



Gnosticism, church unity and the Nicene Creed¹

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... the Christian faith that came to expression in the Nicene Creed still represents perhaps the most compelling as well as the most wide-ranging vision of the world and human life, and of their meaning and their destiny. (Hebblethwaite, 1996:6, 7.)

... I have grown in my appreciation of how important it is for the church to have a communal sense of identity, and how hard that is to come by without something like a creed. (Johnson, 2003:vii.)

Abstract

Gnosticism, church unity and the nicene creed

Gnosticism (derived from the Greek word “gnosis; knowledge”) is the well-known phenomenon or movement which dates from the first centuries of church history. The teaching of Gnosticism questioned and/or contradicted the teaching of the church on some of the fundamental truths of Scripture. Apart from Gnosticism, the Early Church also had to deal with the heresy of Arianism. In the Nicene Creed, formulated by the councils of Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD) the universal or catholic church responded officially to the heresies of both Gnosticism and Arianism. In the final edition of the Nicene Creed we also find an article on the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the church. Both Gnosticism and Arianism posed a serious threat to the unity of the church.

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In our times we experience a revival of ancient Gnosticism, both pagan and “Christian”. This revival is also called the New Age or the Age of Aquarius. Within the framework of this new worldview, we are witnessing a rediscovery of gnosis. The discovery and publication of certain ancient gnostic texts like the Nag Hammadi Codices, play a significant role in this revival. Consequently the canon of Scripture is questioned or openly rejected and also the creeds based on that Scripture.

The Nicene Creed played a major and decisive role in preserving and maintaining the unity of the church on the basis of the truth of Scripture. This age-old creed is today just as relevant and important in proclaiming and confessing the true faith and preserving the true unity of the church.

Opsomming

Gnostiek, kerkeenheid en die belydenis van Nicea

Die Gnostiek (afgelei van die Griekse woord “gnosis” wat letterlik “kennis” beteken) is die baie bekende beweging wat dateer uit die eerste eeue van die kerkgeskiedenis. Die leringe van die Gnostiek het die leer van die kerk oor sommige van die kernwaarhede van die Skrif bevraagteken en/of weerspreek. Behalwe die Gnostiek het die Vroeë Kerk ook te doen gekry met die dwaling van die Arianisme. In die belydenis van Nicea, wat deur die konsilies van Nicea (325 n.C.) en Konstantinopel (381 n.C.) geformuleer is, het die katolieke (algemene) kerk amptelik geantwoord op sowel die Gnostiek as die Arianisme. In die finale uitgawe van die belydenis van Nicea is daar ook ’n artikel oor die eenheid, heiligheid, katolesiteit en apostolisiteit van die kerk. Sowel die Gnostiek as die Arianisme het ’n ernstige bedreiging vir die eenheid van die kerk ingehou.

In ons tyd beleef ons ’n herlewing van die antieke Gnostiek, sowel heidens as “Christelik”. Hierdie herlewing word ook genoem die “New Age” of die “Age of Aquarius”. Binne die raamwerk van hierdie nuwe wêreldbeskouing of wêreldorde is daar ’n herontdekking van gnosis. Die ontdekking en publikasie van sekere antieke gnostiese geskrifte soos die Nag Hammadi-geskrifte, speel ’n deurslaggewende rol in hierdie herlewing. As uitvloeiing van die “kanoniserings” van hierdie geskrifte, word die kanon van die Skrif en ook die belydenisskrifte wat op grond van die Skrif opgestel is, bevraagteken of openlik verwerp.

Die belydenis van Nicea het ’n baie belangrike en beslissende rol gespeel in die bewaring en handhawing van die eenheid van die kerk op die fondament van die waarheid van die Skrif. Hierdie eeue oue belydenis is vandag nog steeds net so aktueel en belangrik in die belydenis van die waarheid en die bewaring van die ware eenheid van die kerk.

1. Introduction

Gnosticism has been called “the shadow of the church” (Van Oort, 2001:120). It is the well-known phenomenon or movement that dates from the second century, although its roots go back to the first century (Walker, 1997:61). It can even be supposed that the opponents of Paul and his close disciples were already Gnostics or proto-Gnostics (cf. Col. 2:4, 8; 1 John 1:1; Van Oort, 2001:120). It is quite difficult to characterise or define this phenomenon (Walker, 1997:61) because it is “by no means a uniform phenomenon” (Walker, 1997:62). We must distinguish, *inter alia* between *Christian* and non-Christian or pagan Gnosticism (Walker, 1997:63).

