

We Believe: The Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed

The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, 5/4/14

Part Two: One God, the Father, the Almighty

Summary notes (for details, see following pages)

We believe in one God:

- vs. polytheism (many gods), and pantheism (all is god—like Hinduism)
- vs. dualism (a good god and a bad god: Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism)
- from “The Shema:” Deuteronomy 6:4-5:
*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. (NIV)*
- One specific God, not a vague universalist spirituality.

We believe in one God, the Father:

- The Father of Jesus Christ by nature
- Our Father by adoption and grace
- Not merely creator, but one in relationship with us; one who loves us.
- We are co-heirs with Christ of the inheritance of the resurrection and eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven
- Not a male god (Judaism and the early church resisted such implications) but using “Father” preserves continuity with the past and avoids new distortions. Note the feminine imagery for God in the Bible.

One God, the Father, The almighty:

- The Greek word “pantokrator” means “all ruling” or “all governing.”
- Not subject to the world or manipulated by us.
- But the two words go together: “The Father, the almighty,” in other words powerful *and* good to us.
- Therefore neither powerless nor the source of evil.
- Some respond to this paradox by describing God’s ability vs. what God chooses to do: that God chooses to give us the freedom to sin.

Creator of heaven and earth:

- A clear distinction between God and creation. In other words, creation is not God
- Draws contrast with idolatry, materialism and pantheism
- The creator is the only God (vs. Gnosticism)
- We understand God’s creating to be an ongoing activity (not a watchmaker god who set things up and let things go at a distance)

Maker...of all that is, visible and invisible:

- Ties up loopholes that try to limit the scope of God’s creating.
- The Gnostics divided material and spiritual, and only identified the true god with the spiritual.
- Consider Mormon theology of separate universes with other gods...

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(full notes)

We believe in one God:

Judaism was unique in the world in professing a faith in one God alone. Pagan polytheistic religion was widespread in the world, and is still somewhat active, worshipping various nature gods. Hinduism (which is internally rather theologically diverse) is largely a blend of polytheism (many gods) and pantheism, which believes that 'all is god.' Pantheism not only finds god *in* creation, but claims that creation *is* god. Jesus is god, you are god, rocks and trees are god—all is god. Note that Buddhism and Daoism and Confucianism are more philosophies than theologies—they do not profess belief in the existence of a god or gods.

Judaism also was unique in its claims about their one God. They did not only claim to worship one national god, but they refused to identify this god with any part of nature. Under Pharaoh Akhenaton, Egypt worshipped only one god: Aten. But Aten was merely the sun god. Hebrews refused to make statues of their god, and even refused to speak this god's name. Instead they said "The LORD" instead of pronouncing the divine name when it appeared in their scriptures. And they claimed that their God is, in fact, the only God there is—and he is the God of all nations and all creation. This was quite a radical claim among ancient religions (and even radical among current religious pluralism).

The basic statement of God's oneness is found in "the Shema," Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

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. (NIV)

This claim of monotheism is a challenge to pantheism, polytheism, and materialism. This claim of monotheism is also a challenge to dualism of a variety of flavors. Dualism usually views two gods: a god of good and a god of evil. Zoroastrianism, Manicheism and even popular notions of God vs. the devil fall into this category. Gnosticism, which developed in the mid 100s AD, claimed that the god of the Old Testament is a bad god of the material world, while the god of Jesus is the good god of the spiritual world that will free us from the decay and suffering of the world. Thus, the creeds (the Nicene Creed explicitly) profess not two gods, but one God.

When coupled with the next words in the creed, this monotheism challenges even the vague universalist spirituality that passes for civil American religion. This is not a vague divine power, or an umbrella metaphor for goodness or diverse spirituality. This is a claim of belief in a particular God who is unique and relational.

Christians believe in the divinity of Jesus and the unique divinity of the Holy Spirit. This changes the way we understand the oneness of God, something more fully described in the doctrine of the Trinity. But we start by reaffirming our belief in one God, in continuity with the Old Testament teaching.

We believe in one God, the Father:

Israel sometimes compared God to a parent, but Jesus particularly lifted up the address of God as Father. There are two ways in which God is Father. First of all, God is described in the New Testament as Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, *we* address God as Father, since we are adopted children of God. We are God's children by adoption, and Jesus is God's son by nature—being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

There is more to say about what we mean in describing Jesus as God's Son; we'll get to that in our discussion of the second clause of the creeds. This relationship of Father and Son is important in Trinitarian theology. We believe in one God, and we believe that this one God exists "in three persons:" God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So the first clause of the creeds addresses not simply the one triune God, but in particular, the "first person of the Trinity:" God the Father. Calling the first person of the Trinity "God the Father" helps to identify the unique description of the first person of the Trinity, and to describe the relationship between the first person and the second and third persons (between the Father and the Son, and between the Father and the Spirit). There is much more to say about Trinitarian theology; we'll get to that in our discussion of the Holy Spirit.

