

WHY DO WE USE THE NICENE CREED?

This is a question that has come up recently, particularly in the light of our congregation's practice of celebrating Holy Communion on a regular weekly basis. It's a good question. Sometimes it is easy to forget that there are people, especially those who are new to the church, who may not fully understand why we do some of the things we do during our worship services. So I thought the time was right to clear the air on this small but significant part of our Sunday morning liturgy.

The best place to start in understanding why we use the Nicene Creed in the Uniting Church, particularly during services that include Holy Communion, is to understand just what the Nicene Creed is, and where it came from. To this end I have clipped a few things together to help us get some context to its use in Church.

The Nicene Creed, also called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is a statement of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church in opposition to certain heresies, especially Arianism. These heresies, which disturbed the church during the fourth century, concerned the doctrine of the trinity and of the person of Christ. Both the Greek (Eastern) and the Latin (Western) church held this creed in honor. In its present form this creed goes back partially to the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) with additions by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381). It was accepted in its present form at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The creed is in substance an accurate and majestic formulation of the Nicene faith.¹

Over 300 bishops from all over the world gathered to write the creed, in response to Arianism, a philosophy that denied Jesus was fully God. The Nicene Creed ultimately explains the Church's teachings about the Trinity, but it also affirms historical realities of Jesus' life. Even though the creed does not directly quote Scripture, it is based on biblical concepts and truths.²

There are several important features in the Nicene Creed.

- As a product of a polemical debate, it is more explicit than the Apostles' Creed concerning the full divinity of the members of the Trinity.
- It is Trinitarian in its structure, affirming the divinity and mission of all three persons of the Triune God.
- Its Christology—while orthodox—is less developed than that of the Chalcedonian Creed. It describes the full deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit by asserting that each of the persons of the Trinity are to be worshipped. By insisting that the Son is “of one substance” with the Father, any sort of Trinitarian subordinationism is ruled out.
- The full life and work of Christ is declared in several sentences, acknowledging that his mission was “for us and for our salvation.”
- Like all of the ecumenical Creeds, the Nicene Creed does not set forth any specific theory or view of the atonement.
- It gives the Holy Spirit a more significant place than the Apostles' Creed.³

As a creed recited in many churches every Sunday, many Christians are very familiar with its contents. While significant as an historical document, the Nicene Creed encapsulates the entire good news of the gospel into a short and rich summary. It describes the Triune God, who turns toward humanity in the person of Jesus, the God-man who suffered, died, rose again, and ascended. Additionally, the Creed goes on to express our future hope, which is a motivating factor in the Christian life.⁴



Icon depicting Emperor Constantine (center) and the Fathers of the First Council of Nicaea of 325 as holding the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

¹ http://www.crcna.org/pages/nicene_creed.cfm

² <http://www.ancient-future.net/nicene.html>

³ <http://theresurgence.com/2011/07/03/the-nicene-creed>

⁴ <http://theresurgence.com/2011/07/03/the-nicene-creed>

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH IN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

Now that you've had your history lesson, I want to address the regular use of the Nicene Creed in Uniting Church worship services, especially when Holy Communion is to be served. Robert Gribbin, in his book, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*⁵, gives us the following understanding:

The *Basis of Union*, paragraph 9, gives unique authority as statements of the Catholic Faith to the two confessions known as the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds. They are commended for use in worship as acts of allegiance to God the Holy Trinity. When we confess our faith, these two creeds have first claim to be used, and we must not set them aside on the grounds that they need careful explanation.

There are also a number of present-day statements which highlight aspects which the modern church wishes to affirm; social justice, for instance. Many of these (see PB 130-134) are based on confessions of 20th century churches and councils. They have the authority of their sources, but they do not claim to state the fullness of the faith as the historic creeds do, and should not therefore replace the creeds. The intention of the Commission on Liturgy is that the creeds should be used when a confession of faith is required in the sacramental life of the church. The Apostles' Creed is used at baptisms and confirmations because it began life as a baptismal formula and retains the 'I believe' form suitable for personal commitment; the Nicene Creed has a traditional place at the Eucharist. Other confessions (including a number culled from the Bible itself - PB 124-130) may be used on other occasions."⁶
(Note PB refers to the blue *People's Book of Uniting in Worship*)

One of the concerns raised by some people in regard to the Nicene Creed's regular use is that one can become so used to saying it that it loses its significance. The same could be said for many things that we do repeatedly. Driving a car, for instance, we can become so blasé that we sometimes fail to concentrate as we should. It can become so 'second nature' that we run the risk of being involved in, or even causing, an accident. Every time we get into a car to drive we need to pay attention to every act of skill that goes in to being a safe driver. We need to approach it fresh every time. The same is true for our regular reciting of the Nicene Creed. We need to find a way (in our own hearts) to approach it fresh every time. Just as the car is not the cause of accidents (usually) so the liturgy that we use in worship, including the use of the Nicene Creed, is not the cause of our becoming desensitised to it. The cause of our desensitisation is, I am afraid to say, us.

Consider also those three words, "I love you." Do you think that your wife/husband/ significant other, will ever get tired of hearing those words from your lips? Should you ever get tired of saying them? The same is true when we affirm our faith in God. How often is too often to tell God you love him? How often is too often to verbally commit your faith and life to God. How often is too often to affirm your faith in the one who, "For us and for our salvation, came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human"—who, "For our sake was crucified under Pontius Pilate; suffered death and was buried"—and who, "On the third day rose again in accordance with the Scriptures."

As Jeremiah affirmed the freshness of God's blessings every morning, so we too ought affirm our faith in the triune God with the freshness of every morning.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul,
'therefore I will hope in him.' (Lam. 3:22-24)

Grace and peace,

Allan

⁵ *Uniting in Worship*, is in its second edition and is the official resource for worship in the Uniting Church in Australia.

⁶ Robert Gribben, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1990) 54