Regarding the Christian Gnostics, a certain group directly opposed the Christian church of the first centuries, and dissented from it (Pagels, 1979:104) while others saw the church as inclusive of Gnostics as well as non-Gnostics (Pagels, 1979:116-117).

As far as the teachings of Gnosticism are concerned, the teaching of the first-century church on some of the fundamental truths of Scripture, were questioned and/or contradicted and rejected, as will be discussed later in this article. Consequently, the proponents of Gnosticism met with Christian opponents and critics such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian and Hippolytus of Rome in the late second and early third centuries (Walker, 1997:62).

Apart from Gnosticism, another purely theological debate raged within the church at the beginning of the fourth century. This is known as the Arian controversy (Walker, 1997:122).

It concerned the old problem of the Logos-theology: the question of the nature or status of the Word or Son of God and his relation to God on the one hand and to the created order on the other.

This debate led to the Council of Nicea in the year 325, summoned by Constantine. At this council and the later Council of Constantinople (381) (Bettenson, 1967:25, 26), the well-known ecumenical Nicene Creed (also called the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum) was approved as the official response of the universal or catholic church to the heresies of both Gnosticism and Arianism.²

2 It is important to remember that at the council Nicaea, Eusebius of Caesarea, initially suggested the adoption of the creed of his own church, which was

In the final edition of the Nicene Creed, apart from the confession on the doctrine of God and Christ, we also find the following article on the church: “We believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” (cf. Bettenson, 1967:26). This article must probably be seen against the background of the anathema, formulated at Nicea in 325, after the approval of the first edition of the Nicene Creed:

And those that say ‘There was when he was not’, and, ‘Before he was begotten he was not’, and that ‘He came into being from what-is-not’, or those that allege, that the Son of God is ‘of another substance or essence’ or ‘created’, or ‘changeable’ or ‘alterable’, these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes. (Bettenson, 1967:25.)

The heresies of both Gnosticism and Arianism posed a serious threat for the unity of the Church.

In our times we experience a revival of ancient Gnosticism, both pagan and Christian (Jones, 1992; Johnson, 2004).

The aim of this article is to determine the relevance of the doctrine, as formulated in the Nicene Creed, in terms of the current debate, with special reference to the unity of the church.

2. Gnosticism

It was stated above that it is not easy to define Gnosticism, because it is not a uniform phenomenon and *Christian* Gnosticism must be distinguished from non-Christian or pagan Gnosticism. There “was no single body of teaching common to all the writings or all the teachers belonging to this stream in ancient religion” (Walker, 1997:62, 63). For the sake of clarity, it is also necessary to distinguish between the general phenomenon of Gnosticism itself “and the particular and definite forms which it took through an association with Christianity” (Walker, 1997:61). It is furthermore important to keep in mind the syncretistic character of gnostic thinking. Walker (1997:63) mentions certain elements in the Jewish Scriptures as well as themes from pagan mythology, popular astrology, magic, philosophical ideas and Hellenistic Judaism. According to Schaff (1918:446) Gnosticism is chiefly of heathen descent and is a

orthodox, but did not deal explicitly with the Arian position. It was taken as a base, and put forward by the council in a revised form as the first edition of the Nicene Creed (cf. Bettenson, 1967:24, 25). It will be an interesting study to determine the background of the creed Eusebius put on the table.

peculiar translation or transfusion of heathen philosophy and religion into Christianity. Schaff (1918:446) is also of opinion that Platonism had the greatest influence, especially on the Alexandrian Gnostics. Gnosticism was an attempt to combine or form a transfusion of Christianity with heathen elements, neoplatonic philosophy, mythology, dualism, astrology, et cetera (Bavinck, 1906:112).