When we describe God as Father, we also make a claim somewhat unique among religions. God as Father certainly indicates that he is the source of our life. But calling God "Father" suggests that God is not merely a spiritual force, nor simply a creator. A father is one who is in relationship with his children, and (assuming a fatherly ideal) loves his children in enduring ways. When we profess belief in God as Father, we say something about our relationship with God and God's approach toward us. Paul writes that we cry out to God as "Abba, Father!" in the way a child cries out to daddy.

We also see ourselves as God's adopted children and, as Paul writes, "co-heirs with Christ." We share in the inheritance of the resurrection first given to Jesus. Our inheritance is as part of the eternal and heavenly kingdom.

One note about gender. "Father" is obviously a male metaphor, one that has been questioned in recent decades. Especially for those whose earthly fathers have been abusive, some have suggested using other names for the first person of the Trinity. Others feel that male terms promote a more male-oriented power dynamic among people. The early theologians in the church addressed this question of gender and were quite clear that God has no sexual gender—that God is not male, and that using such terms as Father should not be used to make gender claims. The Bible certainly uses feminine imagery for God (e.g. "as a hen gathers her chicks..."). When trying to describe someone as indescribable as God, however, the church has taken great care in choosing or developing vocabulary to avoid confusion or distortion. Though there is still distortion possible in using "Father," this provides continuity with the past, and avoids further distortion in choosing new names.

One God, the Father, The almighty:

The Greek word used in the original creeds is "pantokrator," meaning "all ruling" or "all governing." God is not subject to the world or manipulated by us. This challenges "process" theology that see God as still developing. This also challenges some aspects of Liberation

theology that limit God's action to what God's people do. "Christ has no hands and feet but ours" is not meant to be taken literally, but rather as a poetic call to God's service. God is not limited by creation. For most of Christianity, calling God "almighty" does not mean that God controls every aspect of every event. Evil would then be from God. However, theologians affirm that the general progression of history is guided and formed by the hand of God.

Keep in mind that these two words go together: "The Father, the almighty." In other words, God is both powerful *and* good to us. God is not only the ruler of the universe, but God is *for us*. Therefore God is neither powerless nor the source of evil. There is an element of paradox in this. A good God that is all powerful would not allow sin, yet sin happens. The creeds set buoys on the attempts to explain this paradox: we cannot claim that God's power is limited, but we also cannot claim that evil comes from God. Some respond to this paradox (this "mystery of God") by describing God's ability vs. what God chooses to do: that God chooses to give us the freedom to sin. God may be powerful enough to control everything, but he chooses to withhold his power to be in relationship with us—free creatures who can respond to God freely. This allows for sin, but God then provides the remedy for sin and evil in Jesus Christ.

Creator of heaven and earth:

This may sound like a simple statement about God, perhaps even the first thing we claim about God. But such a statement draws a sharp distinction between the monotheistic traditions and a large bulk of the world's religions. God creates heaven and earth—in other words, God is not creation, and creation is not God. God is not a by-product of creation, nor is God to be identified with the human heart or soul, nor with the things we buy or make, nor the rocks and trees in all their beauty, nor the sun, moon and stars. This is a statement against idolatry and materialism. Christianity is also clearly distinct from the pantheism of Hindu belief or of contemporary "it's all the same thing" universalism. We might experience God while we are out in the woods, but, God is the maker of the woods, not the woods themselves.

Christians also understand God as creator in a particular way. Informed by Biblical claims, we understand God's creating to be an ongoing activity. In other words, God is not a "watchmaker god" who set things up and let things go at a distance. This is the understanding of "Deism" that began in the 17th century Europe. We understand God's creative power to include each of us as individuals, and the whole world that continues to be created by a God who is actively involved in this world.

Maker...of all that is, visible and invisible:

The Nicene Creed expands the basic statement as it appears in the Apostles' Creed to say that God is the maker of all things visible and invisible. This is an effort to tie up loopholes in the creed that some were exploiting at the time in order to limit the scope of God's creating. The Gnostics of earlier centuries divided material and spiritual, and only identified the true god with the spiritual. The god of the material world was a separate, bad god described in the Old Testament, according to the Gnostics. This phrase in the creed ties up this loophole to emphasize that we believe in only one God, who creates everything, both visible and invisible. Today, we can apply this buoy to Mormon theology that envisions separate universes with other gods. In fact, the Mormon process of reaching higher spiritual levels and secret knowledge closely resembles second century Gnosticism.