

'We believe...' The Nicene Creed 1,700 years on

Morwenna Ludlow *Canon Theologian, Exeter Cathedral*
Professor of Christian History and Theology, University of Exeter

- What I'm going to cover...
 1. Defining some terms
 2. Telling the story of the Nicene Creed
 3. What kind of thing is a creed?
 - What are we doing when we say, 'We believe...?'

1

1. Defining some terms

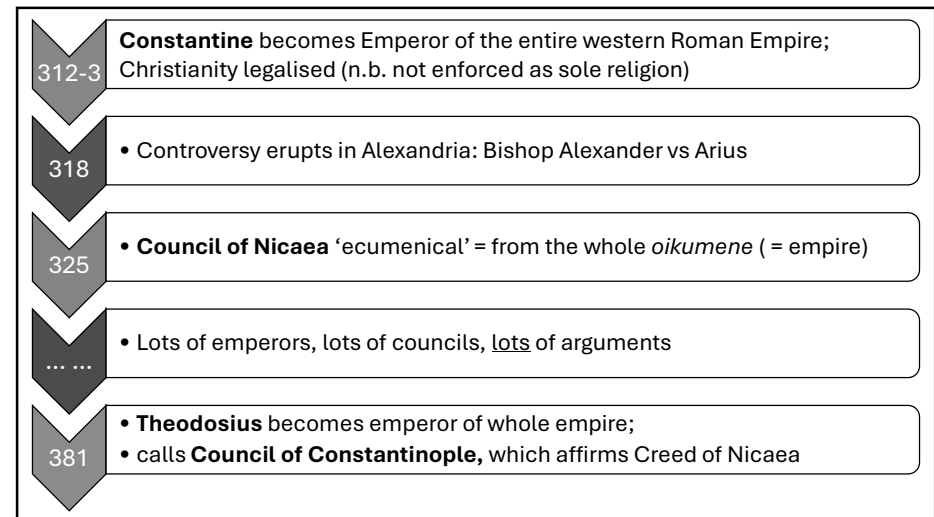
- **Nicene Creed:** agreed at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD
- **Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed:** a modified version of the Nicene Creed, agreed at the Council of Constantinople in 381AD
- The creed we say at Eucharist is in fact the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed

2

1. Defining some terms: some other creeds

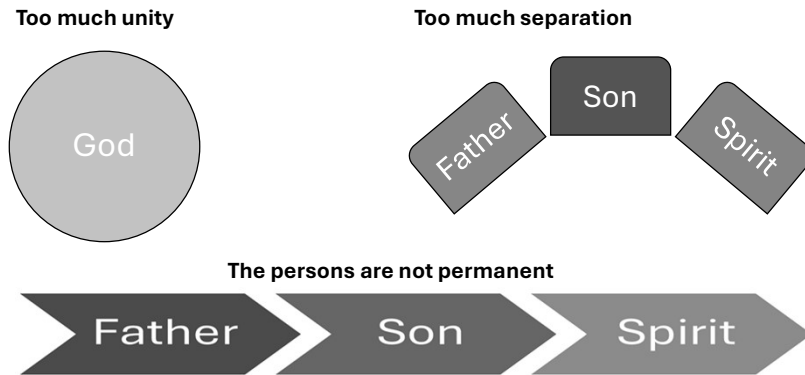
- **The Apostles' Creed:** expresses the 'apostolic faith'
- Western summary of faith; 4th century version of older 'Roman creed' (3rd century) deriving from questions used at baptism
- used in baptism, daily offices → BCP: baptism ('dost thou believe?'), Mattins, Evensong ('I believe')
- **The Athanasian Creed:**
 - not by Athanasius; probably late 4th – fifth centuries
 - considerably longer, less well-used, western creed
 - not formally accepted in the Eastern churches

3



4

What were people worried about?