Gnosticism, derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, can be summarised in the words of Sandmel (1979:135, 136):

A 'gnostic' is a man who 'knew', who knew the way to God through personal illumination ... assured of personal illumination, (he/she) could arise to challenge the tranquility of the developing church, and the authority of its leaders. Gnostics in the area of doctrine tended to stress their personal illumination as over and against church tradition in which there was emphasis on the events that had taken place in church experience. Thus, gnostics tended to deny the historical events which church tradition transmitted relating to Jesus, specifically that Jesus had actually been a man; it was the gnostic view that Jesus, a spirit, had been an apparition, and not truly a man. Why this denial of history? Because gnostics were extreme dualists who scorned anything and everything physical, in the extremity of their dualism ... The gnostic dualism, with its preoccupation with the evil believed resident in this world, denied that God could have created it. Rather, God had created a demiurge, an artisan god, who had done the creation.

This creator god is also the creator of evil. Schaff (1918:446) concludes that Gnosticism is the grandest and most comprehensive form of speculative religious syncretism known to history.

The very essence of Gnosticism, according to Schulze (2007a) is the question how the human spirit came in the bondage of matter and how it can be freed from this bondage. The answer is that it happens through knowledge (*gnosis*).

As far as this article is concerned, the relevant teaching and characteristics of Gnosticism, are the following:

- Its view on Scripture;
- its view on God;
- its view on creation;
- its view on Christ;

- its view on the church.

As far as the gnostic view on Scripture is concerned, it is important to mention the name of Marcion.³ He maintained a dualism between the Old and the New Testament, and consequently taught the existence of two gods. On the one hand there was the inferior creator god of the Jews and the Old Testament, and on the other hand the “good” God of the New Testament. The Canon of Marcion contained only part of Luke and ten of the letters of St. Paul. The Old Testament was rejected as a whole (D’Assonville, 1981:15). In this regard there is a difference between Marcion and Gnosticism in so far as Gnosticism used all the books of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Marcion also had a “considerable influence” upon Mani, the founder of Manichaeism (Van Oort, 2001:endnote 49).

Over against Scripture we have the gnostic writings which contain the secret teaching (the gnosis) to the elect gnostics, those who knew. Among these writings are Ptolemy’s Letter to Flora, Pistis-Sophia, The mystery of the great logos, Secret teaching of John, and the so-called Nag Hammadi codices, discovered in 1945, inter alia The gospel of truth, the Tripartite tractate, The gospel of Thomas, and the Treatise on the resurrection (Walker, 1997:62).

As far as their teaching on God is concerned, He is the unfathomable abyss, locked up within Himself, without beginning, unnamable and incomprehensible. On the one hand He is infinitely exalted above every existence, yet on the other hand, the original aeon, the sum of all ideas and spiritual powers (Schaff, 1918:452, 453).

Their teaching on cosmology is that God entered upon a process of development, and sends forth from his bosom the several aeons, that is the attributes and unfolded powers of his nature, the ideas of the eternal spirit-world, such as mind, reason, wisdom, power, truth, life. These emanate from the absolute in a certain order. The whole body of aeons forms the ideal world, light-world, or spiritual fullness, the Pleroma, as opposed to the Kenoma, or the material world of emptiness. The one is the totality of the divine powers and attributes, the other the region of shadow and darkness (Schaff,

3 Although a scholar like Walker (1997:67) does not view Marcion as a gnostic, he admits the presence of gnostic ideas in the teaching of Marcion. Other scholars (Bavinck, 1910:213; Schaff, 1918:459) view him as a Gnostic.

1918:453). The material visible world is the abode of the principle of evil. This cannot proceed from God, else He were Himself the author of evil. It must come from an opposite principle. This is matter, which stands in eternal opposition to God, and the ideal world (Schaff, 1918:454). The maker of this world is commonly called the Demiurge. He is a creature of the fallen aeon, formed of physical material, and thus standing between God and matter. He makes out of matter the visible sensible world, and rules over it. He has his throne in the planetary heavens and presides over time and over the sidereal spirits. He is the God of Judaism, the Jehovah, who imagines himself to be the supreme and only God (Schaff, 1918:455).

