

written by committee the writing styles are as vast as the topics, but some words from the synopsis on the back cover may give you some idea of the calibre of the content:

“Our guides include a philosopher and a scientist. But all are theologians. Among them is one who was, and another who is, a long -serving priest in a ‘front line’ parish, that relentless crucible of all our theology.”

Confessing the One Faith. Geneva: World Council of Churches. 1991.

This text is a systematic exploration of the Nicene Creed line by line, word by word. It was written in order that as a unit the World Council of Churches could agree on the most basic tenants of the Christian Faith. Poignantly for this author, the conversations that led to the publication of this text were held in the same building in which I underwent selection for ordained ministry – (now Old) Churches House, Dunblane.

Karl Barth. *Dogmatics in Outline.* London: SCM Press, 1949.

While the whole of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics stretches to 13 thick volumes – this is a helpful summary by the author himself. It follows the same pattern as the Creed and thus takes a very systematic approach to faith. The language is, sadly, dated and Barth makes the assumption that you know Latin, though never uses more than two or three words at a time, which can be Googled.

Henry Chadwick. *The Early Church – Revised Edition.* London: Penguin Books, 1993.

This is more of a history book than a theology book – however, it tells the story of the first five centuries of the Church and is built around the stories of the things that led to and the fallout from the Council of Nicaea.

We are greatly indebted to Jamie Campbell for offering to write this study for us and for making such an excellent job of it.

Credo in Unum Deum

An introduction to the Nicene Creed

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Introduction

From the beginnings of the Christian Church there has been much debate over what the individual believes. This brief course is a whistlestop tour through the three sections of the Nicene Creed. As it’s title and by way of an introduction, we must first consider the very first line of the Creed. “We believe in One God”. While time does not allow us to dwell on this – indeed a whole course could be devoted to this single line – we must, before we go any further, make a quick exploration of this statement.

While an undergraduate at the University of Aberdeen I took a course which was intended to be Church history “From Christ to Calvin.” It was, as indeed this course is, a high-speed skim of the development of the doctrines of the Church. There was much that was dreadful about this course – but one of the things that kept my interest was that we had a Muslim taking the class. Having her “outsider” view interrogating our lecturer became, for me, an highlight of the course. Particularly the weeks we looked at the Council of Nicaea (more of that later) and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Her trouble is one I suspect many Christians secretly share: *One God in Three Persons? Surely, what you are describing are three equal Gods?* Hopefully, by the end of the course she would have realised that this is a question that the Church has had to do battle with since the very beginning. Indeed, the various “Trinitarian Heresies” all stem from an attempt to try and explain either how God can be singularly three, or how one part of the Trinity is lesser than the other. (See the debate on the *filioque* clause which we will look at in the third session.) What I hope to do with this course is not to barrage you with academic theology and three sessions of intense dogmatics; rather, I hope to encourage you to look more deeply at each line

of the Creed, to appreciate the story behind them, and – more importantly – to ask what they mean to you.

This starts with the statement that prefaces the whole Creed: We believe in one God.

Rightly, this should be at the beginning of each section. Since what we confess by saying the Creed is that we believe in God the Father; God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. However, what we actually read is that “*We Believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty*”, “*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ*,” and “*We believe in the Holy Spirit*”. We have made a grammatical distinction.

Karl Barth, when teaching on John Calvin’s Catechism and therefore the Apostles Creed says the following:

“The substance of this knowledge is the Creed in its entirety. Therefore the whole Creed refers to our knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ does not appear “in the second act” only. He is unceasingly present, unceasingly active.”¹

The same, of course, must be said of the Holy Spirit – but what Barth was doing was, as I am, setting the scene for what was to follow. The point Barth makes is, nevertheless, an important one. That the Creed must be read as a whole and believed as a whole. This is why I chose to entitle this course “*Credo in Unum Deum*” – because it is only in understanding the first line of the Creed that the rest of the Creed makes any sense. In considering deeply, that we do, in fact, believe in One God.

It is important before we go any further to make a sidenote about the liturgical function of the Creed:

It is a point in the service where the Church (both lay and ordained) stand together and recite a series of statements, written by humans, that encapsulates why we are all here. It is usually placed somewhere around the sermon so that what we hear in the sermon is a response to what we believe (as in the Book of Common Prayer) or in response to hearing the sermon we stand and make our profession of faith (as in the Roman Missal). Saying the

προσδοκῶμεν ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν
towards waiting resurrection [of the] dead
καὶ ζωὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. ἀμήν.
and life the to be expected. Amen

Appendix 2

Some Further Reading: An Annotated Bibliography

While it has been my pleasure to write this course, it is very brief and at no time pretends to provide any depth to any of the subjects covered – that comes from your discussions with one another. If however, this course has piqued your interest in reading a little more about the doctrines of the Church, I would recommend the following as an introductory guides:

D. Densil Morgan. *The Humble God*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005.

This book has been in my armoury since I took my very first undergraduate course in systematic theology. It was written as a Lent study course for the Church in Wales under Rowan Williams and his successor Barry Morgan. From there it was expanded to ten chapters. In his preface Morgan says the following:

“I have also kept in mind group study, whether among college or university classes, lay training seminars or weeknight meetings of local congregations.”

