



Lesson 7. The Nicæan Creed of 381 and Its Use

Introduction

In light of our previous lesson, evaluate the Jehovah's Witnesses' description of the Holy Spirit (from jw.org)

The holy spirit is God's power in action, his active force. God sends out his spirit by projecting his energy to any place to accomplish his will. ...The Bible gives the names of Jehovah God and of his Son, Jesus Christ; yet, nowhere does it name the holy spirit.

7.1 The Nicene Creed of 381

In addition to defending the faith against a variety of semi-Arian beliefs, the council at Constantinople also spoke out strongly on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Rather than writing a new creed, however, the council made some additions and modifications to the Nicene Creed of 325. Compare the two texts below, and you will see that what we today refer to and recite as the Nicene Creed is actually the modified version from 381.

1. As we compare the two creeds, note how the following passages substantiate the person and work of the Holy Spirit:

John 6:63 "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."

John 15:26 "When the Counselor 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."

2 Peter 1:21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed of 325	The Nicene Creed of 381
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<p>We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of all things seen and unseen.</p>	<p>We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.</p>
<p>And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence 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, the things in heaven and on earth. For us and for our salvation he came down and was incarnate, and became truly human.</p>	<p>And [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, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human.</p>
<p>He suffered; on the third day he rose again;</p> <p>He ascended into heaven;</p> <p>He will come to judge the living and the dead.</p>	<p>For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.</p>	<p>And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [<i>and the Son</i>], who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.</p>
	<p>We believe in one holy Christian 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.</p>

The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was a time when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence or a creation or changeable or alterable.

2. What phrases were added to the creed of 381 and how did they clarify the church’s position against false teachings?
3. Why do you think the final paragraph of anathemas (“The catholic and apostolic church condemns . . .”) was dropped in the creed of 381?

7.2 The Use of the Nicene Creed After 381

As we have seen, the 381 version of the Nicene Creed was first approved at a council in Constantinople, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire that was increasingly becoming one of the most important centers of the Christian church. In Constantinople, within the next century, this creed became the normal creed used for baptisms and then part of the Communion liturgy. By the sixth century it was used for both baptisms and the Communion liturgy by all of the Greek-speaking churches of the Eastern Roman Empire and their daughter churches—the churches we call Orthodox yet today (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Serbian Orthodox). The Nicene Creed is usually recited near the beginning of the Communion portion of the liturgy, after the Gospel reading (and after the sermon, if there is one).

In the Latin West, the Apostles’ Creed retained great importance, but a Latin version of the Nicene Creed of 381 came into common use as well. During the fifth century, the Western Empire was being overrun by Germanic invaders, many of whom were Arian Christians. This was most likely one of the reasons that the expanded Nicene Creed of 381 saw increased use in the West. In 589, a council at Toledo in Spain resolved that “before the Lord’s Prayer is said, the creed shall be chanted aloud by the congregation; this will be a witness to the true faith and will enable the people to approach and partake of Christ’s body and blood with hearts cleansed by faith” (Canon 2 of the Council of Toledo, 589). In the following centuries, while the threat of Arianism gradually died out, the practice of reciting the creed of 381 after the Gospel reading and before the Lord’s Prayer spread throughout the western Latin church.

4. Which of the two, the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed, would you choose to use today as a baptismal creed? Explain your answer.

7.3 One Further Change: *Filioque*

Sometime in the centuries immediately following the council of 381, another phrase was added to the Third Article of the creed. After stating that the Holy Spirit was “the Lord and giver of life,” the creed stated that he “proceeds from the Father,” wording taken directly from John 15:26 (KJV). Western theologians like St. Augustine, however, citing verses such as John 16:14-15, explained that the Son was also involved in the procession of the Spirit.

John 15:26 “When the Counselor 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.”

John 16:14-15 “[The Spirit of truth] will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.”

Therefore, the Latin version of the creed’s statement was augmented by the single Latin word *filioque* (“and the Son”). It thus read that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

Theologians in the Greek-speaking east did not question the Son’s involvement with the Spirit. They did not see the Latin addition as wrong, but they preferred to say that the Spirit proceeded from the Father through the Son. While the new addition was used at times in the West in the later fourth and fifth centuries, it wasn’t until about 800 that its use became more widespread. Meanwhile, the Greek-speaking east continued to recite the creed without the addition. Over the centuries the Eastern and Western churches continued to drift further apart culturally and politically. When the two churches experienced times of tension and anger, this small addition to the creed became an easy weapon to throw against the opposing side. To this day, the added phrase remains a point of dispute and disagreement between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

5. Even if it was theologically correct for the Western church to add *filioque* to the creed, was it a mistake to alter an ecumenical creed without first consulting with fellow Christians in the East?
6. What cautions might this suggest to us today?

7.4 The Athanasian Creed

Sometime in the late fifth or early sixth century, a much more elaborate statement about the Trinity was composed, probably in southern France. Often the name of Athanasius was attached to it, but since it was composed in Latin a century or more after his death, he was only the inspiration for its formulations. It begins with the words “Whoever wishes to be saved must,

above all, keep the catholic faith.” Since the first two words in Latin are *Quicumque vult* (“Whoever wishes”), that Latin phrase is often used as a more accurate name for this creed.

The Athanasian Creed is made up of 44 sentences, almost all about the relationship between the members of the Trinity. It became a standard document in the Latin church, although its length kept it from being recited regularly in church services. It states unequivocally that “unless a person keeps this faith completely and entirely, he will undoubtedly be lost forever.” It also combines both positive and negative statements to emphasize that the biblical teaching about the Trinity must be believed, even though that teaching does not agree with our human logic. For example, “The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal; yet there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being.” Thus, it clearly spells out in great detail the same theology that was approved at Nicaea in 325, at Constantinople in 381, and in the writings of Athanasius. In this sense it is truly an “Athanasian” creed. Today this creed is often recited in our services on Trinity Sunday.

7. Interestingly, while our three ecumenical creeds have appropriately accurate names, each name can also be misunderstood. In your group, explain how each name is properly understood and how each can be misunderstood.

8. How else might we use the Athanasian Creed today?

Closing Thought and Prayer

NEXT TIME: The Creeds in Lutheranism