On Christ, they teach that He belongs to the Pleroma, as the chief of the aeons, while the Demiurge or Creator belongs to the Kenoma (Schaff, 1918:453). Redemption is the liberation of the light-spirit from the chains of dark matter, and is effected by Christ, the most perfect aeon, who is the mediator of return from the sensible phenomenal world to the supersensuous ideal world. This redeeming aeon, called Soter or Jesus, descends through the sphere of heaven, and assumes the ethereal appearance of a body. According to another view, He unites Himself with the man Jesus, or with the Jewish Messiah, at the baptism, and forsakes Him again at the passion. However, the redeemer is allowed no actual contact with sinful matter. His human birth, his sufferings and death, are explained by Gnosticism after the manner of the Indian mythology, as a deceptive appearance, a transient vision, a spectral form, which he assumed only to reveal himself to the sensuous nature of man. Reduced to a clear philosophical definition, the Gnostic Christ is really nothing more than the ideal spirit of man himself (Schaff, 1918:455).

According to one of the Gnostic writings, the *Second treatise of the great seth*, orthodox Christianity made an imitation of the true church (Pagels, 1979:102). According to Pagels (1979:104), by the year 200 the battle lines had been drawn: both orthodox and gnostic Christians claimed to represent the true church and accused one another of being outsiders, false brethren, and hypocrites. Gnostic Christians, claiming to represent only "the few", insisted that baptism did not make a Christian. Neither did profession of the creed, or even martyrdom, count as evidence. Above all, they refused to identify the church with the actual, visible community. Instead, they required evidence of spiritual maturity to demonstrate that a person belonged to the true church (Pagels, 1979:104). Gnostics furthermore assert that what distinguishes the false from the true church is

not its relationship to the clergy, but the level of understanding of its members, and the quality of their relationship with each other, as well as their union with God (Pagels, 1979:106). Consequently they dissented from what they called the *imitation* or the *counterfeit* (Pagels, 1979:107). Thus, the gnostic author of the *Testimony of truth* rejects as fallacious all the marks of ecclesiastical Christianity. According to him, obedience to the clerical hierarchy requires believers to submit themselves to “blind guides” whose authority comes from the malevolent creator. Conformity to the rule of faith attempts to limit all Christians to an inferior ideology (Pagels, 1979:110, 111).

Johnson (2003:258, 259) summarises the gnostic view on the church as follows:

At best, the church was the gathering place of rational people who might, with some prodding, themselves become ‘enlightened ones’ whose deeper knowledge of the truth freed them from bondage both to body and to community. At worst, the church exemplified the ‘mud people’ whose lack of brains – and therefore lack of potential for transformation – was shown precisely by their devotion to the rituals and doctrines and leadership that came from those notoriously inept followers of Jesus, the apostles.

Van Oort (2001:123) points out that, in its Manichaeic form, Gnosticism was once a real world religion, i.e. a world-wide and separate gnostic community or church, with its many thousands and later on, even millions of adherents.

3. Revival of Gnosticism

In our times we experience a most influential revival of Gnosticism, both pagan⁴ and *Christian*. This revival is also called the New Age or the Age of Aquarius (Jones, 1992:13). It means that we are faced with a new worldview, resulting in a new world order. Within the framework of this new worldview, we are witnessing a rediscovery of gnosis (Jones, 1992:15) which can be compared with the meeting of the mysticism of ancient Eastern religions with the rational culture of the Greek West. Van Oort (2001:132) is of the opinion that gnosis in

4 It is not within the scope of this article to deal explicitly with the revival of paganism in phenomena like witchcraft, Eastern religions, nature worship, et cetera. Peter Jones deals with the new paganism in a number of books (Jones, 1992; 1997; 2003; 2004).

one form or another is expected to become the main expression of secular religion in the 21st century. He continues to state that religious currents like Anthroposophy, Freemasonry, the Rosicrucians, and so many branches of the multi-coloured New Ages movement are essentially gnostic (Van Oort, 2001:132).

As far as the aim of this article is concerned, it is important to focus on the influence of the “new” Gnosticism on the view of Scripture, on Christ, the view of the church and of man.

Regarding the view on Scripture, in ancient Gnosticism supposedly new revelations from Jesus were circulated in literature. This literature claimed an understanding of reality superior to that found in the traditional writings, and an authority based on these new revelations. The claim of these “new” revelations served to undermine the authority of the apostolic writings widely used in the churches (Johnson, 2004).

Today, the same claim is put on the table regarding the gnostic writings, especially some of the Nag Hammadi codices. “At a time when ancient Gnosticism is returning in the brand new clothes of New Age spirituality, some circles of contemporary New Testament scholarship are seeking to reclaim the ancient Gnostic texts as authentic Christian literature.” (Jones, 1992:87, 88.)

