

We Believe: The Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed

The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, 5/11/14

Part Three: Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord

Summary Notes (for details, see the following pages)

This clause in the creeds reviews the basic narrative of Jesus' life, and emphasizes that he is one being with the Father.

- **“Christ”** means “Messiah,” “anointed one;” Jesus is the king of Israel (such kings were anointed with oil rather than crowned)—Jesus is the king in the kingdom of heaven.
- **The only Son of God:** unique as God’s Son by nature (we are God’s children by adoption). This is the language used to describe the relationship between the two “divine persons.”
- **Jesus is Lord** as one with authority, and as one with God, whose divine name is called “The LORD.”
- The Nicene Creed emphasizes that Jesus is **“one being with the Father.”**
- Though Jesus began his human life when born of Mary, Jesus’ divine life is in God—without beginning. The Father created all things through the Son (see John 1:3)
- To be specific, God the Son took flesh in Jesus. But since the Son is one being with the Father, if you know the Son, you know the Trinity.
- **Jesus became human “for us and for our salvation,” suffering and dying “for our sake”** to save us from the power of death and sin and to reconcile us to God.
- Jesus shares in our human suffering—not a god at a dispassionate distance, but a God who enters into our suffering and experiences the evil of this broken world—and overcomes it.
- The Creeds contain the core proclamation of the **bodily resurrection of Jesus**, as read in the New Testament.
- **Ascended into heaven:** After his suffering and humiliation, Jesus is exalted to the throne of God (the right hand seat is the seat of honor).
- We believe that Jesus will return in majesty to raise all the dead (the “second coming”), to judge the deeds and hearts of all people, and bring to fulfillment the kingdom of God that he began in us already.
- Jesus as king and judge is cause for our hope—we believe that Jesus is *for us*, even though we don’t deserve it.

So What?

- If Jesus is truly God, and truly risen from the dead, then he really does have the power to save us from sin and death—the power to give us renewal of life, now and at the resurrection of the dead, and the power to reconcile us to God. Someone less than God wouldn’t have that power.
- If Jesus is truly God, then his promises of forgiveness and new life are trustworthy (and not just metaphors of a moral philosophy).
- If Jesus is truly God, we learn more of who God is through seeing who Jesus is
 - Then God is for us
 - Then God loves self-sacrificially
 - Then God loves us even before we love God—while we are yet sinners

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Part Three: Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord

(detailed notes)

I believe in Jesus Christ:

- Christ means “Messiah,” which means “anointed one”
- Kings were anointed; Jews hoped for a Messiah as a king in Israel, one who would deal with their oppressors and restore Israel in relationship with God.
- Christians proclaim Jesus as this Messiah, whose restoration brought forth a new Israel: new life through his death and resurrection, opening up God’s grace to the world (as in God’s promise to Abraham that through Israel, all nations will be blessed, Genesis 18:18)
- Jesus as Messiah is Jesus as King—in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The only Son of God:

- Yes, *only* means *only, unique*...
- We are adopted children of God, but Jesus is God’s Son by nature
- Describing Jesus as the Son of God is a way of describing his relationship to God the Father—as Jesus coming from God and having common identity with God. This is clarified in the next phrases.

...Our Lord/one Lord:

- Lord implies that Jesus has authority, in particular we claim Jesus as the ultimate authority in our lives. We submit our lives to Jesus.
- Lord also implies the divine name: Jews did not speak the written name of God (יהוה) but rather said “adonai,” the Hebrew word for “Lord,” when reading scripture aloud (see the commandment not to take the name of the LORD in vain). Many English translations will render the divine name in the Old Testament as “LORD” in all capitals. Others try to transliterate the name with “Yahweh” or (rather erroneously) “Jehovah.” When Jewish Christians called Jesus “Lord,” this implied that they identified Jesus with God.

The Nicene Creed then expands this section (in comparison to the Apostles’ Creed) to clarify the relationship of God the Son to God the Father. At the Council of Nicaea, this expansion addressed a distortion of the tradition that created theological problems—ideas known as Arianism, after the priest Arius who taught them. These next lines in the Nicene Creed tie up loopholes to defend against Arianism.

