

Reflections on the 1700th Anniversary of Nicene Creed

Jesus once posed a question to Simon Peter: *'Who do you say that I am?'*

The early Christian church found it necessary to formulate creeds to summarise what they believed about such important questions. The word Creed derives from the Latin word *credo* meaning 'I believe'.

Some were short statements used by candidates at baptism such as 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. Others were more detailed as guides for teaching in the church. They were important to distinguish 'orthodox' Christian teaching from false ideas and to maintain the unity of the church.

Arius, a pastor from Egypt in the 4th century came into conflict with his bishop when he declared that *'The Son had a beginning but God has no beginning'*. He presented Jesus as the first and greatest created being, a semi-divine super hero. Arius' bishop excommunicated him as a false teacher but he had a popular following and the church was in danger of splitting.

The Emperor Constantine responded by calling a Council in 325 in Nicaea (Iznik in modern Turkey). Around three hundred bishops attended and debate centred on the question: is Jesus of the 'same substance' as God the Father or is He a lesser being? The Council agreed on the Greek term 'homoousious' which means that the Father and the Son are 'of one essence'. It described Jesus in these words: *'True God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father'*.

So emerged the Nicene Creed which was later expanded in 381 at the Council of Constantinople and to this day is the standard of orthodoxy of Roman, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Reformed churches as well as many others. It has a Trinitarian structure dealing first with God the Father as Creator, Jesus the Son who came as Saviour and the Holy Spirit as giver of life. It emphasises that just as God is one, so is His church.

As we reach the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea, the Creeds are still important to:

- summarise the essential doctrines of the church
- guide those who are responsible for its teaching
- inform those seeking to join it as members
- express oneness among believers when recited corporately at worship
- foster unity in the essentials of the faith with churches worldwide
- connect the contemporary church to its historical roots
- provide a foundation for worship 'in spirit and truth'

Thus we delight to sing:

“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity,
pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel!”

“Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, in perfect harmony the man
who is God,
Lord of eternity dwells in humanity, kneels in humility and washes our
feet.”

“Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity!”

This anniversary is an opportunity to thank God for those of past generations on whose shoulders we stand, who earnestly ‘contended for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints’ - Jude v 3.

Rev. John Woodside
Church History Lecturer at Irish Bible Institute, Dublin
Presbyterian Minister