

Why We Do Not Utilize the Nicene Creed
at Commonwealth Community Baptist Church of the Bronx
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The Nicene Creed (NC) might be the most widely recited confession of faith in the history of Christianity. Originally composed (or at least begun to be composed) in Greek at the Council of Nicea (CN) in modern day Turkey in 325 A.D., the NC has been recited by the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), Eastern Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, and many other Protestants and Christian denominations,¹ and no doubt even by some Baptists.²

The CN was convened by 4th Century leaders of proto-Roman Catholic Christianity, popularly referred to as “church fathers” and who had embraced the State Church paradigm, for the purpose of dealing with the Arian controversy over the deity of Christ. The conflict was between two RCC leaders, Alexander, who held that Christ was divine and had no beginning, and Arius, who espoused the idea that Christ was created and therefore not God. This division threatened the unity of the empire. As Latourette notes,

“Then the Emperor Constantine stepped in. He had recently come over to the side of the Christians and after a long, hard struggle had united the Empire politically under his rule. The dispute over Arius threatened the disruption of what, along with the Empire, was the strongest institution in the Mediterranean world, the Catholic Church. Constantine had already intervened in the Donatist controversy. He now felt impelled to act in this much more serious division.”³

His actions involved summoning both men to Nicea to convene for the purpose of reestablishing unity and quelling these differences, which Constantine himself referred to as “of a truly insignificant character and quite unworthy of such fierce contention.”⁴ About 300 Church bishops were in attendance as well as other clergy and Catholic laity to hear the debate between Arius and Alexander’s disciple Athanasius. It is doubtful if any pastors of NT immersionist assemblies were on hand. The CN resulted in Arius being condemned and his books being burned, and the doctrine of the deity of Christ being officially adopted by the RCC.⁵

¹ Mead also lists by name African Orthodox, Assyrian Jacobite Apostolics, Catholic Apostolics, and Episcopalians who utilize the NC. Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951).

² It was this author’s experience to have found the NC in some hymnals utilized in some Baptist churches he has ministered in over the past 32 years.

³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1953), p. 153.

⁴ Latourette, p. 153.

⁵ The peace did not last long. “Constantine’s achievement of unity proved a hollow victory. Conflict flared up again when the anti-Arian party, led by Athanasius who succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria,

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the NC is, “The formal and orderly presentation of the chief doctrines of the Catholic faith... officially made a part of the Roman rite of the Mass by Pope Benedict VIII, and it remains so today as a profession of faith said by the priests and the people.”⁶ Pope Benedict VIII died in 1094, and so the NC has been officially recited by the RCC for over 900 years.

While the history of the NC is both interesting and not irrelevant, that is not the reason why CCBC does not utilize it for corporate worship. Since, by God’s grace, we are a NT candlestick of the LORD and not part of the state church movement or sacral society, we take our doctrine and practice from the Scriptures alone. We are not opposed to doctrinal statements, position papers, or confessions, and of course we utilize our own which we have been expanding since updating our constitution and by-laws beginning in 2013. But history and all penultimate authorities are never the foundation for our faith, and can only be used to illustrate obedience or disobedience to the Word of God.

The fact is the NC itself has very limited value. There are hardly any doctrines it expresses in a way that would compel us to keep its language or quote it to express our views. Furthermore, the NC contains numerous errors and expressions that could lead to wrong theological thinking. Though it has great antiquity (as most false doctrines do as well) it fails to provide the NT church member with any edifying reason to hold to it. We reproduce a common version of the NC below, with brief comments to follow:

*We believe in one God,
The Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
Of all that is, visible and invisible*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
The only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten from the Father before all ages,
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*

refused to receive back repentant Arians into the church. Constantine’s continued attempts to attain unity were frustrated, as he saw it, by the obstinate refusal of first one faction and then the other to make any compromise.” Tim Dowley, ed. *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977) p. 134.

⁶ Robert C. Broderick, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), pp. 423-24.

*He came down from heaven,
By the power of the Holy Spirit
He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary
And was made man;
For our sake also He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
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.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit,
The Lord, the giver of life,
Who proceeds from the Father;
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified;
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.
We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the age to come.*

The first section, beginning with, “*We believe in one God,*” misses an opportunity to specify, “in three persons” as I John 5:7 teaches. The second through fourth line describes God as “*Maker...of all that is visible and invisible.*” The problem here is that Colossians 1:16 specifically applies to the LORD Jesus Christ the phrase, “by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible...” While it is certain that the Triune Godhead was involved in the creative acts of Genesis 1, the NC restricts those acts to the Father alone and in fact is in conflict with an explicit statement about Christ in the NT.

The second section contains phrases like, “*God from God*” and “*True God from True God.*” While it is commendable that the NC strives to promote the deity of Christ, it meanders into the sphere of gnostic confusion with language that echoes a procession of deities or emanations from God. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) reading of John 1:18 seems to reflect this confused gnosticism when it reads, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained him.”⁷

⁷ This is the reading of the 1995 edition of the NASB. The 2020 revision of the NASB seems to attempt to correct this error, while still sounding confused due to the underlying Critical Text (CT) reading: “No one has seen God at any time; God the only Son, who is in the arms of the Father, He has explained him.”

The second section of the NC goes on to say, “*He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary.*” There are two errors here; first, the phrase seems to espouse power to accomplish the incarnation to Mary, stating that Christ’s becoming incarnate was from her, and, second, it uses the definite article as well as capitalizes Virgin. Nowhere does the Bible use such terminology. To refer to Mary the mother of Jesus in this way opens the door to an unbiblical veneration of her beyond what the Scripture allows.

The third section begins on the topic of the Holy Spirit, but then moves to ecclesiology, where it reads, “*We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.*” Of course, it may be reasonably argued that the NC does not have in mind the RCC as we think of it historically, and is merely using the term “catholic” in its general meaning of “universal.” But that is just as erroneous, for the Bible knows of no church but the local, visible, immersionist assembly. It is self-defeating to use the term “catholic / universal church” just as it would be to use the term “unassembled assembly.”

Finally, the third section concludes with the phrase, “*we confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*” This term by itself could be understood to be promoting the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Some have sought to defend this statement by arguing that similar terminology is used in Acts 2:38.⁸ However, the verse in Acts requires repentance before baptism, and, furthermore, if the English of Acts 2:38 is the least bit unclear, why duplicate the unclarity in one’s doctrinal statement, with no clarifying statement?

In conclusion, it is clear why CCBC counts itself among NT churches that have no use for the NC other than as a bit of historical enlightenment in regards to the history of Christianity. One lesson to be learned is that we must strive to be precise theologians, to study diligently to show ourselves approved unto God, and to write our beliefs with the expectation that the next generation may read what we have claimed to believe. May God be glorified as we testify His truth to our world.

⁸ “*Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.*” Acts 2:38. The preposition “for” is used in the sense of “because,” as in, “be baptized because you have the remission of sins,” not in the sense of obtaining remission of sins. Peter would later write that baptism does not save from the filth of the flesh, it is simply the testimony of a good conscience, cf. I Peter 3:20-21.