

The development from ‘faith statements’ to the Nicene Creed

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1 Introduction

In the year 325, 318 bishops from all over the Christian world met in Nicea to discuss and adopt a formal Creed that from then on would be the criterion for what was considered theological orthodoxy. These bishops represented the world-wide Church, hence the Creed was called *oecumenical*. From that day on, leaders who did not accept this Creed *verbatim*, were considered outside the fold. This is the Nicene Creed as adopted in June 325:



We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God born as only-begotten of the Father, that is of the Father's substance, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, born not made, homo-ousios [of the same being] with the Father, that is of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made, those in heaven and those on earth. Who for the sake of us human beings and our salvation came down and was incarnate, and becoming a human being suffered and rose on the third day, and ascended to heaven, from where he is to come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say that there was a time when he was not, and before he was born he was not, and that he was made out of nothing existing or who say that God's Son is from another subsistence or substance or is subject to alteration or change, the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.¹

This paper endeavours to demonstrate that the adoption by the Church of this Nicene Creed was not a caesura with its previous history, but the logical result; it expressed what most Christians had always believed. The real change was, that worldwide Christianity now agreed on the precise theological formulation of this faith.

I will demonstrate the continuity of the Christian faith as expressed in all sorts of faith statements and creeds from the time of the New Testament until the time when the Nicene Creed was adopted.

2 Faith statements in the New Testament

It is a romantic and mistaken idea that the faith in New Testament times was not expressed in clear terminology, as if it was marked by more spontaneity than later developments in the Church. Even in the New Testament, the Apostles spoke of a clearly defined ‘deposit’ of faith. Faith was not only the *act* of entrusting oneself to God, but there was also clearly delineated faith *content*. The New Testament speaks, for instance, of:

...faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3)
...healthy doctrine (2Tim 4.3)
...hold on to teaching we passed on to you (2Thes 2.15)

In the New Testament we also recognize that the Church early on developed certain ‘faith statements’ that may not be called creeds yet, but that certainly show a clearly expressed faith in creed-like slogans. This was both the result of reasons intrinsic to the faith, ‘What do we actually believe?’, and because the faith had to be set apart from what Jews and gentiles believed, ‘How is our faith different from theirs?’ Central in both was the need for clear instruction and liturgical clarity in relation to baptism. The baptismal command of Jesus came to play a very important role in the faith and the creedal developments in the early Church, as it was clearly Trinitarian:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Mat 28.19)

Many other parts of the New Testament bear the marks of the development of creed-like faith statements. Here just a few examples:

[The Gospel is] concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 1.3-4)

[We] believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Rom 4.24-25) Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1Cor 8.6)

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1Tim 2.5)

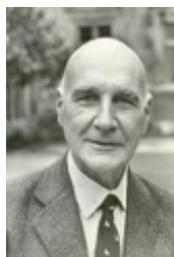
1. Rufinus of Aquileia, *Church History*, 10.6.

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1Tim 3.16)

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1Pet 3.18)

The writers of the New Testament often used concepts that seem to express Trinitarian theology. In the description of the baptism of Jesus this is very clear, but many other examples can be cited.² We also see an early development of expressions that have creedal aspirations, like how St Paul and St Peter use the term ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’.³

So, even in the New Testament faith began to be solidified into conventional summaries. These were not creeds yet, but creed-like formularies. This was to be expected as the early Church was from the start a believing, confessing, preaching Church. J.N.D Kelly, an expert in creedal development, writes in his seminal book *Early Christian Creeds* about this:



Nothing could be more artificial or more improbable than the contrast so frequently drawn between the Church of the first century, with its pure religion of the Spirit and its almost complete absence of organization, and the nascent Catholic Church, with all its institutional [accessories], of the late second century.⁴

This conclusion is fully warranted; it needs a revisionist approach to early Church history to make the New Testament, and especially the Gospels, into romantic Sunday School stories. The New Testament, including the Gospels, was written to propagate a certain very specific theology, a view of God and salvation. To deny this and to then take it that the Apostolic Fathers of the second century diverted dramatically from this romantically envisioned earliest church, is clearly contradicted by the existent historical sources.

