

Reflection on the first few words of the Nicene Creed

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“We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, ...”

The Roman Emperor Constantine, after declaring the Christian religion as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 CE (the Common Era), called a very important Church Council of Bishops and clergy at Nicea (in the city of Iznik in Eastern Turkey today) in 325 CE to work on a summary statement of the Christian faith. One of the reasons for the Council was to clarify and summarize what the core of the faith was in the midst of very diverse and different theological opinions about what the nature of God was, and how within the Godhead (a theological term attempting to describe the internal aspect of Godhead based on the Bible): how God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit might relate to one another. The other reason for calling the Church Council was Constantine wanted to promote peace throughout the Roman Empire (Pax Romana) and to unify the Empire by means of having one singular religious faith tradition. Too many religions might be very divisive for the people, thus causing havoc and unrest in the Empire, so thought the Emperor.

The Church Council met again, after several interim sessions within the next 5 decades since 325 CE, for the second time in 381 CE with another generation of Bishops and clergy in the Capitol of Constantinople (in modern day Istanbul, Turkey) known as the Council of Constantinople. (It shows that all good things are worth taking the time and the effort to accomplish the goals.) Hence the Nicene Creed as we have it today is really known as the “Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan Creed”. The Creed represents the best effort of the early Christian leaders. In our Episcopal Church tradition, we recite it in every Sunday liturgy.

The purpose of this introductory article is to provide some historical and theological background of the Nicene Creed for our pastoral consideration.

“We believe in one God”:

Our Christian faith is deeply rooted in the faith of the Jewish people, in Judaism. According to some scholars, the ancient Jewish people (the Hebrews, the ancient Israelites) came from the Delta area of ancient Mesopotamia (modern day Persian Gulf area near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) around 2000 BCE (before the Common Era). Their earliest religious belief was a form of “henotheism”: a belief in one supreme most powerful God (the God of the Israelites: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God who appeared in the burning bush to Moses) among other less powerful gods (the gods in other non-Hebrew tribes and in other nations in the ancient Near East). Eventually, with the urging and teachings of Moses and of the subsequent prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc., the Israelites more or

less became “monotheists”. They believed the existence of One Supreme God as stated in the beginning of the Ten Commandments: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, you shall have no other gods besides me” (Exodus 20: 1-3).

One of the most central prayers of the ancient Israelites, and for some very religious Jewish people today is the “Shema Prayer”: the “Shema Yisrael”: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6: 4). The ancient Israelites were asked by their spiritual leaders to pray this prayer three times a day to remember the importance of God in their community and personal lives. It is no accident that the opening words of the Nicene Creed is “We believe in one God”, patterned very much after the Jewish Shema Prayer.

What follows as part 2 of Deuteronomy 6: 4 is the important teaching of “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” which Christ our Lord quotes as the first of the 2 Greatest Commandments for us Christians (see Mark 12: 29, 30; Matthew 22: 35-40; Luke 10: 25-28). As we recite the Nicene Creed, it is good to remember the teachings of our Lord Christ to honor and love God behind these first words of the Creed.

It is also important to note that the 3 great religions of the Near East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share the one common important belief in the One Supreme God, the One God called by different names in the different traditions. It is therefore important that we, as Christians and Episcopalians, respect and honor these other religious traditions in our troubled and war torn world today.

“The Father”:

The ancient Israelites, like all their neighbors in the ancient Near East, lived in a patriarchal society ruled and led by males. It is no wonder that they understood their God as a male, supreme heavenly male figure. Our Lord Christ lived in such a cultural tradition. Based on his own experiences, he called God the Father but in a very loving, familial way: “Abba”, which is akin to our English word Daddy. Our Lord teaches us that God is our Father, the Loving Daddy who loves and forgives all people: the poor, the rich, the sinners, the saints, the foreigners, the Israelites, etc. (see Matthew 6: 9-13, Luke 11: 2-4, Matthew 5: 45, Luke 10: 25-37).

People experience God in many different ways. Some people experience God in what theologians call the “anthropomorphic ways” (describing God with human qualities) such as God as the Loving Father, or God as the Loving Mother (see Isaiah 66: 13), or God as the Beloved Friend. Other people experience God in and through nature. They describe God in “non-anthropomorphic ways” (using non-human images to describe God). Examples in this category abound in the Sacred Scriptures: God as the Rock of our salvation (see Psalm 95: 1, quoted in the Morning Prayer Service in the Book of Common Prayer, p. 82), God as the Light of

the world (Psalm 119: 105, Matthew 4: 16, John 1:5), etc. It is important that we encourage one another to deepen our relationship with God and to articulate our experiences of God using many meaningful images as they truly reflect our experiences of God in our lives.

“The Almighty”:

The Nicene Creed was originally written in Greek. The Greek word for “the Almighty” is “Pantocrator” which is similar to the Hebrew term: “El Shaddai” meaning God Almighty. According to our Judeo-Christian tradition, God the Pantocrator, the Ruler of the universe is a very loving, forgiving, compassionate, caring God. Psalm 113 expresses this well: “Who is like the Lord our God, who sits enthroned on high, but stoops to behold the heavens and the earth? He takes up the weak out of the dust and lifts up the poor from the ashes” (see Psalm 113: 5, 6 quoted in the BCP, p. 756). Psalm 146 also expresses the loving nature of God the Almighty in very moving words: “(the Lord God) gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the strangers; the Lord sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked” (see Psalm 146: 5-8, as quoted in the BCP, p. 803).

Ultimately, it is not sufficient to only speculate about the nature of God in our mind and in our thinking alone. Our Episcopal Tradition encourages us to tap into the “Scriptures, Tradition, and Reason” to practice and to understand our Christian Faith. It is in our humble and sincere prayers, both communal, liturgical, and personal, and in our living out the 2 Greatest Commandments by Christ our Lord to love God and to love our neighbors, spelled out more specifically in our Baptismal promises (BCP, pp. 304, 305) that we grow in our covenantal relationship with God, and by God’s grace through Christ our Lord and their Holy Spirit, that we come to experience God as the “one God, the Father, the Almighty” (Nicene Creed in the BCP, p. 358).

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you think it is important for Christian churches today to adhere to one credal statement of faith such as the Nicene Creed? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think the writer suggests that prayers (communal, liturgical, and personal) and actions of loving service to God and people (including creation care) are very good ways of understanding who God is for us?
3. In what ways do you experience God in your life?

4. How might sharing our experiences of God with one another help people in our church communities grow in faith, hope, and love, and help us to be more committed to do mission & ministry to share the Way of Jesus' Love?