

A Case for the Worship of the Son of God: Reflecting on the Nicene Creed

By Tami Jelinek

What the Nicene Creed Says about Jesus and His Relationship to God the Father:

First, “*we believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible*” (1a,b). God the Father is the maker of all things. Everything that was made was made by Him. And all things, other than God Himself, were made by God. Implicit in this first statement affirming God the Father as the Creator of all things that exist—“*visible and invisible*” covers not only tangible objects, but “things” which cannot be seen or touched—is that nothing exists that God did not create.

Stanza two begins with the affirmation that Jesus Christ is unique--singular and unparalleled—He is the only. He is the “one” Lord Jesus Christ. He is also “*the Son of God, uniquely begotten from the Father*” (2b,c). He is “*uniquely begotten,*” meaning that there is no other who is likewise begotten. He is begotten “*from the Father,*” which means, He is “*from the substance of the Father*” (2d). And who is the Father? He is the “*maker of all things visible and invisible*” (1a,b). Yet the Son of God is *not* made, He is *begotten* (2h). Therefore, God the Father is not the maker of His Son.

Prior to the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, the Arian Controversy threatened a major tenet of the Christian faith, the deity of Jesus Christ, with the suggestion that the Word (*Logos*) of God, while She existed before the incarnation, did not exist eternally.

According to Arius, the *Logos* was the first of God’s creation. In other words, the *Logos*

was *made*. The *Logos* was not of the *substance* of the Creator, but rather of the *substance* of created “things,” whether visible or invisible. Yet John’s gospel states that this *Logos* became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-18). So to deny the divinity and the eternal existence of the *Logos*, is also to deny the divinity and eternal existence of God’s Son, who became flesh—“*what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, of the Logos of life*” (1 John 1:1)—in the person of Jesus Christ. Arius’ assertion that Jesus Christ, whom the church had worshiped since her inception, was not God incarnate was paramount to charging the church with idolatry. For if the Lord Jesus she worshiped was not God, who *alone* is to be worshiped (cf. Matthew 4:9,10); then the church had been worshiping a mere man, who is *not* to be worshiped (cf. Acts 10:25-26).

The creed continues to expound on “*from the substance of the Father*” (2d) with: “*God from God*” (2e); “*light from light*” (2f); “*true God from true God*” (2g). According to Scripture, God is light (cf. Psalm 27:1), and Jesus is light (cf. John 8:12). And according to Scripture, God is the *true* God (cf. John 17:3), and Jesus is the *true* God (cf. 1 John 5:20). The bishops at Nicea therefore set out to affirm what Scripture affirms: that God the Father and Jesus, His only Son incarnate, are of the same substance.

The creed also equates the Son of God with God the Father in the role of creation. The Son of God, manifested physically in the person of Jesus Christ, was “*begotten not made*” (2h); and He is “*of one substance with the Father*” (2i), “*through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth*” (2j,k). This is a direct reference to the opening of John’s gospel: “*All things came into being through [the Logos], and without him not one thing came into being*” (1 John 1:3); and also to Paul’s letter to the

Colossians: “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:16). If all things were made through the *Logos* of God—or the Son of God as the creed affirms—then the Son of God (who is synonymous with the *Logos* of God, cf. John 1:10,14), existed eternally, before any created thing. Some early Christian apologists, eager to prove that Christianity was reasonable, patterned the Christian “doctrine of the *Logos*”¹ after the Greek philosophers’ concept of *Logos*, which included the idea that “between the immutable One and the mutable world, there was the Word, or *Logos* of God.” Some of these Christian theologians had also adopted the Greek concept that God is impassible, and therefore inaccessible to humans seeking relationship with Him. The doctrine of the *Logos* of God then, became the way for mutable human beings to know an immutable God. So it was a very short step between adopting the Greek concept of the universal *Logos* available through the natural world, and the Arian motto which regarded the *Logos* of God, or the Son of God, as a part of God’s creation and therefore not coeternal with God: “*there was when He was not.*”² But if the Son of God was not coeternal with the God the Father, then He would not be “*of one substance with the Father*”(2i). And again, what was at stake for the bishops at Nicea was the church’s belief that the *Logos* of God, and therefore Jesus Christ God’s only Son, was divine and to be worshiped as God the Father is worshiped.

¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Rev. and updated [ed.], 2nd ed. (New York: Harper One, 2010), pages 182-184.

² Gonzalez, *Story*, 184

What the Nicene Creed Says about Jesus' Relationship to Human Beings:

The creed goes on to state the reason for what Christians call “the incarnation”—the “because” of the Son of God, who had created human beings, becoming human Himself: *“because of us humans, and because of our salvation, came down and became incarnate, becoming human”* (2l,m). In other words, in order to accomplish our salvation, and for the end goal of our salvation, the Son of God, who was in fact *“in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”* (Philippians 2:6,7). And as a human being, *“he suffered”* (2n). This seems to be taking the doctrine of God’s impassibility to task (whether or not at this point it was deliberately intended) while affirming again the deity of the Son. For if God cannot suffer, and the Son suffered, then the Son could not be God. The fact, affirmed by the creed, that the Son of God became a human being and suffered also assures us as believers that He became *“like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people”* (Hebrews 2:17). This section of the creed concludes by affirming that Jesus Christ is the ultimate and final judge of humankind, *“the living and the dead”* (2p).

Against Heresy:

It seems that the series of anathemas in the last stanza of the creed serve as an exclamation point, or bold under-scoring of what was at stake for those fourth century bishops: the eternal existence of the Son of God--against the heresy: *“there was when he*

was not” (4b); the existence of the Son prior to His incarnation in Jesus Christ—against the heresy: “*before being born he was not*” (4c); the Son as Creator rather than creation [*ex nihilo*]*—against the heresy: “he came into existence out of nothing*” (4d); the Son being of one substance with the Father, and perhaps even the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ—against the heresy: “*the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance*” (4e); and the unchanging nature of the Son of God (perhaps the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ is in view here as well, in that even while he was “flesh, dwelling among us,” He did not cease to be God)—against the heresy: “*[the Son of God] is subject to alteration or change*” (4g).

A Modern Paraphrase of the Second Stanza:

We believe there is only one Lord and one God. We worship Him through His only Son, Jesus Christ, who came to earth in the form of a human being to bring us salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, through His suffering, death and resurrection. We believe that the Son of God, whose name is Jesus Christ, and whom we worship as God, is one with God, and is God. He created all things, and nothing exists that He did not create. He was one with God and was God before He became a human being; and He is one with God and is God now and for all eternity. He did not cease to be God, even while He was in human form. He did not cease to be God, even when He suffered and died. It was in fact God Almighty who suffered and died to save His people from their sins. It was Jesus Christ’s death, and resurrection to eternal life and eternal presence with the Father, that accomplished our salvation. And Jesus Christ is the eternal judge of all, the living and the dead.