3 Church Fathers of the second and third century

Bishop Ignatius wrote some letters around 115AD while on his way to Rome for being martyred. The manner in which he describes the heart of the Christian faith seems to point in the direction of the Apostolic Creed that was formalized probably around the year 300. Listen first to this Apostolic Creed:

2. 1Cor 12.4ff; 2Cor 1.21ff; 2Cor 13.14; Gal 3:11-14; 1Thes 5.18ff.

3. Rom 15.6; 2Cor 1.3, 11, 31; Eph 1.3; 1Pet 1.3.

4. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (1950, 2011, Continuum, London, New York), p. 7.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy Catholic Church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and life everlasting. Amen



Now see how Ignatius in the year 115 expressed his Christian faith in very similar terms. Take into account that Ignatius has been personally taught by St John the Apostle and that he was the bishop of Antioch not long after St Peter has ministered in that city. He knew what the apostles had taught and his church members would never have accepted any new teaching from Ignatius if that stood against what they had heard directly from the Apostles. In line with what he had heard from the Apostles, he wrote:

For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit.⁵



Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified and died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, his Father having raised him up, as in the same manner his Father will raise up us who believe in him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life.⁶

I glorify Jesus Christ, the God who made you so wise, [...] totally convinced with regard to our Lord that he is truly of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin,

5. Ignatius, *to the Ephesians*, 18:2.

6. Ignatius, *to the Trallians*, 9.1-2.

baptized by John in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him, truly nailed in the flesh for us under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch.⁷

Beside the writings from Ignatius, other Christian writers from the first century can be quoted for similar creed-like statements.

One of the most intriguing credal statements of the second century comes from the *Epistula Apostolorum*, which was most likely written before the year 150, probably in Egypt. It describes the orthodox faith in apposition to the gnostic heretics Cerinthus and Simon Magus in a manner that suggests credal development that would eventually result in the Apostolic Confession. Notice the Trinitarian language and the mentioning of the holy Church and forgiveness of sins:

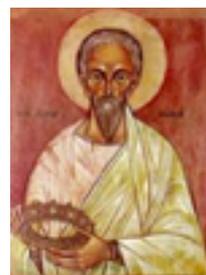
Our faith in the Lord of the Christians (in the great Christendom): In the Father, the ruler of the universe, and in Jesus Christ, our redeemer, in the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in the holy Church, and in the forgiveness of sins.⁸

The Acts of the Martyrdom of St Justin and his Companions describes the interrogation of Justin Martyr by his persecutor, Junius Rusticus, the Roman prefect from 163-167AD. The *Acts of the Martyrdom* preserves the court records of the trial. In the answers given by Justin during the interrogation he seems to quote, maybe loosely, from an existent creed, referred to as the 'rule of faith':

'What doctrine do you hold?' asked Rusticus. Justin answered: 'I have tried to become acquainted with all doctrines, but I have adopted the true doctrines, those of the Christians, even if they are not acceptable to those who hold false beliefs.' The prefect then said: 'So those are the teachings which you accept, you wretch?' To which Justin replied: 'Yes, I follow them according to the right rule of faith.' The prefect asked: 'What is this rule of faith?' And Justin answered: 'That which we profess concerning the God of the Christians, whom we believe to be from the beginning the one and only Creator and Maker of all creation, of things visible and invisible; and concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose coming among men was foretold by the prophets as the herald of salvation and the teacher of the blessed disciples.' 'I realize that I am a mere man and that what I say

is insignificant compared with the infinite greatness of God; but I recognize the force of prophecy in what I affirm, since the coming was foretold of the one whom I have called the Son of God. And I know that the prophets in times past foretold his coming among men.'

