**The Nicene Creed (part two)**

Rev. David Waldron

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 16:13-20; John 15:18-27

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 84, 63, 345, 393, 525

**Series:** Nicene Creed (2/2)

**Theme:** The doctrines of the Holy Spirit and of the church expressed in the third and fourth parts of the Nicene Creed

**Proposition:** The Nicene Creed includes a helpful summary of the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and of the church.

**Introduction**

The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed date from the early centuries of the Christian church. Creeds, also called “symbols of faith,” are concise and authorised statements of the essential tenets of the faith. The believing community of the church uses these creeds for testimony, instruction, and worship. Although many kinds of creeds exist, the ecumenical creeds have the broadest recognition within the Christian church. They are called “ecumenical” because they have been approved and accepted by a large portion of the churches of Christendom. We regularly recite the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as part of our worship services in order to confess the core content of our faith together. The reason why we don’t recite the Athanasian Creed so much is not because its content is less Biblical but simply because it is much longer than the other two ecumenical creeds.

The Nicene Creed contains four parts:

1. Belief about God the Father
2. Belief about Jesus the Son
3. Belief about the Holy Spirit
4. Belief about the church universal

Other than the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed is likely the most universally accepted and recognised statements of the Christian faith. This sermon focusses on the third and fourth parts of the Nicene Creed

1. **The Holy Spirit**

The third section of the Nicene Creed is: “*And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets*”. The creed affirms the existence and deity of the Holy Spirit and identifies His life-giving work and His inspiration of the true prophets in Scripture.

This third section of the creed, in particular the phrase ‘and the son’ has been the source of great controversy in the wider church. This clause is referred to as the ‘Filioque’ – a Latin word meaning ‘from the son’. The Filioque describes the procession of the Holy Spirit from Jesus Christ, in addition to His procession from the Father. The Filioque was not part of Nicene Creed text either in the first ecumenical council of Nicea in 325AD, the second ecumenical council of Constantinople in 381AD, or the third ecumenical council of Chalcedon in 451AD. The Filioque was not added until 589AD. It was incorporated into the liturgy of the Roman (Western) church in 1014, but was rejected by the Eastern church. Disagreement over the Filioque led, amongst other things, to the ‘Great Schism’ in 1054 which led to the separation of the Western and Eastern churches.

Any creed or confession is only of any value and significance if it accurately summarises the truths of Scripture. So what does the Bible say with respect to the Filioque? Does the Holy Spirit **only** proceed from the Father, or from the Father and the Son?

Firstly, it is clear that the Spirit is sent by the Father. Jesus says: "*But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me*” (John 15:26). The Greek word translated ‘proceeds’ means to ‘go forth, to go out from’. This word is also used in Scripture to describe people leaving from a place (e.g. Mark 6:11), the dead coming out from tombs (John 5:29), words coming out from the mouth (Mat 15:11), a report spreading abroad (Luke 4:37), and water flowing out (Rev 22:1). Jesus also says of the third person of the Trinity: “*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:26).

Secondly, other Scriptures **seem to indicate** that the Spirit proceeds from the Son **as well as** from the Father: “*Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go,* ***I will send him to you***” (John 16:7). ‘…*because you are sons, God has sent* ***the Spirit of his Son*** *into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*’ (Gal 4:6).

The significance of the Filioque clause ‘from the Son’ is its connection to an understanding of the nature of the Trinity. Those who oppose the filioque clause object because they believe the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son makes the Holy Spirit “subservient” to the Father and Son, whereas those who uphold the Filioque clause believe that the Holy Spirit proceeding from both the Father and the Son does not impact on the Spirit being equally God with the Father and the Son.

It could be argued that the inclusion of the Filioque clause in the Nicene Creed is less important that a right understanding of the nature of the Trinity. Whilst there are mysteries within the Godhead that have not been revealed in Scripture, it is clear that the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are (in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism 6) ‘*the same in substance, equal in power and glory*’. The Nicene Creed expresses the essential equality of the Father and Son, saying of Christ ‘*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God…. being of one substance with the Father*’. The same could be said of the Holy Spirit: ‘*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God…. being of one substance with the Father*’. The Nicene Creed confesses the deity of the Holy Spirit by saying of Him ‘*who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified*’.

Whilst the essential natures of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the same (theologically this is termed ‘ontological equality’), their roles are different (theologically this is termed ‘economic’ distinction).

1. The Father is the ‘Maker of heaven and earth’. He is the initiator of Creation (and Redemption- by sending His Son).
2. The Son is the One ‘by whom all things were made’. He ‘came down from heaven…was made man…was crucified…suffered…was buried…rose again…ascended into heaven…he shall come again with glory’
3. The Holy Spirit is ‘the giver of life’ ‘who spoke by the prophets’.