**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:**

(see next page):

Eternally Begotten of the Father...of one being with the Father:

- Arius taught that Jesus was divine, yes, but Jesus was a divine *creature*, created by God, but not always existing as God (“co-eternal with God”). Arius was trying to preserve the oneness of God and the distinction between God and creation. But the way he did so changed the basic account of who Jesus is—the understanding handed down from the Apostles (see the documentary evidence).
- Though Jesus began his human life when born of Mary, Jesus’ divine life is in God—without beginning. See John 1:1, 3, 14a: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made...and the Word became flesh...*
- Jesus truly is God
- “begetting” a child is what a father does in contrast to “bearing” a child that a mother does. Given the conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit and Mary, the church chose the word “begotten” to describe the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. This is in keeping with the names of “God the Father” and “God the Son.”
- The second person of the Trinity is not made by God as a part of creation (and therefore distinct from God), but “begotten” by God the Father in eternity—before time and before God’s creating.
- “of one being” translates a special Greek word invented for this purpose (*homoousios*). The Latin renders this as “one substance.” This became the way that theologians could describe Jesus’ oneness with the Father.

So What?

- If Jesus is truly God, then he really does have the power to save us from sin and death—the power to give us new life, now and at the resurrection of the dead. Someone less than God wouldn’t have that power.
- If Jesus is truly God, then his promises of forgiveness and new life are trustworthy (and not just metaphors of a moral philosophy).
- If Jesus is truly God, we learn more of who God is through seeing who Jesus is
 - Then God is for us
 - Then God loves self-sacrificially
 - Then God loves us even before we love God—while we are yet sinners

Through him all things were made:

- John 1:1-3: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.* (ESV)
- In contrast to Greek Pagan religion, Plato conceived of a single, divine (but impersonal) power. The “Word” (the Greek word “Logos”) in Plato’s philosophy was the active power of God in creating. The Apostles used this language to help describe who Jesus is: the divine Word of God.
- This matches up with how the word for “word” in Hebrew is used in the Old Testament (and compare with the power of God speaking “let there be light...” etc, in Genesis).
- So, to be specific, the *Trinity* did not “take flesh,” but rather the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, took flesh in Jesus. But since the Son is one being with the Father, if you know the Son, you know the Trinity.

For us [humans] and for our salvation, he came down from heaven:

- The new translation omits “humans” as redundant.
- The Son is eternally with the Father, but at a specific time in human history, God enters human time and space—“came down from heaven.”
- The purpose of the incarnation is “for us;” God is “for us.”
- God seeks our salvation—from the power of sin and death that divides us from God, from each other, and from the wholeness God desires for each of us. God deals with sin through Jesus.
- We can’t solve the problem of sin ourselves—we need God to solve it for us—in Jesus.

By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary:

- “the power of” is an addition in the new translations of each creed. Why?? I don’t know. But this shouldn’t be taken to lessen the claim of Jesus’ conception by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.
- “Incarnate” means “in flesh.” “Became incarnate” = “took flesh.” But don’t think of this as Jesus putting on “a human suit,” this is another bit of theological language for Jesus becoming truly human—in the flesh.
- A more literal translation of this line from the Greek would be “he took flesh from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin.”
- This follows the Biblical narrative about the virginal conception of Jesus (perhaps less hard to believe than Jesus’ divinity or his bodily resurrection?)

And was made man:

- “Made human,” or “became human.” Jesus is truly divine and truly human. The further case for Jesus’ full humanity follows in the narrative about his life...see below.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate:

- Jesus suffered and died and rose *for our sake*
- What’s a third-rate Roman bureaucrat doing in our profession of faith?? This note places Jesus in a particular time in real history—not a fictional metaphor for human goodness, but a revelation of God in human history.
- Jesus shares in our human suffering—not a god at a dispassionate distance, but a God who enters into our suffering and experiences the evil of this broken world—and overcomes it.
- We see Jesus’ death as on our behalf and for our benefit. Jesus’ death is a sacrificial payment for our sin and a “Passover lamb’s” death to protect us from the power of death (see the Passover story). Jesus’ death as a pure victim shows the ultimate self-giving love of God in the face of human evil. Not overcoming evil by returning evil, but by being a victim that swallows evil up.

