In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi
ISSN: (Online) 2305-0853, (Print) 1018-6441

The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 years

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How to cite this article:
Vorster, N., 2026, 'The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 year', *In die Skriflig* 60(2), a3299. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v60i2.3299

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The year 2025 marked the 1700th year celebration of the Nicene statement of faith. The creed drawn up by the Council of Nicaea represents the first ecumenical creed accepted by the early church. It sought to prevent schism, address controversy and instil unity in the early church by addressing issues fundamental to the Christian faith. The creed affirmed the full divinity and humanity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, salvation through Christ and belief in the resurrection, thereby refuting heresies such as Gnosticism, Arianism, Adoptionism and Docetism.

For many centuries, the creed has guided instruction and theological reflection in Christian communities across the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant divide. Short and carefully worded, it proved to be a rich resource for theological teaching and church unity. Yet, it did not escape ecclesiastical controversy. The filioque controversy, which was one of the major causes of the 1054 schism between the Western and Eastern church, immediately comes to mind. Even today, the creed invokes debate. Some theologians consider the metaphysical concepts used in the Nicene creed as out of touch with the modern mind while others regard the creed as a vital source of future inspiration. Whatever the angle and judgement, one cannot dispute the historical import and theological impact of the creed.

This issue offers historical and constructive theological perspectives on the contents of the Creed of Nicaea as it was adopted in AD325. References are also made to the amended version of AD381. It starts with hermeneutical reflections on how doctrine develops. Thereafter, attention is given to Article 1 on God the Father, the Arian controversy on the divinity of Christ, the *homoousios* expression 'light from light', the incarnation of Jesus, the canons of Nicaea's dealings with baptism, and the AD381 version's doctrine on the church.

In the article, 'The reception of doctrine? Theologies of the Holy Spirit between Nicaea of 325 and Constantinople of 381', Henco van der Westhuizen (2026) discusses the dynamics involved in the development and reception of doctrine. He does so with specific reference to the extension of the Nicene creed's doctrine on the Holy Spirit between AD325 and AD381. The AD325 wording on the Spirit is very short and simply refers to 'in the Spirit' while the AD381 Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed expands the formula to read 'the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who, with the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets'. Van der Westhuizen (2026) asks what this movement tells us about the dynamics involved in doctrinal development? How is such a change theologically possible? In answering the question, he draws on the literary reception theory of Jauss (1982) and Basil's AD374 work on the Holy Spirit, which serves as a crucial example of theological reception in the 4th century. Van der Westhuizen holds that reception is an event that takes place between the handing down of a doctrine and the expectational horizons of those who receive it. Literary and doctrinal meanings are not fixed but are moulded in time through concrete communal experiences and new questions that arise. When new controversies arise, faith communities cannot simply repeat inherited formulae, but they must refine the wording to say what must be said. This must not be seen as moving away from the doctrine, but a deepening of its message. The 325 Nicaean version on the Spirit was received in faith by church communities, but new challenges pressed the church to say more, because minimalist wordings could be misunderstood. The 381 article, on the Holy Spirit, is a prime example of this dynamic. From a Christian point of view, the reception of doctrine must be seen as the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is not only the object of confession, but also the one who makes confession possible. The Spirit leads the church, not by bypassing history, but by working in history through the lived experiences of communities.

Van den Brink (2026) examines Article 1 of the 325 Nicene Creed (We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible). He starts by interpreting each of the epithets about God according to its historical background. The first epithet is marked by a language of

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 years: Reflections on doctrine, confession, and ecumenism', under the expert guidance of guest editors Nico Vorster, Sarel van der Walt and Nadia Marais.

community (*we*) and faithful commitment (*belief in God*). God is depicted as a personal God with whom one can relate and who we can trust. He is not an abstract principle, nor an unknowable being. Equally important is the monotheistic emphasis on the oneness of God. It not only affirms the inseparable link between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian faith but also rejects pagan polytheism and the dualistic worldviews of Gnosticism and Marcionism. The second epithet's reference to God as *Father* is interpreted by some as a reference to the relationship between the first and second Persons of the Trinity, and by others as indicating the reign of God over all things. Seen against a 2nd-century background, Van den Brink holds that this metaphor refers to God as Creator of all things. The third epithet refers to God as *the Almighty*. The term *Pantokrator* is used. Van den Brink stresses that this term must not be identified with the Latin term *omnipotens* that emerged later.