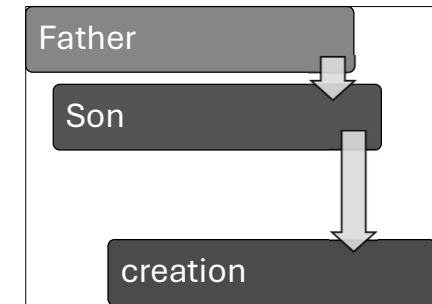


5

2. Arius: distinct persons, united by causation

- Son came from the Father
- BUT 'there was a time when the Son was not'

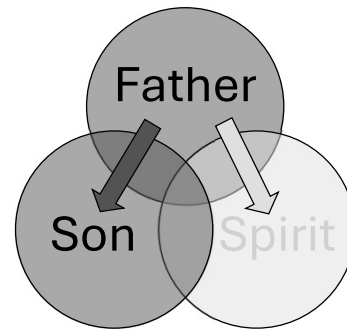
→ Son inferior to Father?
 → Son created by Father?
 (But not like the rest of creation)



6

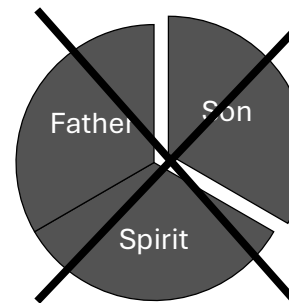
2. Nicaea: distinct **and equal** persons

- Son **came from** the Father but as an equal: 'God from God, light from light'
- Son begotten from the Father's own being/substance therefore...
- Son is 'of the same substance' of the Father
- Consubstantial / *homoousios*
- *ousia* = being, substance, essence



7

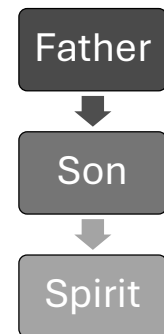
2. Nicaea: did it settle the dispute?



So various groups suggested that the Son was:

- of **like substance** to the Father
- **like** the Father
- **unlike** the Father

Distinct, but not equal

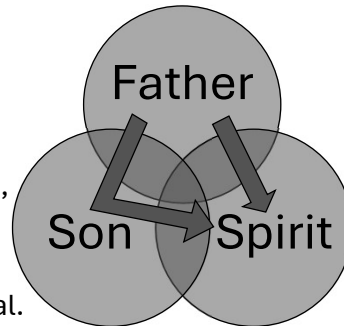


8

2. Constantinople: distinct **and** equal

Changes to the creed of Nicaea:

- Son is begotten 'before all ages'; his 'kingdom will have no end'
- Son is co-eternal with Father
- Holy Spirit 'proceeds from Father'
- Son is 'only-begotten' of Father
- Each person is distinct but equal.

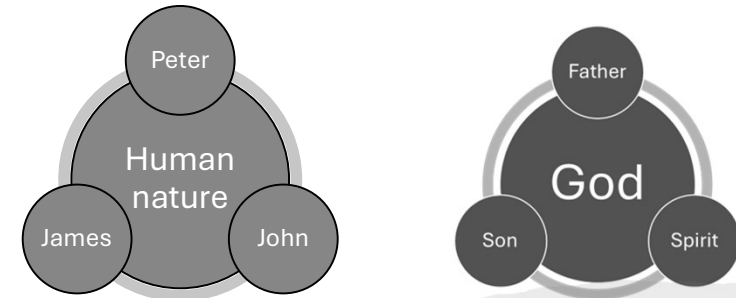


9

The Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus

Their contribution: **1. A grammar for talking about God**

What is in common to x, y & z and what is particular?

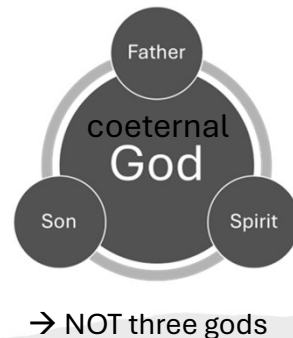
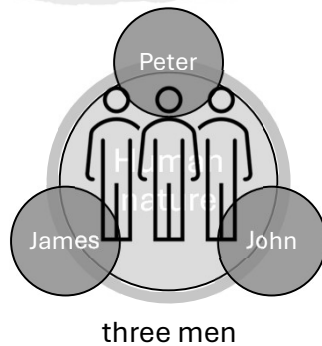


