, a city within easy reach of Constantinople in Asia Minor. At that time, Athanasius attended this assembly as a deacon along with his bishop Alexander, who headed up the council. After many controversies and heated discussions, the council finally approved a formal statement that fully rejected Arianism and further stated that his views were heretical. Of the 300 bishops that had attended, all but two agreed on this formula. The full text of that statement, the *Nicene Creed*, approved by that council, is translated in English as follows:

“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; 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 for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit 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 sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge 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 proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in 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.”

This creed is still in use in many of our Protestant churches today, since for the most part, it is a clear statement of what the church has always believed from the beginning. We must note, however, that most Protestants rightly find considerable difficulty with the phrase, “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church,” which serves only to glorify the Roman Catholic Church and its false Pope through the erroneous doctrine of apostolic succession. Moreover, the first phrase of the last sentence states that human sins are remitted through a ritual act of baptism, which is totally unbiblical. Although “baptism” could be construed to mean baptism in the Holy Spirit resulting in a spiritual rebirth, the erroneous doctrine of baptismal regeneration was well accepted by the Roman church in those days, and it is most probably the intended meaning by its framers. © Arthur J. Smith 2015

¹ This error still arises from time to time from a misinterpretation of Colossians 1:15, which only states the preeminence of Christ over mortal men by virtue of the fact that He “is the image of the invisible God” imprinted in mortal flesh.