He suffered death and was buried/was crucified, died and was buried:

- To clarify both his truly human experiences and his truly real death. The word “death” in the Nicene Creed is an addition in the English translation, but is implied in the Greek.

He descended to the dead:

- This line appears in the Apostles' creed—one of the last additions in the development of that creed. In the Latin (where it originated) this reads that he descended “ad inferna” which can be literally translated “to Hell” (as in earlier English translations). But this might be misleading. The New Testament describes Jesus as going to the souls in “hades,” that is—to the dead. This is different from a place of eternal separation from God or a place of torment that our word “hell” might imply. Thus this newer translation is an appropriate rendering.
- 1 Peter 3:18-19 writes obliquely about Jesus preaching salvation to the “spirits in prison” when he was dead. The reference is vague and brief; probably implied to some extent by this line of the Creed, but not necessarily.
- This line does not appear in the Nicene Creed.

On the third day, he rose again [from the dead]:

- This is the core proclamation of the resurrection, as read in the New Testament.
- The words “from the dead” were omitted from the newer translation of the Apostles' Creed, probably seen as redundant. But the point is that Jesus really did rise to life again (not a metaphor, not a good feeling in the Apostles', but really a formerly dead man living).
- The earliest record of claims of the resurrection are not the Gospel accounts (which emphasize the empty tomb and particular experiences of the disciples with Jesus), but rather from ~56-57 AD in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (15:3-8): *For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*
- Essentially corroborating the witness of several people—‘many of whom you can go talk with to verify yourselves.’

In accordance with the scriptures:

- This line appears in earlier affirmations, but not in the Apostles' Creed as it later developed. This line comes from the above passage in First Corinthians 15:3 and 4.
- “The scriptures” for Paul (and the early church) are the Old Testament scriptures.
- The resurrection of Jesus is seen by Christians as a fulfillment of the scriptures. We have no record of any widespread expectation before the time of Jesus that the Messiah would die and rise again, but following his resurrection, the Apostles saw signs of this in several passages in scripture, especially Isaiah's description of the renewed Israel and his references to the “suffering servant” in Isaiah 53 (vv. 5, 11: *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed... Out of his anguish he shall see light*), and in the Psalms (see especially Ps. 16:8-11, quoted by Peter in Acts 2:25-28).

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father:

- After rising to life again, he ascended to the Father (Acts 1:1-11)
- This ascension is not like space travel (Jesus is not camping out on the Moon or Mars), but rather Jesus' departure from this world to the realm of God. This is not death, but departure. We believe Jesus is alive (unlike Lazarus, for instance, who later died), but Jesus has left the scene.
- After his suffering and humiliation, Jesus is exalted to the throne of God (the right hand seat is the seat of honor).

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead:

- We believe that Jesus will return in majesty to raise all the dead (the "second coming")
- Jesus will judge the deeds and hearts of all people
- Jesus as judge is cause for our hope—for we know our sins, but we also believe that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins. Thus, Jesus may judge our actions unworthy, but he judges us beloved and forgiven, and given new life though we don't deserve it.
- The older translations read "to judge the quick and the dead." "Quick" is an old fashioned word implying "living" (the Greek and Latin words are simply "living"). The word comes from "the quickening" which is that moment when a mother first can feel her baby's movement in her womb, and thus she can tell that the baby is living.

And his kingdom will have no end:

- The Nicene Creed adds this to clarify that the kingdom of God is the kingdom in which Jesus reigns as king. This also reinforces the divinity of Jesus.
- Note that we do not profess a generic afterlife, but a kingdom where Jesus is the king. This is a different claim from other religions' various conceptions of an afterlife (among those religions who even believe in an afterlife).
- This kingdom has already begun in us (Jesus preached "the kingdom of God has come near"). It will have its fulfillment at the second coming and the resurrection.
- Jesus as king gives us hope in the same way that Jesus as judge does: Jesus is *for us*.

So What??

- We profess not speculation about God, but God's self-revelation to us in the historic person Jesus.
- His life, death and resurrection change our relationship with God and our knowledge of God and ourselves.
- If Jesus is God, then to know Jesus is to know God. Then we really have hope for forgiveness (reconciliation with God), for renewal of life and in our own resurrection from the dead.