
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Nicene Creed and Modern Thought.

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WHEN speaking of the Nicene Creed as an expression of the Church's faith, we have to consider whether it sets forth the ideal truth or but a transient aspect of it; whether it is a philosophical explanation of the doctrines of Christianity that may serve for all time, or whether it may be superseded by a new Confession specially adapted to make the profession of Christianity easy for the scientific and the learned.

The questions we have therefore to answer are: Does the spirit of Christianity require to be embodied in a new vesture to keep pace with the advancing inquiry and scientific research of our age? Does it express the eternal truths of Christianity in a manner that can never be improved upon or modified? Before we attempt to answer either of these questions for and against the Creed, it were well to keep before us the fact that if the Creed were thrown into the melting-pot it is very improbable that we would ever see its *disjecta membra* again, or that any other summary of Christian doctrines could take its place in the centre of the Church's worship or in the heart of Christian people. It may very possibly be that the Nicene Creed, as it stands, has little practical bearing upon life, that it is cast in too transcendental and metaphysical a garb, and that its form is too general, too statuesque, too archaic. But it may be all that, and still be the nearest approximation to the Christian truth, the nearest to perfection that a symbol could reach. "Symbols, like all terrestrial Garments, wax old," says Carlyle.[1] But he also says, "Look on our divinest Symbol, on Jesus of Nazareth and His life and His biography and what followed therefrom. Higher has the human thought never reached. This is Christianity and Christendom; a Symbol of

[1] "Sartor Resartus," book iii., chap. iii.

quite perennial, infinite character, whose significance will ever demand to be anew inquired into, and anew made manifest."

Carlyle's words remind us that, after all, human language is but an inadequate vehicle to express the great eternal truths. The Creed is an attempt to body forth the infinite in the finite; its phrasing must therefore be more or less economical. It is an economy, as Newman pointed out, to speak of our Lord as sitting on the right hand of God, as if right and left were possible in Him.[1] It is, moreover, an economy to speak of the Son as ascending into heaven, as if heaven and earth were not full of His majesty. It is an economy to use the illustration "Light from Light." It is an economy to use the word "Son" to express the relation of the First and Second Persons. But it is the nearest word we have to express the ineffable truth. And the Arians saw this, for, they argued, if Christ be a Son, He cannot be eternal *a parte ante*, because a son is younger than his father. But as Athanasius[2] said, "Such illustrations and images are used by Scripture to help us to form ideas of things, however obscurely, beyond our reason." The language of a creed must be, therefore, regarded in the light of an economy, an attempt to bring the incomprehensible within the reach of our finite intelligences. Bearing this fact in our minds, we perceive that there are at least three conditions which a creed must fulfil if it is to be a permanent possession. And these are:

I. It must be drawn up in language that is not liable to a change of meaning.

II. It must be an adequate and balanced summary of the fundamentals of the Faith, so far as in keeping with necessary brevity.

III. It must have points of contact with modern thought.

I. It would be interesting to see how far the Nicene Creed answers these three conditions. In the first place, it has happened very providentially that the language of Greek theology in which the Creed is couched is no longer spoken, and is not, therefore, liable to the vicissitudes of a living language;

[1] Athanasius, vol. ii., p. 91. [2] Athanasius, Orat. ii. 32.

and so the Creed is understood to-day in the same sense as it was understood by the Fathers at Nicæa. There is one obscurity in the English version of the Creed which is caused by this very tendency of a spoken language to modify the meaning of its words. I refer to the expression, "Of the same substance," a rendering of *Homoousion*. The word "substance" is more or less ambiguous. Generally speaking, it is the unknown and unknowable substratum of mind or matter, which may be either spiritual or material, but has only a metaphysical existence. In scientific and popular thought it is generally identified with solid matter, although some scientists are now leaning to an idealistic interpretation of the word, and find in force and its proportions and arrangements the key of the universe. But it is obvious that the word which is associated with such different conceptions is hardly sufficient to body forth the eternal relations in the Godhead, and we are compelled to fall back upon the forced distinction between Divine substance and creaturely substance, by which the former would be regarded as indivisible and the latter as divisible. On the other hand, the word "essence" is free from the suggestion of solid matter, and it is also a more correct equivalent of the *ousia* in Homoousion. For the word "substance" was used by the Schoolmen as a rendering of quite a different word (ὑποκείμενον). What did the Nicene Fathers mean by Homoousion? They certainly did not mean anything material. For in the previous Council of Antioch the word was purposely avoided because it was thought to give a material conception to God. But at Nicæa it was used because it excluded the idea of more than one Divine *ousia* or substance, and because it signified that the Son was co-essential with the Father as touching His Godhead. The Greek expresses that idea; it is questionable if the English conveys it.