This is especially true about the gospel of Thomas. This Gnostic document is surreptitiously “canonised” and placed on the same level with the four Gospels of Scripture (Jones, 1992:94). In the Jesus Seminar the gospel of Thomas is a criterion for establishing the authentic teaching of Jesus (Jones, 1992:94). The so-called “New Reformation” in South Africa propagates a new spirituality based on the contents of this same document (Muller, 2002:225-236). The same assault for a new canonical base also comes from within the circles of ideological feminism (Jones, 1992:89) illustrating the wide-ranging influence the revived Gnosticism has. Jones comments on this: “The canon for which they long has been available for some forty years ... Finally humanistic Christianity will have its own canon, hoary with age and capable of making a claim to authenticity.” (Jones, 1992:89.)

It is not only the canon of Scripture that is questioned or openly rejected in our times, but also the creeds based on that Scripture. The Nicene Creed for instance, is increasingly unintelligible and alien, easily regarded as another instrument by which the ancient episcopate distorted Christianity (Johnson, 2004).

Based on the assumption of the authenticity and authority of the gnostic writings, a “new” Christology is taught. Not only is the divinity of Christ rejected but also his virgin birth along with his physical resurrection from the dead. On the grounds of “Jesus sayings” in “Q” (another hypothetical gnostic document, supposedly embedded in the canonical Gospels of Matthew and Luke) and the gospel of Thomas, the resurrection of Jesus is interpreted as a resurrection into the Holy Spirit (Jones, 1992:91). Elaine Pagels also points out extensively from the gnostic writings that they view the resurrection as symbolic (Pagels, 1979:3-27). According to this view, “Q” and Thomas suggest that Jesus was known initially as a teacher, a sage, a wise man, before his birth and death became part of the gospel story (Pagels, 1979:3-27). “Simply put, this means that a primitive form of Gnostic Christianity predates the orthodox Christian gospel of Jesus as our dying and resurrected Redeemer from sin.” (Jones, 1992:91, 92.)

Because Jesus did not die for our sins and did not conquer death by physically rising from the dead, according to Gnosticism, saving knowledge is the awareness – available only to the few – that they belong to a higher order of being. Christian gnostics regard Jesus as the emissary from the light, the teacher-revealer who saves by sharing this knowledge of self-realisation. The resurrection is not a matter of a body being exalted, but of a divine existence realised (Johnson, 2004). “The saving knowledge that gives present-day Gnostics their sense of superiority derives not from experiences of divine revelation but from initiation into the historical consciousness provided by higher education.” (Johnson, 2004.) By “historical consciousness” is meant a set of perceptions about human life that are common among modern intellectuals (Johnson, 2004).

Regarding the “new” Gnosticism’s view on the church, Johnson (2004) mentions the reduced significance of the institutional church in the lives of most Christians,⁵ stemming from an intense individualism. “For Christians across the ideological spectrum, religion is increasingly thought of in terms of personal salvation and individual satisfaction rather than communal commitment and shared practice.” (Johnson, 2004.) According to Johnson (2004) this anti-institutional bias has strengthened the above-mentioned antipathy toward canon and creed.

5 It must be kept in mind that Johnson belongs to the Roman Catholic tradition. Nevertheless, we can agree with the essence of his argument.

Jones (2003:235) is of the opinion that the “new” Gnosticism, like the ancient form, is striving for a false unity:

The seductive program of a unified, liberated humanity enjoying spiritual super-consciousness in deep communion with Earth, and with all the religions is sheer paganism. Such a program is nevertheless being promoted as the true goal of Christianity.

4. The Nicene Creed

The well-known ecumenical Nicene Creed, must be seen against the background of the controversy between the church and Gnosticism as well as the Arian controversy. In the context of this article, it is therefore necessary to make a few remarks on this background. From the early rise of Gnosticism, church fathers such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Marcellus and Athanasius fought against the infiltration of Gnosticism into the church (Jones, 1992:13). The perpetual conflict with heathen persecution from without, and heretical and schismatic tendencies within, played a significant role in the growth of the idea and the institution of the “one, holy, catholic and Apostolic” church, as it was eventually formulated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan (Schaff, 1918:168, 169).