Sometimes I hear people in the wider churches refer to the Holy Spirit as ‘it’. This is not right. He is a person. The Scriptures reveal that the Holy Spirit speaks (e.g. Acts 1:16; 8:29; 10:19; 13:2), teaches (John 14:26), bears witness (John 15:26), searches (1 Cor 2:10), wills (1 Cor 12:11) and intercedes (Rom 8:26,27). These are the functions of a person, not a mere force. It is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we have the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). One of the areas of truth that the Spirit reveals through the Word is the nature of the church. This is the subject of the fourth part of the Nicene Creed and brings us to our second point:

1. **The Church**

The fourth section of the Nicene Creed is: “*And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come*”. The Nicene Creed recognises that the true Christian church can be identified by four things: (1) unity, (2) holiness, (3) catholicity, and (4) apostolicity. Let’s briefly look at each of these four ‘marks’ of the church in turn.

1. **Unity.**

The church today, and through history following the ‘Great Schism’ of 1064 and the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century does not looklike one church. Not only is there the divide between Eastern and Western branches of the church, there are many different denominations, beliefs and practices. The church must be unified in some way. Multiple churches which are at odds with one another cannot be the one true church. Different ‘factions’ have their own understanding of what the church’s “oneness” means. The Roman Catholic church believes that being ‘one’ means acknowledging the same tradition and prime leader throughout the entire church. Eastern Orthodox Christians broadly believe ‘oneness’ means affirming the same belief system. They do not, however, require that this belief be expressed in the same way among all Christians. Protestants believe that essential church is “spiritual” and that its oneness is made manifest in the visible church through the profession and lives of Christians.

1. **Holiness.**

The basic meaning of holy is to be ‘set apart’ as pure. God Himself is holy. He is ‘altogether other’; set apart from all that He has made. Holiness has been greatly misunderstood by many people over the years. Here is what the Bible says: The people who are part of the local church in any particular location are called ‘saints’ – which means ‘holy ones’ or ‘set apart ones’ e.g. “*To the* ***saints*** *who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus*” (Eph 1:1), “*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be* ***saints***” (1 Cor 1:2).

Those whose confession of Christ comes from a believing heart do fail. They do sin and they do not live perfectly holy lives; however they do desire to be the holy people God has called them to be. They take the Bible seriously, for example these words: ‘*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy,* ***you also be holy in all your conduct****, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*’ (1 Peter 1:14-16).

1. **Catholicity**

When most people in the Western world hear the word ‘catholic’ they think of the Roman Catholic church, but that is **not** the root meaning of this term. The word ‘catholic’ is a combination of two Greek terms ‘according to’ and ‘the whole’. So ‘catholic’ means ‘universal’ – the whole of something. We first find this term written down by the early Christian church leader and writer Ignatius in the 2nd century AD. Ignatius used the word ‘catholic’ to describe a single group of confessing Christians.

This is the sense of the word catholic as we find it in the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian creeds. Abraham, ‘the father of faith’ (Rom 4:16) is part of the catholic church. His faith in the promises of God (Gen 12:1-3) then yet to be realised in Christ (Heb 11:13) was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). The true church is catholic, being a universal assembly of true believers stretching back in time. She will also always exist in the future – God will always preserve some who truly love and worship Him. The church is also ‘catholic’ in her geographical spread around the world. However, whilst the Scriptures do refer to the whole, catholic church as the body of Christ (e.g. Eph 1:22-23), more frequently the word ‘church’ is used to describe a local congregation in a particular place e.g. ‘*the church of God that is in Corinth*’ (1 Cor 1:2).

1. **Apostolicity**

Jesus said to Peter: *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)* The idea that Christ was promising to give these keys to a line of men who would succeed Peter over future generations is the concept of what is called ‘apostolic succession’ whereby the ministry of the church only passes down through bishops descending from Peter. With differing details, this is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic, Swedish Lutheran and Anglican churches.

We believe that Christ was promising to delegate His authority over His church to all those who make the **same confession** as Peter (as a disciple), whilst also delegating that authority to Peter (as an apostle). Apostolicity in our Reformed understanding of Scripture refers to the succession of true doctrine in the life of the church. Scriptural support for this view comes from the inspired words of the Apostle Paul who writes to Timothy “*what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*” (2 Tim 2:1-2). We also understand from Ephesians 2:9-20 that the true church is ‘*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*’. A church that is faithful to the teaching of the Apostles can rightly be called an Apostolic Church.

Why don’t we call ourselves the ‘Apostolic Church of Christchurch’ then? For at least three reasons!

1. That would be very confusing as the name ‘apostolic church’ has relatively recently come to be associated with the Pentecostal denomination that emerged from the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905.
2. We are not only ‘apostolic’ we are also part of the catholic (universal) church. We are also holy by God’s grace.
3. Our name reflects our origin as a federation of churches firstly in the Protestant Reformation and secondly as local churches here in New Zealand.

Two significant areas of confusion in the wider Christian church today are the person and work of the Holy Spirit and the nature of the church herself. The Nicene Creed helpfully summarises what the Scriptures teach in both these areas of doctrine.

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit gives life to those who were once dead in their trespasses and sins by regenerating them to become alive together with Christ? Do you believe that the church is the body of Christ, for which Jesus gave Himself up for, that He might sanctify her? (Eph 5:26).

The Nicene Creed points us to Christ, His glorious person and His work of salvation, together with God the Father and the person of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.