The intrusion of one foreign word into the Creed, the Latin *filioque* ("and the Son"), caused a breach between the Eastern and Western Churches. This clause was inserted in the Council of Toledo on account of the turn the Arian heresy had taken there, and without the authority of a General Council. As we

are now contemplating the reunion of Christendom, it might be well to inquire if any mutual arrangement could be arrived at concerning this word, which the Greek Church regards as endangering the Monarchia of the Father, but which the Churches of the West would retain as expressing the Double Procession of the Spirit. I believe a *via media* can be found in the passage of John of Damascus, a Greek theologian of the eighth century, who wrote: "The Holy Spirit . . . proceeding from the Father through the Son" ("De Fide Orthodoxâ," c. xii.), and, "The Holy Spirit is God connected with the Father through the Son" (c. xiii.). Is not the first of these expressions equally true to the words of Christ, "Whom the Father will send in My Name," and less ambiguous than, "Proceeding from the Father and the Son"? for it asserts both the Monarchia of the Father and the Double Procession of the Spirit in a more compact form. While pointing out the fact that the expressions "Of the same substance" and "from the Son" are sufficiently ambiguous to warrant a reconsideration of them, we would again emphasize the fact that the ambiguity is not in the original Creed of Nicæa or in the later additions of Constantinople, but in an English word which has quite other associations, and a Latin word inserted without conciliar authority.

II. We now come to the second requisite of a creed—that it should be a short and sufficient statement of the facts of Revelation. While it cannot contain a philosophy of religion, it must be a complete summary, sufficient to guard the truths it embodies from future misconceptions or misinterpretations. The Nicene Creed safeguards the Church from any approach to error on the subject of the Personality and Nature of the Christ. It asserts His pre-existent glory and existence as God *of* God, Light *of* Light; and it maintains the reality of the humanity of Him "who became flesh" and "was made man." Any dangerous heresy that has arisen or is likely to arise, will be found to assail either of these two facts, which the Creed states without reserve. The Incarnation was not "the descent of a God-man into flesh," was not the descent of the æon Christ upon the man Jesus, as

some of the Gnostic schools taught, and was not simply a Divine interposition at the birth of Jesus which profoundly influenced and completely sanctified His appearance, as Keim suggested in his "History of Jesus of Nazara," or an intensification of the indwelling of God which is in every man (Lodge). For how can such ideas be made compatible with the original condition of the Word, the Personal identity of Jesus and Christ, the dignity of Jesus Christ as Saviour of men, and the reality of His humanity, all of which find suitable expression in the Nicene Creed? That Creed is, therefore, to be regarded, not merely as a negative statement of the truth, but as a positive equipment for future controversy. With it in our hands we can combat every heresy. As we can find an almost exact parallel to, and anticipation of, almost every clause in the Nicene Creed in the writings of Clement of Alexandria,[1] compiled more than a century before the original Creed of Nicæa was formulated, we must regard that statement of the faith as not merely a conciliar decision carried by a small majority, but as the Spirit-taught answer of the growing Christian consciousness to the great question: "What think ye of Christ?"