In this creed as well as in the Apostle’s Creed, as even in the more indefinite creeds of the second and third centuries, on which those symbols are based, the church appears as an article of faith (*credo unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*; Schaff, 1918:169).

All catholic antiquity thought of none but the actual, historical church, and without hesitation applied to this, while yet in the eyes of the world a small persecuted sect, those four predicates of unity, holiness, universality and apostolicity. (Schaff, 1918: 169.)

As far as this article is concerned, the view of Irenaeus (ca. 130-200) is very important. He calls the church the haven of rescue, the way of salvation, the entrance to life, the paradise in this world, of whose trees, the holy Scriptures, we may eat. The church is inseparable from the Holy Spirit. It is his home and indeed his only dwelling-place on earth. Heretics in his view, are enemies of the truth and sons of Satan. He makes this applicable to Gnostics such as Cerinthus and Marcion, whom he calls the “first-born of Satan” (Schaff, 1918:171).

It was teachers like Irenaeus and Tertullian (ca. 160-225) who wrote extensive treatises against heretics on the basis of what they called the Rule of faith. They also argued for a set canon of Scripture, and located the teaching authority of the church in the bishops, regarded as the successors of the apostles (Johnson, 2004). It was Irenaeus's tripod of creed, canon and apostolic succession that shaped Christian orthodoxy (Johnson, 2004). Whenever there was controversy over doctrine or morals, bishops met in council, debated and discerned the Scripture, and elaborated on or defended the creed. Schaff quite rightly points out that in the course of time, the emphasis on the authority of the bishop and the institutional church led to the fundamental error of Romanism: "Out of the Roman Church there is no salvation" (Schaff, 1918:174). We can add to this the heresy of the infallibility of the Pope, but it is another issue.

In his reply to the Gnostics, Irenaeus argued that Christians never had a secret doctrine in the gnostic sense. Both Paul and the original twelve were under strict command to pass on to their converts all that they had been taught. In this sense the Church is catholic, as a world-wide community, reaching back in time to the apostles and through them to Christ Himself (Kiefer, s.a.).

Another church father, Cyprian, in his *De unitate Ecclesiae* (251), most distinctly and most forcibly developed the old catholic doctrine of the church, her unity, universality, and exclusiveness (Schaff, 1918:172). Schaff calls him a "typical champion of visible, tangible church unity" (Schaff, 1918:172).

In the beginning of the fourth century (318), the Arian controversy started. Within a few years after this, in 324 Constantine became Emperor and freedom from persecution dawned for the church. As far as the controversies confronting the church were concerned, Constantine was concerned about keeping or restoring ecclesiastical peace. After all, the church had an important service to perform in his empire (Lohse, 1966:51). The Emperor therefore stepped into the controversy and extended invitations for a council to be held at Nicaea (325), the imperial residence (Lohse, 1966:51).

At the council, after lengthy discussions, a confession was formulated, dealing mainly with the doctrine on the divinity of Christ and the relationship between the Father and the Son, followed by the anathemas upon heretical opinions, referred to earlier in this article. However, the decisions of Nicaea did not bring an end to the controversy. Another council was called to meet at Constantinople in 381 in order to restate the faith of Nicaea (Bray, 1984:115). This

council was called by the Christian Emperor Theodosius I who gave intense attention to the unification of the church under the banner of orthodoxy (Johnson, 2003:36). Finally, the longer creed that we know today, was produced and read out as the “Faith of the 150 fathers” (Johnson, 2003:36). Bray argues that nothing is known of what happened between 381 and 451 as far as the formulation of the creeds is concerned (Bray, 1984:115, 116). But Schaff (1983:25, 26) convincingly argues that the additional clauses already existed in 374, in the two creeds of Epiphanius, a native of Palestine and most of them as early as 350, in the creed of Cyril of Jerusalem.

The creed, finally formulated, reads as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father, ruler of all, maker of heaven and earth [against Gnosticism and Marcion’s cosmological dualism; cf. Johnson, 2003:50] of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God begotten from the Father before all ages light from light true God from true God [Against Gnosticism and Arianism] begotten not made of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary and became man and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered and was buried, and rose on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead Whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit the Lord and giver of life Who proceeded from the Father [The words “and the Son” was added at a later stage, Toledo, 589] Who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified Who spoke through the prophets. In one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. (Bray, 1984:116, 117.)