At this Rusticus said:
'So you are a Christian then?'
And Justin replied:
'Yes, I am a Christian.'⁹



A decade before his death, Justin wrote his *First Apology*, addressed to Emperor Antoninus and his two adopted sons. In this *Apology* he regularly describes his faith with seemingly standardized sentences:

...we revere and worship Him (the true God), and the Son, who came from Him [...] and the prophetic Spirit.¹⁰

...to the Father of the Universe, through the name of his Son, and of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

...the Maker of all things, through his Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit.¹²

These last two quotes come from Justin Martyr's description of the Eucharist. The similarity in the quotes suggests that these formulaic statements actually stem from usage during the Eucharist, according to Kelly. He thinks they may be parts of the rather standardized prayers at the time of Communion.¹³

Justin's longest credal statement is this one:

[We] worship the creator of this universe... and [we] honour Him Who has taught us these things and was born for this purpose, Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judaea in the time of Tiberius Caesar, having learned that he is the Son of the true God and holding him in the second rank, and the prophetic Spirit third in order...¹⁴

In Justin's works we often come across statements with a creed-like character:

...Jesus, whom also we have recognized as Christ, the Son of God, crucified, and risen again, and ascended to the heavens, who will come again as judge of all men...¹⁵

These writings from the middle of the first century confirm that the development of creeds was steadily progressing at that time. Ignatius in Antioch, the *Epistula* in Egypt and Justin in Rome all testify to common

7. Ignatius, *to the Smyrnaeans*, 1.1-2.

8. *Epistula Apostolorum*, 5. This document was originally written in Greek; it is preserved in translations of Coptic and Ethiopic. The Coptic manuscript comes from the late fourth to early fifth century. The Ethiopic manuscripts come from the eighteenth century but preserve the entire text. In this 'prophetic' text, Jesus speaks as the risen Lord who mediates instruction to the community. The discourse and dialogue comprise credal formulas, catechetical instructions, and portions of abbreviated dogmatic treatises, all of which are used in the service of orthodoxy. The Coptic version in chapter 17 places the end of the world at 120 years past Pentecost, while the Ethiopic version states that 150 years would pass. A likely explanation would be that the document was originally composed shortly before 150 AD and was revised by a redactor when the prediction didn't come to pass.

9. *Acts of the Martyrdom of St Justin and his companions*, 1.A.

10. *Justin Martyr, Apology* 1.6.2.

11. *Justin Martyr, Apology* 1.6.2.

12. *Ibid.*, 67.2.

13. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 76.

14. *Justin, Apology* 1,13.

15. *Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho*, 132, I.

expressions of the Christian faith in the early Church. The choice of themes – Trinity and Christology – and even the precise choice of words point into the direction of the Creeds that were later formalized by the oecumenical Church. This is also confirmed by the writings of Irenaeus, bishop in Lyon, who around 180AD uses similar creedal language as Justin had done. Irenaeus, by the way, had been a student of Polycarp, who had know St John the Apostle.

In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus repeats a few times, each time in slightly different words, what Christians believe. He also makes clear that all over the world, Christians took care to speak of their faith in a similar manner, because they received their faith from the Apostles themselves:



The Church, though scattered through the whole world to the ends of the earth, has received from the Apostles and their disciples:

The faith in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth, and the seas, and all that in them is;

And in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became flesh for our salvation;

And in the Holy Ghost, who through the prophets preached the dispensations and the advent, and the birth from the Virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily assumption into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father, to comprehend all things under one head, and to raise up all flesh of all mankind, that, according to the good pleasure of the Father invisible, every knee of those that are in heaven and on the earth and under the earth should bow before Christ Jesus, our Lord and God and Savior and King, and that every tongue should confess to him;

And that he may execute righteous judgment over all: sending into eternal fire the spiritual powers of wickedness, and the angels who transgressed and apostatized, and the godless and unrighteous and lawless and blasphemous among men, and granting life and immortality and eternal glory to the righteous and holy, who have both kept the commandments and continued in his love, some from the beginning, some after their conversion.

The Church, having received this preaching and this faith, as before said, though scattered throughout the whole world, zealously preserves it as one household, [...] and unanimously preaches and teaches the same, and hands it down as by one mouth; for although there are different dialects in the world, the power of the tradition is one and the same.

And in no other manner have either the churches established in Germany believed and handed down, nor those in Spain, nor among the Celts, nor in the East, nor in Egypt, nor in Libya, nor those established in the middle of the world. But as the sun, God's creature, is one and the same in the entire world, so, too, the preaching of the truth shines everywhere and enlightens all men who wish to come to the knowledge of the truth.