10

1. A grammar for talking about God

Peter, James and John
separated by time & space

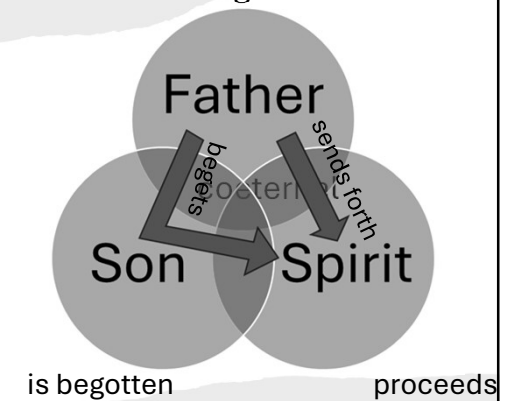
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
indivisible in time & space



11

1. A grammar for talking about God unbegotten

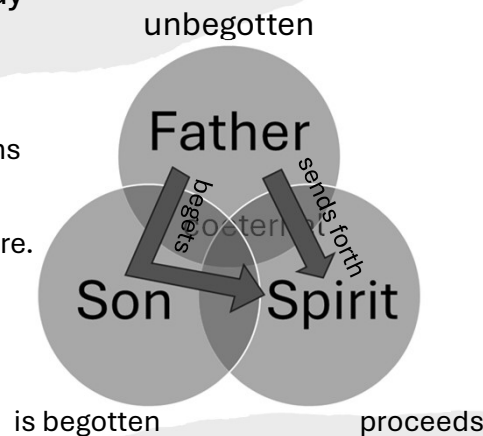
- if Father, Son, and Holy Spirit **indivisible** in time & space, how are they distinct?
- causal relationships in the Trinity unite and distinguish the persons



12

2. Limits to what one can say about God

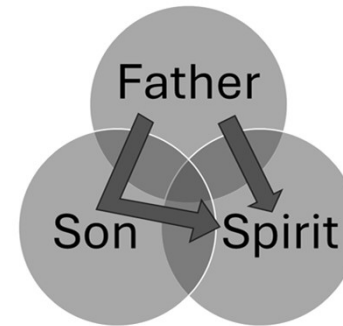
- Terms ONLY describe relationships between persons (from Scripture)
- do NOT define who persons are.
- A 'grammar', not definitions;
- The being of God is mystery (never fully comprehensible).



13

Why does all this matter?

1. Absolute equality in God:
 - Father is cause, but not more divine
 - no theological justification for inequalities between human beings.
2. Secure grammar for talking about God, but caution about claims fully to understand God.



14

Form and purpose of Creeds derive from three origins:

baptismal confessions

Defending the faith:

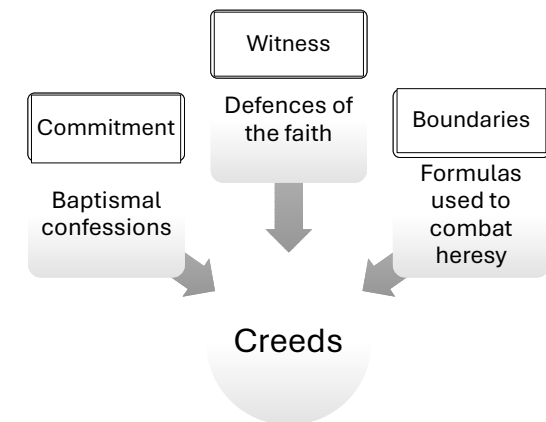
- Why is Christianity different from Judaism?
- from tradition Roman and Greek polytheism?
- e.g. Justin Martyr, Tertullian

Combatting heresy:

- As Christianity grew, a need to define its limits.
- e.g. Irenaeus of Lyons, Constantine (stability of empire needed stable boundaries of Christianity?)

15

4. What are we doing when we say, 'We believe...?'



16