III. We have now to see how far the Creed can be brought into line with modern thought. A glance at this Creed shows that it is as remarkable for what it does not say as for what it does say. Its omissions are very striking. It stands committed to no theory of creation; therefore the Creed is acceptable to all those who believe that God created the world, whether they hold that it was an instantaneous manufacture or a slow growth; whether they consider that all things were made by the very Hand of the Almighty or were made to make themselves. Its statement of the Creation, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible," does not conflict with any presumptions or findings of science. Science does not deny a Creator. "This question," wrote Darwin, "has been answered in the affirmative

[1] See "Clement of Alexandria," by the present writer, pp. 266-268 (S.P.C.K.).

by some of the highest intellects that have ever existed." Science has failed to discover where the principle of life began, whence it comes, and whither it goes; but it has declared that the law of life is orderly growth in one direction. "In science there is only one direction," said a President of the British Association in his inaugural address. The Creed says the same thing in different language. It describes God the Father as a Poet (ποιητής), whose poems are the universe and all that it contains, both the seen and the unseen, material and spiritual, mind and matter. A poem is a harmonious work, obedient to one uniform method, and growing to one great purpose. Again, the Creed would seem to imply that the orderly progress in the Godhead, "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God," finds its counterpart in the orderly progress of created life.

Again, science, tracing the organic filaments of life, maintains the unity of nature amid its diversity, and, following the development of the species and the descent of man, upholds the unity of humanity. The Creed likewise declares that God is the unifying principle of life, in creation, redemption, and spiritual life and development. "I believe in *one* God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in *one* Lord Jesus Christ . . . and in *one* Holy Catholic Church, and *one* baptism for the remission of sins." In its statement of this unity of origin and spiritual life the Creed is not objectionable to modern science, which believes in *one* origin, *one* purpose, and *one* end of created life.

Again, modern thought is averse from any doctrine of the Atonement that assumes a dualism in the Godhead or presupposes a schism in the life of man. But when discarding the legal and forensic formulæ of the Roman law in which Tertullian first presented the doctrine of the Atonement, what simpler expression could it find for that grand response of the Almighty to human needs than that of the Nicene Creed, "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, and made man"? This is a bare but dignified statement

of fact. No theory as to the mode of the Atonement is presented. Therefore the Nicene Creed offers no stumbling-block to those who maintain or to those who deny expiation, substitution, or any other doctrine of the Atonement, but only to those who deny the FACT.

It puts forth no view of the Church, its ministry, or its sacraments, and therefore collides with not one of the many opinions that have been held of the Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, or the Christian priesthood, but is acceptable to all who hold that such things have a right to be.

Modern thought is suspended as to the extent and method of inspiration, but is not opposed to its source—the Spirit—and therefore can find nothing to cavil at in the bare statement of the Creed, "Who spake by the prophets," which gives no view of inspiration, while maintaining the fact of inspiration. Modern thought is baffled by the problems of evil, hell, and the devil. The silence of the Creed on these subjects is eloquent. While in two bright and glorious phrases a light is thrown on that dark and mysterious subject of Christian eschatology—viz., "Whose kingdom is without end," and, "I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." No pronouncement on the vexed subject of eternal punishment or eternal death makes the Creed obnoxious to those who do not believe in such.

Thus, while the Creed is singularly free from doctrines peculiar to certain portions of Christendom, it rehearses the facts that are the common property of Christendom in a symbol that has all the charm and life of a Christian hymn, all the grace and endurance of a Grecian temple. And, allowing for a certain amount of economical language which could hardly be avoided in any statement of infinite realities and relations in the language of mortals, we have every reason to be grateful to the ancient Fathers of Nicæa, who, out of a sea of clashing thoughts and shifting views, raised so noble a hymn to heaven because the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Nor is it merely a statement of fact; it has a message of

salvation, baptism, remission of sins, resurrection, future life, and a kingdom that has no end. Is not this practical? Does it not touch human life at all its points—its beginning, its sin, its sorrow, its death, and its eternal hope?

The Creed is not a valley of dry bones, for every "bone" is a living link in the chain of immortal Truth when the breath of the Spirit has passed over it. And while every phrase may be charged with new and glorious meaning by each advancing and progressive generation, the whole is bodied forth in a form that is fixed and lasting as the Pyramids. Is it any wonder that we say we love our Creed because it is so ancient; we love our Creed because it is so modern? To what representative body of collective Christendom would we be prepared to commit the amendment or reconstruction of that Nicene Hymn? And would the result of any Universal Council's decision in our day find equal acceptance with the scientific and the learned? These two questions we leave to the serious consideration of those who object to the Nicene Creed as out of date and devoid of life, for—

"That which never dies, for ever must be young."