THE NICENE CREED
A STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

We do not need a completely accurate or comprehensive grasp of theology to accept God’s free gift of salvation and be welcomed into his family.\(^1\) However the more accurate our understanding of God is, the more easily we can access the full benefits which come with Salvation. Furthermore, as children of God, commissioned in his service, we need to know the truth about God and his world in order to serve effectively; especially as the enemy’s main weapon against us and the work of God, right from the very beginning, has been deception (Genesis 3:13b).

In this study we will look at the theology of Jesus Christ - Christology. One aspect of Christology\(^2\) that has always been the subject of much discussion and debate has been about how Jesus combined a human nature with his divine nature. Early church theologians strove to find a right way of understanding and explaining this mystery of the dual natures. Some focussed more on Jesus’ divine nature, others on his human nature.\(^3\)

In the 4\(^{th}\) century A.D., one of the main threats against orthodox Christian beliefs was a view taught by a theologian named Arius. Arius believed that Jesus was divine but not fully God. Moreover he believed that Jesus was of a different substance to God the Father. This idea created the problem of two distinct gods, and the Bible is very clear that there is only one, true God. Arius also taught that the Father created the Son, so that in his view, Jesus was a created being. Arius’ teaching caused a lot of contention and division in the Christian church.

When Constantine became emperor of the Roman Empire, he sought to bring unity to the different church factions at that time; and in 325 A.D., in the city of Nicaea he assembled the first ever ecumenical council. He invited bishops from all over the empire and the majority of them,\(^4\) 318 in all, signed and endorsed a creed which stated simply and succinctly their core beliefs.

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\(^1\) Certainly, an incorrect or distorted understanding of the essentials of the Christian faith may lead to deception and damnation.

\(^2\) Christology is the study of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

\(^3\) The Apostles’ Creed concentrated more on Jesus’ humanity because it was aimed at addressing the heresy of Gnosticism which emphasised Christ’s divinity and minimised or denied his humanity.

\(^4\) Only 2 bishops refused to sign.
This creed was specifically designed to oppose Arianism.\textsuperscript{5} In response to the continued dissemination of Arius’ teaching, another council was held in Constantinople in 381, and the creed was revised and expanded into the form that is very similar to the versions\textsuperscript{6} we have today. This creed – the Nicene Creed – has been universally accepted and adopted by almost all Christian denominations and traditions, including Protestant and Orthodox denominations, as well as the Roman Catholic Church.

As Christians who seek to worship and serve both God the Father and Jesus Christ, it is vitally important that we have a sound comprehension of who we are worshipping.

\textsuperscript{5} The Christological viewpoint of Arius has been termed Ariansim.
\textsuperscript{6} There are very slight variations between modern English translations of the Nicene Creed.
In this opening statement of the Nicene Creed we are given no hints that this is a creed designed to affirm the equality of the Father and Jesus Christ. This statement emphatically declares that there is only one God, the Father, and that he is the Creator of everything, including both the material and immaterial elements of the universe.7

Read 1 Corinthians 8:6 carefully and discuss how this influences the way you interpret the opening statement.

The words of the creed, so far, echo the words found in 1 Corinthians 8:6. The preceding verse speaks about many “gods” and many “lords” but verse 6 attributes creation and life to the One God, the Father and the One Lord, Jesus Christ. This verse actually highlights the supremacy and mutuality of both the Father and Son.

Read each of the following verses and comment on your observations:

John 1:3 What has Jesus (the Word) made? What hasn’t he made?

Colossians 1:16 Compare this verse with the opening statement of the Nicene Creed.

7 This point was for the benefit of the Gnostics who believed that God was too perfect and transcendent to create the physical and material things.
The Nicene Creed and the New Testament were both originally written in Greek, and possibly one of the most crucial words in Christology is the Greek word *monogenes* which has been translated somewhat misleadingly in the past as “begotten.”

The NIV translates this word much more meaningfully as “one and only” as in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he sent his One and Only Son…”

The following verses contain the word *monogenes* in the Greek.

Who was the *monogenes* in each of these verses?

Luke 7:12  
Luke 8:42  
Luke 9:38  
Hebrews 11:17

Luke, and the author of Hebrews, used this word about sons (and a daughter) to emphasise that the person was an only child.

John is the only New Testament author to use this word in describing Jesus. Read John 1:14&18; 3:16&18 and 1 John 4:9 in various English translations and write down how *monogenes* is translated.

Note any margin notes in your Bible and share them briefly with the group.

The real implication of this word is that Jesus Christ is God’s one and only, unique Son: *Mono* signifying one; and *genes* signifying that they are of the same family. (Greek: γενος; Latin: genus)

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8 One real problem with the word “begotten” is that it is not part of everyday modern English anymore, and so the word’s full range of meaning is unfamiliar to modern readers.