The important point, as far as this article is concerned, is that the Nicene Creed played a major and decisive role in preserving and maintaining the unity of the church on the basis of the truth of Scripture. Johnson says:

... the schisms within Christianity had reached such a point that some unifying instrument was needed – the church was now catholic, after all, in the sense of being universal. It was more than a federation of local congregations, and needed a measure that could apply to all. (Johnson, 2003:34.)

The Creed is this measure, the “Rule of faith” (*Regula fidei*) or norm for Christian identity, particularly how Christians should read the Scripture (Johnson, 2003:46). In this regard, Johnson points out that the Latin word *regula* is a translation of the Greek word *kanon*, meaning “a measure” or ruler (Johnson, 2003:46).

In the Nicene Creed the Church primarily confesses the truth of Scripture on the Trinity. The article on the church therefore presupposes and necessarily follows the articles of faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Schaff, 1918:169). The unity of the church must be seen from the perspective of the oneness of the triune God. “The Divine oneness is the model for the oneness of the people” (Scouteris, 1985:405). According to Naude (2003:11) the focal point of the unity in the Nicene Creed is the Trinity as one God where Father, Son and Spirit are equally divine and from whose grace the church as one church is established.

5. Church unity in the light of the revival of Gnosticism

It was pointed out in 3 above, that the church of today is faced with a revival of Gnosticism. One of the reasons for the revival of this age old heresy, is the positive publicity given to the gnostic documents such as *The gospel of Thomas*, *The gospel Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, by authors like Elaine Pagels. Jones (1992:90) refers to Groothuis, who said Elaine Pagels’ book *The gnostic gospels* “did more than any other ... to ingratiate the Gnostics to modern Americans. She made them accessible, even likeable”. In a popular magazine like *Time* (cf. Van Biema *et al.*, 2003:54-61), Van Biema, Sieger and Taylor, on the grounds of “the lost gospels”, argue that Nicaea suppressed Feminism and played a role in the deification of Christ. This clearly illustrates that the revival of Gnosticism also has an influence on “ordinary” people, or so-called lay people, and not only on academic scholars. The authority subscribed to the *Gnostic gospels* plays a significant role in the rejection of the canon of Scripture.

In the implementation of a new view on Scripture, although not always under the banner of the new Gnosticism, the church has to deal with issues like militant feminism and homosexual rights.⁶ In this regard the view is propagated from within the church that Scripture must be re-interpreted in the light of the witness of gay

6 Peter Jones (1992), sees this issues as part of the onslaught of the “new Gnosticism”.

people (Müller, 2007:15). This viewpoint contradicts the reformed view on the authority and inspiration of Scripture (cf. inter alia Belgic Confession, article 7), and poses a serious threat for the unity of the church (Du Plooy, 2007:11). Furthermore, fundamental truths of the Bible such as the doctrine on the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and his virgin birth and physical resurrection, are questioned and even rejected by a growing number of theologians (cf. inter alia, Schulze, 2007b).

The major lesson the church should learn from the history and the creedal development of the first centuries, is that true unity can only be achieved and maintained on the basis of the truth of Scripture as formulated in the creed of the church. The unity and the apostolicity of the church can and should never be separated.

Against Gnostics who claimed to have a continuing revelation superior to that given to Jesus' original apostles, Irenaeus and Tertullian made historical continuity with the lives of the apostles – above all in teaching and morals – an essential mark of the authentic church. (Johnson, 2003:273.)

Neglecting the apostolicity must eventually lead to an unscriptural syncretism (cf. Jones, 2003:69).

“The battle against error is fought out at the level of doctrine” (Jones, 2003:125). In this regard, it is of vital importance that the Nicene Creed will function as the living belief of the churches and of every true believer. We can agree with the statement of Bray that “more than any other document, the Nicene Creed remains for all Christians the touchstone and guarantee of orthodox, Biblical belief (Bray, 1984:118).

... the oneness of the Church is the oneness of those who confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, and accept the historic creeds ... This unity is, in essence, the unity of those indwelt by the one Spirit, those being conformed to our one Lord Jesus Christ, and those being drawn into the love of the one eternal God. (Hebblethwaite, 1996:149.)

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Key concepts:

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kerkeenheid