In Scripture, the Almightiness of God is related to God's concrete acts as the Provider and Sustainer of all things, not to omnipotence in the sense of *Him being able to do the impossible*.

The last epithet refers to God as the Maker of all things, visible and invisible. In describing God as Maker, the creed draws on the Old Testament, which abounds with the term. The reference to visible and invisible opens up a perspective on the spiritual world and reflects the enchanted world within which the early Christians lived. Having analysed each epithet, Van den Brink moves to the question of what the creed offers to modern Christians living in a disenchanted secular cultural environment where belief in God has waned, male references to God, such as Father, have come under fire, and the notion of omnipotence is questioned on theodicy grounds. Van den Brink (2026) argues that the monotheistic tenor of the creed encourages dialogue with other monotheistic religions, especially at a time when secularism dominates.

With respect to the creed's male reference to God as *Father*, Van den Brink underscores the metaphorical use of this term. When dealing with metaphors, we must take cognisance of the point of comparison, while keeping in mind discontinuities. The metaphor of *Father* is designed to express care and cannot be used to justify patriarchy or the suppression of women. Van den Brink contends that the reference to God as *Almighty*, when rightly interpreted, remains important because it explains why we can trust God. Lastly, the creed serves as a powerful counterbalance to secular, disenchanted, and consumerist views of natural reality, by affirming the goodness and meaningfulness of God's creation.

Delport's (2026) contribution focuses on the Arian controversy, which urged Emperor Constantine's assembling of the Council of Nicaea. Arius is often depicted as a heretic who sought to overthrow orthodoxy, but a closer examination of his few available works reveals that, in terms of his time, he was a conservative monotheist firmly embedded in the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition. Ironically, the Nicene formulation of *homoousios*, rather than the teachings of Arius, represented a rupture with the philosophy of the times. Arius did not reject the divinity of the Son as often assumed; he questioned the co-eternity and eternal generation of the Son. Thinking in the monistic and hierarchical 'chain of being' terms of Christian Neo-Platonism, he tried to protect divine simplicity and transcendence. Arius argued that Christ could not form part of the Father's divine essence. This would introduce a kind of Manichaean duality into divine existence. The Father can create deified beings, but this happens through the exercise of his will rather than an ontological mixture of nature. Although he was prepared to affirm that the Father had generated the Son divine before time, and that he created all things through the Son, he insisted that the Son does not share the same glory as the Father, because he has a beginning in the Father – the Father alone exists without prior cause. The Father is foreign to any created being, so much so that even the Son cannot comprehend the essence of the Father.

Over and against Arius, Athanasius and Nicaea insisted that God does not generate the Son in the same way that humans procreate. The Father would not exist without the Son, because the Son exists internally in the Father. The Son is not created through the divine will but exists 'eternally from the nature of the Father'. The term *homoousios* was adopted by the Council to express the idea that the Son is eternally derived from the being of the Father, rather than externally created. Unlike Arius, God is not seen as a distant being from everything else, but as a communicative self-revelatory being which condescends. Here we see a rupture in tradition that breaks with the Neo-Platonist chain of being and subordinationist Christology.

What is the significance of the rupture in tradition brought about by Nicaea? What does this tell us about the ways in which the Christian tradition functions? Delport argues that tradition is a continuing event of conversation that must be exploratory and innovative to remain dynamic. This is especially true of Christian tradition. If self-communicating divine life has entered human flesh through the incarnation, the meaning of Jesus is not a closed-off event but requires continuous and non-identical repetition.

Vorster (2026) deals with one of the Nicene Creed's *homoousios* expressions, namely *light from light*. His contribution starts with a historical explication of the concept, specifically the Gnostic and neo-Platonic background of the expression, and the way in which the Council of Nicaea adapted the term to suit its trinitarian theology. Vorster points out that Gnosticism was marked by a dualistic distinction between a higher spiritual realm created by a spiritual deity and a lower material realm created by a *Demiurg*. Gnosticism regarded light as the main characteristic of the higher spiritual world, and darkness as

the defining feature of the lower material realm governed by the forces of evil. To escape evil, the light of the spiritual deity should be radiated to the lower realm of the material world through its agents, who possess *gnosis* [knowledge]. Like Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism was also undergirded by a dualistic view of reality. It followed Platonism in distinguishing between a fixed ideal realm and a concrete realm in continuous flux. The ideal realm radiates knowledge to cognitive agents who transform the material realm.