9 Several recent English translations omit the word “begotten” entirely at this point of the Creed.
The Nicene Creed makes the point that Jesus Christ is “eternally begotten\textsuperscript{10} of the Father,” stressing that Jesus has always, eternally, been the Father’s Son. This is a direct contradiction of Arius who said that the Son was not eternal, but was created at some distant point in time. The theologian Athanasius\textsuperscript{11} maintained that the Father and the Son have an eternal, timeless relationship.

An icon of Athanasius

\textsuperscript{10} The word “begotten” here is not translated from the word monogenes. Recent English translations retain the use of the word “begotten” here.

\textsuperscript{11} Athanasius, who has been called “the Father of Orthodoxy” was 40 years younger than Arius and a strong opponent of Arianism. He had attended the Council in Nicaea as an assistant and became the Bishop of Alexandria in 328.
The expression “light of light” comes from Athanasius’ writings. He used the analogy of light to explain that the Father and the Son were the same in substance. 12 Athanasius stated that a son can only be the same sort of being as his father – if the Father is God; the Son is God also.

Using a good English translation,13 and understanding that the word LORD (all capitals) represents God’s Name - YHWH,14 compare the following Scriptures; noting the titles that are given to the LORD in these verses.

Isaiah 40:3-4 cf Mark 1:3. Who is the way made ready for?

Isaiah 6:1ff cf John 12:40-41. Who did Isaiah see?

Isaiah 44:6 cf Revelation 1:17. Who is the first and the last?

Zechariah 12:10 cf Revelation 1:7. Who is speaking in Zechariah chapter 12?

Who was pierced? 15

Hint: Allow plenty of time for investigation and discussion on these verses.

The Orthodox position is that YHWH the LORD is the one, true, triune God - God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.16

12 You can read about this in extracts from Athanasius’ De Sententia Dionysii (On the Opinion of Dionysius) here: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2810.htm
13 You will need a fairly literal translation such as the NASB, NIV or NKJV for this exercise. Paraphrases, such as the GNB, will not provide clear answers to some of these questions.
14 Make sure that you have a good understanding of God’s Name. In the preface of most good Bible translations there is an explanation of the translation practise concerning God’s Name. It is also useful to read Exodus 3:1-15 which is the occasion where God reveals his Name for the first time. (Look for any margin notes.)
15 See also Psalm 22:16b and John 19:34
Arius had argued that the Father and the Son were only similar (Gk-\textit{homoiou\kappa\omicron\s{\upsilon}is}) in their substance; Athanasius maintained that they were the same (Gk-\textit{homousi\kappa\epsilon\omicron\s{\upsilon}is}). Tremendous, prolonged debate and conflict surrounded the accuracy and acceptance of these words, with literally just one iota separating heresy from orthodoxy.  

The Jehovah’s Witnesses share Arius’s view that Jesus is a lesser divine being, distinct from the Father. Think about how might you explain that the Father and Son share the same divine nature: “one substance” - \textit{homoousi\kappa\epsilon\omicron\s{\upsilon}is}? See Colossians 2:9

\textit{Hint:} Don’t get too bogged down with this question.

16 The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists believe that only the Father is LORD, i.e. God. Conversely, the Mormons (as in those belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints) believe that Jesus is LORD, and that God the Father is a separate being who they call Elohim. Elohim is in fact not a name, but a generic word which simply means \textit{god}. It is used frequently in the Old Testament, in a variety of contexts, though usually it refers to the one, true God. It has a plural connotation and generally includes the entire godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

17 \textit{Orthodox} literally means “right” or “correct thinking”. Whereas \textit{heresy} means an “other” view rather than the doctrine held by the church.
While the Nicene Creed sought to establish that Jesus is fully divine, it also maintained that Jesus took on human flesh and became a human being. His divinity came through the Holy Spirit; his humanity through Mary.

Reflect on Philippians 2:5-11 How do you understand and explain the fact that Jesus has two natures: divine and human?

Hint: Look up the word *kenosis* in a reputable, theological book or on the internet.

Look up *incarnation* in a dictionary and write down the definition.

Why did Jesus have to become a human being to be our Saviour?


Athanasius stated that Jesus also had to be divine to be our Saviour? Why is it important that Jesus is God? See 2 Peter 1:3-4ff

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18 The fact the Jesus lived and suffered as a human being was denied by the view known as *Docetism*. Docetism is condemned in 1 John 4:2-3
What can we learn about worship from this passage?

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...and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried and on the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures...

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-6. What important points can you draw from this passage?