And neither will he who is very mighty in language among those who preside over the churches say other than this (for the disciple is not above his Master), nor will he who is weak in the word impair the tradition. For as the faith is one and the same, neither he who is very able to speak on it adds thereto, nor does he who is less mighty diminish therefrom.¹⁶

In another place in *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus says:

If the Apostles had not left to us the Scriptures, would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which those to whom they committed the churches handed down? To this order many nations of barbarians give assent, those who believe in Christ having salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit without paper and ink, and guarding diligently the ancient tradition:

Believing in one God, Maker of heaven and earth, and all that in them is; through Christ Jesus the Son of God; Who, for his astounding love towards his creatures, sustained the birth of the Virgin, himself uniting his manhood to God, and suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rose again, and was received in glory, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged; and sending into eternal fire the perverters of the truth and the despisers of his Father and his advent.¹⁷

A third creedal statement in *Against Heresies* is this:

[A spiritual man] has full faith: In one God Almighty, from whom are all things; And in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord, by whom are all things, and in his dispensations, through which the Son of God became man; The firm persuasion also in the Spirit of God, who furnishes us with a knowledge of the truth, and has set forth the dispensations of the Father and the Son, in virtue of which he dwells in every generation of men, according to the will of the Father.¹⁸

The creed-like statements we have seen thus far, from different parts of the Roman Empire, show enough correspondence to conclude that the churches were in close touch with each other, and that they looked together at a common source of inspiration. This common source was maybe the shared memory of the teaching of the Apostles, but this was also developed into a crisp Roman Creed.

16. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.10.1 (First Form)

17. *Ibid.*, III.4.1-2 (Second Form)

18. *Ibid.*, IV.33.7 (Third Form).

We know of a Creed that was used in Rome before the end of the second century; by scholars this Creed is called the *Old Roman Creed, or just R.* Kelly argues that it should be dated in the closing decades of the second century.¹⁹ It reads thus:

I believe in God the Father almighty
And in Christ Jesus his only Son, our Lord,
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
On the third day rose again from the dead,
Ascended to heaven, Sits at the right hand of the Father,
From where he will come to judge the living and the dead;
And in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh.

This was the formal Creed as used in the liturgy of Rome, and it is remarkable that in Carthage, on the other side of the Mediterranean, Tertullian describes the Christian faith in very similar terms around the year 200, in his letter *On the Veiling of Virgins*:

The Rule of Faith is altogether one, sole, immovable, and irreformable—namely, to believe in one God Almighty, the Maker of the world; And his Son, Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, on the third day raised again from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right hand of the Father, coming to judge the quick and the dead, also through the resurrection of the flesh.²⁰

In *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian gives us another Creed-like summary of the faith:

But we believe always, and now more, being better instructed by the Paraclete, the Leader into all truth,

One God: but under this dispensation which we call economy, and the Son of the one God, his Word [Logos] who proceeded from him, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. This was sent from the Father into the Virgin, and was born of her, both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and called Jesus Christ: He suffered, he died and was buried, according to the Scriptures; and raised again by the Father, and taken up into the heavens, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, he shall come to judge the quick and the dead:

He thence did send, according to his promise, from the Father, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the Sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.²¹

In *On the Prescription of Heretics*, Tertullian left us again another description of the Rule of Faith:

The Rule of Faith is [...] that there is but one God, and no other besides the Maker of the world, who produced the universe out of nothing, by his Word sent forth first of all; that this Word, called his Son, was seen in the name of God in various ways by the patriarchs, was always heard in the prophets, at last was sent down, from the Spirit and power of God the Father, into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and born of her, lived (appeared) as Jesus Christ; that then he preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven; wrought miracles; was nailed to the cross; rose again on the third day; was caught up to the heavens; and sat down at the right hand of the Father; sent in his place the power of the Holy Ghost, to guide the believers; he will come again with glory to take the saints into the enjoyment of eternal life and the celestial promises, and to judge the wicked with eternal fire, after the resuscitation (resurrection) of both, with the restitution (restoration) of the flesh.²²

From Hippolytus (ca. 170-235), theologian in Rome, we have a creed that is dated around 215 AD. Hippolytus was a student of Irenaeus. He describes how people were baptized; the liturgy had become more formal now and people being baptized had to give their consent to the correct formulas that were used by the person who baptized:



When the person being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say:

“Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?” And the person being baptized shall say: “I believe.” Then holding his hand on his head, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say:

“Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?” And when he says: “I believe,” he is baptized again. And again he shall say:

“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?” The person being baptized shall say: “I believe,” and then he is baptized a third time.