Arius applied the higher-lower reasoning of dualism and the idea of a chain of being to the essence of Christ, arguing that Christ was a deified creature, rather than a Person within the being of God who shares God's essence. The subordination theory of Arius, as well as the theories of others, were refuted by Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea by using the metaphor of light in service of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son. Just as the rays of the sun emanate from the sun, and still are 'sun', so the second Person shares the essence of the Father.

After explicating the creed's use of the metaphor, Vorster turns to the contemporary theological debate on the use of Christology in ethics. Vorster stresses that a 'high Christology' that focuses on the enlightening power of Christ through the Spirit has great value in transforming moral agency. This classic Christian idea, as articulated in the creed of Nicaea, should not be relinquished in search of an ethics that focuses solely on the example of the historic Jesus.

Marais (2026) examines the constructive potential of the soteriological grammar used in the Nicaean creed. In appropriating the creed, we must be willing to apply imagination and to 'read the creed beyond the creed'. After all, the purpose of the creed is not to provide expansive formulations of doctrine but to set the norms and framework for the doctrine. One way of dealing imaginatively with the text, is to examine the 'symbolic of natality' and the possible means by which it could shape a theology of human flourishing. Drawing on David Kelsey's theology of birth and Grace Jantzen's theology of natality, Marais argues that the incarnation forms an important part of the soteriological rhetoric of the creed. As embodied beings, we not only live and flourish by participating in the death and resurrection of Christ but also by his being made human through the incarnation. In social contexts, overshadowed by symbols of violence and death, the language of natality enables us to think in new ways about salvation, bodiliness and flourishing existence.

Van de Beek (2026) investigates the Council of Nicaea's dealings with the sacrament of baptism. Although the AD325 Nicaean creed did not deal explicitly with baptism, the topic was very much part of the agenda of the Council. The first Council of Nicaea promulgated 20 ecclesiastical laws, known as the *canons of Nicaea*. In these canons, we find repeated references to the administration of baptism. Ultimately, it was left to the AD381 Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed to explicitly confess belief in the 'one baptism' for remission of sins. Van de Beek deals with the AD325 canons' references on baptism. He also locates these references within the context of the larger theological debate of the time. According to Van de Beek, the topics of import at Nicaea were the rebaptism of heretics, the use of the trinitarian formula during baptism, the divinity of Son and Spirit, the oneness of baptism as a participation in the oneness of God, and the status of baptism outside of the Catholic church. Van de Beek draws attention to disagreements that existed between the Eastern and Western church. The Eastern church community emphasised the collective participation of the one Church in the one God's eternal trinitarian life. Baptism is the means whereby Christians are incorporated into this eternal divine life. In contrast, the Western church focused more on individual participation in salvation, and it did not ascribe the same prominence to baptism as the Eastern view. Eventually, the Council upheld the Eastern view, but this did not mean that all the differences were resolved.

As is the case with baptism, the 325 Nicaean faith statement did not contain any references to the church, even though the canons dealt with ecclesiastical matters. However, the AD381 Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed made a lasting contribution to Christian ecclesiology by distinguishing between the four attributes of the true church, namely unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. These attributes were originally intended to distinguish between the true church and heretical movements but later became a source of ecclesiastical self-reflection. Van der Walt (2026) holds that the four attributes remain very important from an ecumenical point of view, especially when it comes to fostering dialogue and reconciliation among Christian denominations. These are not mere aspirational goals but represent key characteristics of the church that flow from its very nature as the body of Christ. These four attributes cannot be read in isolation from each other, because they keep each other in balance. For example, unity without holiness might result in empty institutionalism; holiness without catholicity could lead to sectarianism; while catholicity without apostolicity might descend into relativism. When read together, the attributes illuminate each other, presenting a holistic view of the church as the body of Christ.

Much more could be said about the Creed of Nicaea. Though minimalist in formulation, it is extremely rich in theological content. So rich that one book cannot deal adequately with all the issues that arise. Hopefully, all the new books published around the globe during the celebrations will provide a complete picture. That said, this collection provides some very interesting historical insights and constructive thoughts. From a historical point of view, the creed presents a rupture with the main philosophical traditions of the time. In a sense, the creed was anything but orthodox. Constructively speaking, the creed provides impulses that modern Christians can find helpful in addressing modern ethical challenges and providing an alternative to the materialism of secularism.

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