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The mention of Pontius Pilate grounds the story of Jesus in history. The gospel narratives are historical. Our faith is based on real events – events that were witnessed by many people – events that were foretold in Old Testament Scripture (Luke 24:44).

Jesus death on the Cross was not some sort of tragic mistake. It was part of God’s divine plan to bring redemption to the earth; a plan that Jesus participated in willingly. (John 10:17-18)

In Luke 9:22 Jesus prophesied about his future suffering. What did he know? Note also verse 26!
After Jesus humiliation and suffering came his exaltation. Jesus is now in heaven, in a place and position of glory and power.

Read the following verses and write down your thoughts.

**Colossian 3:1-4.** Where should our thoughts be? Why?

Ephesians 1:18-21. Have you put your complete trust in Jesus’ power for all aspects of your earthly life as well as your future life? See Philippians 4:6

One of the unmistakable promises in the New Testament is that Jesus will return to earth. (Revelation 1:7-8) In his first advent Jesus made it clear that he had not come to judge (John 3:17), but when he returns for his second advent, his role will be very different.

Read Revelation 19:11-16. How is Jesus described in these verses?
How does this compare with the Jesus you know?

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Read 2 Corinthians 5:10 and 2 Timothy 4:8. How do you feel about standing before Christ to be judged?

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And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the 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.

These statements, declare that the life-giving Holy Spirit\(^{19}\) is worshipped together with the Father and the Son as the Lord. The Holy Spirit gives life in his role in the creation, (Job 33:4) but also gives \textit{new} life in his role in salvation. (Titus 3:5)

\textbf{How might you worship the Holy Spirit and acknowledge him as Lord.}

This version of the creed states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. However the Eastern Orthodox Church vehemently maintained that the Holy Spirit proceeded only from the Father.\(^{20}\)

\footnote{19 These statements about the Holy Spirit were aimed at addressing the heresy of Sabellianism. In the early third century Sabellius promulgated his heresy of modalism which stressed the unity of God. Instead of a triune God, Sabellius viewed God as one being with three distinct modes of activity. Each of the three \textit{prosopa} (“faces”) was a representation of God. - Jonathon Shroeder (2000:1)}

\footnote{20 This point of doctrine was one of the causes of the split between the Greek speaking Eastern Orthodox Church and the Latin speaking Western (Roman Catholic) Church in 1054.}
Who sends the Holy Spirit?

Read the following verses and draw your own conclusions:

Mark 1:8
Luke 24:49
John 14:26
John 15:26
John 20:22

The Nicene Creed also points out that it was the Holy Spirit who spoke through the Prophets.

And we believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

This statement encapsulates four important elements of the Church of Christ.

Looking at each of these four factors, how do you think you and your local congregation measure up to these criteria?

One refers to unity. Read John 17:20-23

Holy refers to the fact that we as believers have been sanctified and set apart collectively as the body of Christ, as well as individually. 1 Peter 2:9-10a

21 1 Peter 1:12; 2 Peter 1:21
Catholic\textsuperscript{22} means \textit{universal}. The church of Christ is universal: open to all people regardless of age, gender, race or social status, etc. Revelation 5:9

\textit{Apostolic} may refer to the fact that the church should follow the apostles’ teaching found in the New Testament (see Acts 2:42a; Ephesians 2:19-20 and 2 Peter 3:2); or it may refer to the fact that the church sends people to tell outsiders the Gospel, e.g. Acts 13:2-3. What do you think it means? Is your church apostolic?

Jesus sacrifice on the cross was completely effective in paying the penalty of every sin, of every person, for all time.\textsuperscript{23} When we repent from sin and accept Jesus offer of forgiveness and salvation we can be baptised in water. Baptism is symbolic of both our death to the old sinful nature and our resurrection into a new life in Christ.

\textbf{We acknowledge one baptism, for the forgiveness of sins.}

Read the following verses about Baptism and note important points.

\textbf{Romans 6:3-5}

\textsuperscript{22} Don’t confuse the word \textit{catholic} with the Roman Catholic Church. Look up the word \textit{catholic} (with a small ‘c’) in a dictionary.

\textsuperscript{23} Hebrews 7:24-27; 1 John 1:7-9
Galatians 3:26-27

We are strangers and aliens in a sinful world which is in bondage to decay, (Romans 8:18-25) but one day our bodies will be transformed and we will live eternally in a glorious and sinless new heaven and earth. (2 Peter 3:14)

Who will be resurrected? John 6:40.


How accurately does the Nicene Creed express your core beliefs?

24 This verse reads particularly well in the NASB
If you were writing a creed for the church, what things would you include?

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Praise God for our wonderful Saviour - Jesus Christ!
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