This text for baptism reflects the Old Roman Creed, but in an interrogatory form. It is very likely that the declaratory Old Roman Creed came into existence through the interrogatory creed that Catechumens had to respond to at baptism. People being baptised had to express their

19. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 101.

20. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 1 (First Form)

21. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2 (Second Form)

22. Tertullian, *On the Prescription of Heretics*, 13.13 (Third Form)

faith in the Trinity, with some additional Christology and statements about the church.

We do see a clear increase in fixed formulation and the Old Roman Creed exerted its influence as the Creed of the major church in the Western world. These fixed formulations were most likely needed to ensure that those who came to be baptized had the right faith. A standard for the faith was necessary for teaching new members and for keeping heresy outside the church. By the end of the second century this was a very serious issue.

The creedal statements of the second century were very recognizably part of the basis for our later Apostolic Creed. The Old Roman Creed was a standard for many churches, not only for those in the city of Rome. However, by the end of the second century we do not see anyone quoting the exact words of any common creed; there was no infatuation yet with being precise. And in each major city, churches may have looked well at the Old Roman Creed, but they maintained their own formulas at the same time.

In Rome, ca. 250AD anti-pope Novatian tried to prove his orthodoxy by pointing to the fact that he held the true, orthodox faith:

The rule of truth demands that, first of all, we believe in God the Father and Almighty Lord, that is, the most perfect Maker of all things. [...] The same rule of truth teaches us to believe, after the Father, also in the Son of God, Christ Jesus, our Lord God, but the Son of God. [...]

Moreover, the order of reason and the authority of faith, in due consideration of the words and Scriptures of the Lord, admonishes us, after this, to believe also in the Holy Ghost, promised of old to the Church, but granted in the appointed and fitting time.²³

In order to prove his correct faith, Novatian did not find it necessary, it seems, to quote any particular creed, not even the major Roman one, in a literal manner; about the Trinitarian character of his statement there is no doubt. He even calls Jesus Christ 'Lord God', while at the same time underlining that He is the Son of God.

4 Developments in the East

Given the weight accorded to the *Rule of Faith* in the early church, it is surprising that there is such a paucity of information about the creeds that were used in the second and third century. The main cause of this seems to be that the churches were purposely secretive about the heart of the faith of the church. The Sacraments, Baptismal Creeds, and the Lord's Prayer were surrounded with secrecy. Those matters were seen as 'for insiders only', so many leaders preferred to not publish much on these matters, and certainly not the official formulas.



23. Novatian, *On the Trinity or the Rule of Faith*.

It is hard enough to find details about the creedal statements of the churches in the Western parts of the Roman Empire. From the Eastern areas, our information is even poorer. In spite of the paucity of information about developments in the East, it is clear that the Old Roman Creed did not have much influence there. And in the East, no one city or church played the role that Rome had for its Western environment. The little we know of the creeds in the East shows that they shared some common characteristics that set them apart from those in the Western parts of the Empire. This will be obvious when we look at some of them.

A major theological giant of the Eastern parts of the Empire was Origen of Alexandria. (185-254) Around 220AD he wrote his book *On the Principles*. He gives some fragments of the creed that was used in Egypt at his time. He first remarks that, while all believers in Christ accepted the books of the Old and New Testaments as a full revelation of the divine truth, the diversity of interpretations and opinions demanded a clear and certain rule (*certa linea, manifesta regula*) and that the apostles delivered such articles of faith as they deemed necessary for all, leaving the study of the reasons, the examination of the mode and origin, to the more gifted lovers of wisdom. He then proceeds to give a sketch of these dogmatic teachings of the apostles as follows:



The form of those things which are manifestly delivered by the preaching of the Apostles is this:

First, that there is one God, who created and framed every thing, and who, when nothing was, brought all things into being,—God from the first creation and, forming of the world, the God of all the just—Adam, Abel, Seth, Enos, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve Patriarchs, Moses, and the Prophets:

And that this God, in the last days, as he had before promised through his Prophets, sent our Lord Jesus Christ, to all Israel first, and then, after the unbelief of Israel, also to the Gentiles. This just and good God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, himself gave the Law and the Prophets and the Gospels, and he also is the God of the Apostles, and of the Old and New Testaments.