The language is easy to understand, the imagery and metaphors likewise; but that does not mean that his topics are in any way watered down, simply that he makes some of the fundamental challenges of thinking about Christian theology palatable.

We Believe in God. The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England. 1987.

Although a much heavier book, it attempts to answer the question “Who is God?” It does this by looking at God through the lens of various ways that God can be approached such as the God of Jesus, the God of the Bible, the way we talk about God, how we relate to God. As with anything

¹ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church*, (London and Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1960) p. 34

τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ
τῶν οὐρανῶν,

who for us humans and for the salvation came down from the heavens

καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου,
and took flesh from the Spirit Holy and Mary the virgin

καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα,
and became human

σταυρωθέντα τε ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου,
crucified under for us by Pontius Pilate (Greek grammar gets in the way of the interpretation here)

καὶ παθόντα, καὶ ταφέντα,
and suffered and was buried

καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ κατὰ τὰς γραφάς,
and resurrection the third day because the writings

καὶ ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς,
and go up to go into heaven

καὶ καθεζόμενον ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Πατρὸς,
and is sitting on right the Father.

καὶ πάλιν ἐρχόμενον μετὰ δόξης κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς,
and back will come with glory separating living and dead,

οὗ τῆς βασιλείας οὐκ ἔσται τέλος·
of the kingdom no sum ends.

καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, τὸ Κύριον καὶ Ζωοποιόν,
and in the Spirit the Holy, the Lord and Life-giver

τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον,
the out of the Father proceeds

τὸ σὺν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ συμπροσκυνούμενον καὶ συνδοξαζόμενον,
who with Father and Son all worshiping and glory-giving

τὸ λαλῆσαν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν·
who has spoken by the prophets;

εἰς μίαν ἁγίαν καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν·
in one holy universal and apostolic gathering;

ὁμολογοῦμεν ἓν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν·
to be in dipping to go releasing failures;

Creed is a unifying moment. We unite ourselves with those around us and we unite ourselves with everyone who has ever said it. We join the Communion of Saints. The Faith and Order board of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Dunblane in 1990, said the following:

“The common confession of the apostolic faith is one of the essential conditions and elements of unity which have been identified in our common ecumenical history.”²

Welsh Baptist theologian D. Densil Morgan makes the following observation of the Trinity and how it relates to our life as the Church:

“The doctrine of the Trinity...teaches that God exists as communion, therefore being itself, as created by God, is relational existence.”³

What this naturally all builds to is the unity that St Paul’s describes to the Church in Ephesus:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.⁴

Prayer

O God of unfathomable mysteries,
in you we see a vision of unity
yet, in ourselves we see a picture of division.
Unite that which divides us so that, by your Holy Spirit,
we may conform to your threefold likeness.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Amen.

² *Confessing the One Faith*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991) p. vii.

³ D. Densil Morgan, *The Humble God*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005) p.52.

⁴ Ephesians 4:4-6 NRSV

God the Father

The first section of the Creed is on the Father. There is much debate in the Church over whether this term is helpful in the 21st Century or whether we should look at it in a more general sense as a Divine Parent. As a general rule, God is referred to in a genderless way; however, the inescapability of the word “Father” in both the Bible and the writings of the Church throughout history means that this word in the second line of the Creed is as inescapable as the word “Almighty” which follows it.

Yet, on the Fatherhood of God (or for that matter the parenthood of God), the Creed is silent – save for the use of the words Father and Son. Instead, what we see in the first section of the Creed is an enumeration of God as the Creator.

It would be forgivable to limit the first person of the Trinity to simply this creative act were it not for the use of the word “*Father*.” This brings with it many connotations, both positive and negative, and encourages us to explore the concept of a creator who is in relationship. One cannot be a parent without there being a child. Thus, the sense of unity between the sections of the Creed is presented and preserved.

Reading: *John 1 : 1 – 18*

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways does the Prologue of St John’s Gospel parallel the opening of the Creed? What are the significant points of departure?
2. To what extent do you think that the parenthood of God is linked to Creation?
3. How does knowing this (and reciting it as a statement each week) effect our faith in the God we profess?
4. Is there room for science, reason and doubt in this?
If there is, where is it?
If not why not?

Appendix 1

The Text of the Creed

In the following translation I have attempted to make a very literal, word for word translation of the Greek text of 381AD. This may not make much sense in isolation, but when compared with the familiar words of the Creed in any liturgical source should, I hope, give an added depth to your reading and perhaps shed new light on certain concepts within the Creed.

Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἓνα Θεόν,
We believe in one God,

Πατέρα παντοκράτορα
Our father all-powerful

ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς,
who made heaven and earth,

ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων·
visible to everything and invisible;

καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν
and in one Lord Jesus Christ

τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ,
the son of the God the one-begotten

τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων,
the out of the father ever-begotten for everything the eternal

Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός,
light out of light

Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ,
God truly out of God truly

γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα,
begotten not created

ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί,
the same substance the Father

δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο·
because of him the all things came into being

in our expectation of eternal life. As the liturgical formula puts it “*as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be.*”

Reading: *Ezekiel 37 : 1 – 14*

Questions for Discussion

1. In John 14 Jesus says “*I will pray to the Father and he will give you another comforter*” meaning the Holy Spirit. To what extent do you think the *filioque* clause affects our understanding of this?
2. How do you view the unity of the Church in the light of the Trinity?
3. Does the Church being an action of the Holy Spirit mean that it is infallible?
4. How has the Holy Spirit moved in your life?

Prayer

Prevent us O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help;
that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee,
we may glorify thy holy Name.
And finally by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Prayer

God our Creator,
You were with us at the world’s beginning,
be with us at the world’s end.
You were with us at our life’s beginning
be with us at our life’s end.
You were with us at the day’s beginning,
be with us as the day ends.⁵

Amen

God the Son

The Council of Nicaea in 325 was called by the Emperor Constantine to settle many issues that had developed in the 4th Century Church. (Not least the date of Easter!) Among these issues was the relationship of the Son to the Father. The result of this debate is the Nicene Creed. Each word on each line was agonised over in order to prevent one heresy or another being promulgated. The most famous of these being the incident where Arius (who proposed that the Son was a creation of the Father) so incensed Nicholas of Myra (better known as Santa Claus) that the latter punched him in the face. From this debate we get the line “*of one substance* (Gk. homo - ousion) *with the Father.*” Arguably, the whole section up until “*things were made*” is a combatting of Arius’ and his companions’ heresy. It firmly establishes the second person of the Trinity in the time and space of the first. Yet, it makes the distinction that these are separate “things”. (It would take a long time for a word to describe that “*thing*” to be fully settled on.)

By far the longest section of the Creed, it is interesting to note that the majority of the Gospels become simply a full stop. “*And was made human. // For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.*” No teaching, no healing, no disciples – simply Christ’s birth, death, resurrection, ascension and eventual return. There is a much repeated argument that the Creeds tell us everything you need to believe but nothing about how you should live whereas Jesus told us everything about how we should live and nothing

⁵ *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001) pp.143-144 (amended).

about what we should believe. This is perhaps a key point in understanding the Creeds: they do not live in isolation. They come alongside the wider story of the Church. This is why it is usually sited in a central part of the Liturgy – not because statements of belief are central – but because the Creed sits as a response to the Word of God in either the readings and or the sermon and therefore the natural response to that (in many contexts) is to move towards Communion with the one we have just responded to by professing our faith in.

Reading: *Philippians 2 : 6 – 11*

Questions for Discussion

1. Our reading from Philippians is sometimes considered the earliest Creed (if not an early hymn to teach the Faith.)
What are some of the obvious similarities and differences between it and the second section of the Nicene Creed?
2. How effective is the statement “*the creeds tell us everything we should believe and nothing about how we should live, Jesus tells us everything about how we should live and nothing about what to believe.*”
3. Is there a part of this section (of the Creed) that you would remove, change or add? Why?
4. Why does this section of the Creed matter?

Prayer

Risen Lord, behind closed doors
you turned Thomas’ doubt into a shout of faith.
Take our questioning minds
and make them a gateway to hope and trust in you,
that faith may seek and find understanding in your mysterious purposes and will;
for your honour and glory.⁶

Amen.

God the Holy Spirit

If ever there was an underdeveloped study in theology, its pneumatology – the study of the Holy Spirit. Mostly because within scripture there is not much to work with. Yet, it is this part of the Creed which poses the biggest debate in theology – one which continues to this day.

I am of course referring to the *filioque* clause. Does the Spirit proceed from the Father (as the original Greek says) or from the Father *and the Son*? (A later addition.) There is debate as to when it was added, though by the 10th Century it was adopted in the Western Church (around the same time it parted ways from the Eastern Church.) This has continued to be a source of schism between the East and the West. Churches ever since have debated and argued over its inclusion. As an example, the Book of Common Prayer retained it, but subsequent Anglican liturgies have removed it. This does lead to the theological question of what the Anglican Church teaches about the Holy Spirit.

This is not the only question raised by this section; some have even asked where it ends. Are there four parts to the Creed or three? Three would suggest that - as in the original structure - the Church, and her actions, are all part of the Spirit. Four suggests that the Church is something else we must believe in. The line that is most commonly translated “*We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church*” is in the Greek simply “*In one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.*” Suggesting that the Church is part of the actions of the Holy Spirit rather than a fourth thing to believe in. However, the only point at which the Greek actually says “*We believe*” is in the very first word two words. The Son and the Spirit are introduced with “*And in...*” I would argue the lack of “*and*” indicates that the Church is not separate from the Spirit.

The section on the Spirit also provides us with perhaps the most overt language about the unity of God in Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Personal Experience. The section on the Spirit refers to the Spirit speaking through the Prophets, being in the activity of the Church’s sacraments, and

⁶ Ian Black, *Prayers for all Occasions*, (London: SPCK, 2011) p.147.