Then, secondly, that Jesus Christ himself, who came, was born of the Father before all creation. And when in the formation of all things he had served the Father (for by him all things were made), in these last times, he became man incarnate, while he was God, and though made man, remained God as he was before. He took a body like our body, differing in this point only, that it was born of the Virgin and the Holy Ghost. And since this Jesus Christ was born and suffered in truth, and not in appearance, he bore the death common to all men and truly

died; for he truly rose from the dead, and after his resurrection, having conversed with his disciples, he was taken up.

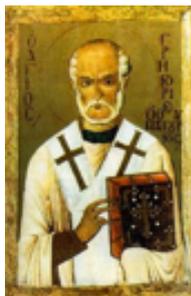
They also delivered that the Holy Ghost was associated in honor and dignity with the Father and the Son.²⁴

Origen then goes on to say about the Holy Spirit, that:

...such questions, as to whether the Holy Spirit was born or unborn, whether he was also to be regarded as a Son of God or not, are left for inquiry and investigation out of the holy Scriptures, according to the best of our ability; but it was most clearly preached in the churches that the Holy Spirit inspired every one of the saints and prophets and apostles, and that there was not one Spirit given to the ancients and another to the Christians.²⁵

The language of Origen regarding Christ seems somewhat closer to Nicea than what we have read from his colleagues in the Western parts. Origen claims that his theology came from the Apostles; that would have been a rather unbelievable claim if he and his Christian audience did not at least remember that his predecessors in Alexandria taught similar things.

If we read the creed of Gregorius Thaumaturgus (213-270) we recognize even more of the Nicene Creed. Gregory ‘The Wonderworker’ studied under Origen in Palestine (231-238), and returned to Neocaesarea in Pontus where he became bishop. Around 265AD he wrote:



There is one God, the Father of the living Word, who is the substantive wisdom and eternal power and image of God: the perfect origin (begetter) of the perfect (begotten): the Father of the only-begotten Son.

There is one Lord, one of one (only of the only), God of God, the image and likeness of the Godhead, the mighty Word, the wisdom which comprehends the constitution of all things, and the power which produces all creation; the true Son of the true Father, Invisible of Invisible, and Incorruptible of Incorruptible, and Immortal of Immortal, and Everlasting of Everlasting.

And there is one Holy Ghost, having his existence from God, and being manifested by the Son, namely, to men, the perfect likeness of the perfect Son, Life, the cause of the living [the sacred fount] sanctity, the Leader of sanctification: in whom is revealed God the Father, who is over all things and in all things, and God the Son, who is through all things: a perfect Trinity, not divided nor differing in glory and eternity and sovereignty.

Neither, indeed, is there anything created or subservient in the Trinity, nor introduced, as though not there before but coming in afterwards; nor, indeed, has the Son ever been without the Father, nor the Spirit without the Son, but the Trinity is ever the same, unvarying and unchangeable.²⁶

This is Nicene language, 60 years before Nicea. The suggestion that Nicea was theologically revolutionary can therefore be rejected. The Nicene belief in the full divinity of the Son of God and even its theological expression was not new when the bishops met in Nicea 325AD. It was the rather ‘normal’ belief of the church. Priest Lucian of Antioch (240-312) also testified to this faith around the year 300, so a quarter century before Nicea:



We believe, in accordance with evangelic and apostolic tradition, in one God the Father Almighty, the Maker and Provider of all things.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ his Son, the only-begotten God, through whom all things were made, who was begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Whole of Whole, One of One, Perfect of Perfect, King of King, Lord of Lord, the living Word, Wisdom, Life, True Light, Way, Truth, Resurrection, Shepherd, Door, unchangeable and unalterable, the immutable likeness of the Godhead, both of the substance and will and power and glory of the Father, the firstborn of all creation, who was in the beginning with God, the Divine Logos, according to what is said in the gospel: ‘And the Word was God,’ through whom all things were made, and in whom ‘all things consist:’ who in the last days came down from above, and was born of a Virgin, according to the Scriptures, and became man, the Mediator between God and man, and the Apostle of our Faith, and the Prince of life; as he says, ‘I have come down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me:’ who suffered for us, and rose for us the third day, and ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and again is coming with glory and power to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost given for consolation and sanctification and perfection to those who believe; as also our Lord Jesus Christ commanded his disciples, saying, ‘Go ye, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;’ clearly of the Father who is really a Father, and of a Son who is really a Son, and of the Holy Ghost who is really a Holy Ghost; these names being assigned not vaguely nor idly, but indicating accurately the special personality, order, and glory of those named, so that in Personality they are three, but in harmony one.

24. *On the Principles*, I.Praef.4–6.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Gregorius Thaumaturgos, *Exposition of the Faith*.

Having then this faith (from the beginning and holding it to the end) before God and Christ we anathematize all heretical false doctrine. And if any one, contrary to the right faith of the Scriptures, teaches and says that there has been a season or time or age before the Son of God was begotten, let him be accursed. And if any one says that the Son is a creature as one of the creatures, or generated as one of the things generated, or made as one of the things made, and not as the divine Scriptures have handed down each of the forenamed statements; or if a man teaches or preaches anything else contrary to what we have received, let him be accursed. For we truly and clearly both believe and follow all things from the holy Scriptures that have been transmitted to us by the Prophets and Apostles.²⁷

Lucian believes that this faith he describes, comes from the Apostles. He can only hold this view if he was raised in this faith, not if he considers it a radical departure from tradition.

Finally, during the opening sessions of Nicea, Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339), condemned as a heretic at a previous council, had to prove his orthodoxy in order to participate in Nicea. He did so by presenting his own theological testimony, most likely the Creed that was used in Caesarea. He introduced his creedal statement with these words:



According as we received from the bishops who preceded us, both in our instruction [in the knowledge of the truth], and when we were baptized; as also we have ourselves learned from the sacred Scriptures: and in accordance with what we have both believed and taught while discharging the duties of presbyter and the episcopal office itself, so now we believe and present to you the distinct avowal of our faith. It is this...

So, in order to prove his orthodoxy, Eusebius refers to a theological statement that already existed in Caesarea at the year of his baptism, hence, in the year 263. No-one present denied the validity of his claim that the creed he read, was old. If it was not old, it could not clear him of heresy. This was the pre-Nicene Creed of Caesarea:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life, the only-begotten Son, the firstborn of every creature, begotten of God the Father before all ages, by whom also all things were made; who for our salvation was made flesh and made his home among men; and suffered; and rose on the third day; and ascended to the Father; and will come again in glory, to judge the quick and the dead.

[We believe] also in one Holy Ghost. We believe that each of these is and exists, the Father truly Father, and the Son truly and the Holy Ghost truly Holy Ghost; even as our Lord, when sending forth his disciples to preach, said: 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' And concerning these things we affirm that we so hold and so think, and have of old so held, and will so hold till death, and stand steadfast in this faith, anathematizing all ungodly heresy. We testify before Almighty God and our Lord Jesus Christ that we have thought all this in heart and soul ever since we knew ourselves, and we now so think and speak in truth, being able to show by evidence and to convince you that we in past times so believed and preached accordingly.²⁸

5 Conclusion

We do not know whether any one specific existent creed was used as the basis for the Nicene Creed, but the common language of the different Eastern Creeds predating Nicea comes very close to the eventual Nicene Creed.

For the Eastern bishops, not much was new in Nicea, except the final and binding role that the Creed was to have. The Nicene Creed was linguistically more distant from the western Apostolic Creed, but the fact that the Western bishops adopted Nicea just as the Eastern bishops did, shows that the actual content was congenial to them. The Nicene Creed became the standard for theological orthodoxy all over Christendom, exactly because it ratified the faith that the churches had always adhered to.

27. Lucian is quoted by Athanasius, *Epist. de Synodis Arimini et Seleucia celebratis*, 23.

28. Described in Socrates Scholasticus, *Church History*, I.8.