

The Nicene Creed and Trinitarian Pedagogy*

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Introduction

It has become commonplace (dare I say cliché) to talk about the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of its being forgotten and rediscovered.¹ Authors often mention the “renewed interest”² in the doctrine, which can be seen in the voluminous body of literature on that has appeared the subject since the 1950-60s with Karl Barth’s and Karl Rahner’s seminal contributions³ to the so-called “trinitarian renaissance,” but in an insightful comment Robert Letham noted that:

Since then, numerous works have appeared, but, as far as I can see, this torrent of activity has yet to percolate through to pulpit or pew. It is mainly confined to theological treatises, and often supports other agendas—ecumenical, ecological, egalitarian. For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the

* I am indebted to Bryan L. (a.k.a. El Bryan Libre) for his insightful suggestions on an essay topic for the 2010 Trinity Blogging Summit. This paper was born from those suggestions.

¹ This is evident in the titles of books such as James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN, 1998); Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004); Farrelly, M. John. *The Trinity: Rediscovering the Central Christian Mystery* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

² Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 3; cf. Luis F. Ladaria, *The Living and True God: The Mystery of the Trinity* (ed., Rafael Luciani; trans., Evelyn Harrison; Miami: Convivium, 2009), 15; John R. Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), ix.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.I: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (2nd ed.; trans., G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975; repr., London: T&T Clark, 2004); idem., *Church Dogmatics III.I: The Doctrine of God* (trans., T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight and J.L.M. Haire; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957); Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (trans., Joseph Donceel; New York: Crossroad, 1997).

Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove, remote from daily life.⁴

J. Scott Duvall writes, “For many people (some Christians included) the doctrine of the Trinity is about as exciting as doing advanced math blindfolded—overly complicated, boring, mysterious, and pointless.”⁵ Sadly, it is my experience that both authors are correct, and this lays at the foundation of my concern for what I’m calling “Trinitarian pedagogy.” This is just my way of trying to sound smart when all I really mean to say is that I think it’s important that we teach the doctrine of the Trinity, which Catherine Mowry LaCugna described as “the specifically Christian way of speaking about God,”⁶ to believers at every stage of their faith.

Letham and Duvall’s observations are real but they also evince a misunderstanding on the part of the “person in the pew”⁷ and a failure on the part of those who stand behind the pulpit. At the heart of both this misunderstanding and failure is an equation of the *Trinity* (i.e., *God as God*) and the *doctrine* of the Trinity (i.e., *our articulation* of what we believe about God). Tarmo Toom is certainly correct when he says that “we should [I’d say *must*] distinguish between the Trinity and the *doctrine* of the Trinity. God the Trinity may well be incomprehensible and ineffable. Yet doctrines of God, which are human statements in human language, are meant to be understood. Doctrines—even the doctrine of the Trinity—are supposed to make sense.”⁸ LaCugna is in essential agreement with this when she says, “Trinitarian

⁴ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 1.

⁵ J. Scott Duvall, *Experiencing God’s Story of Life and Hope: A Workbook for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 33.

⁶ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 1. This description is especially poignant given the fact that all non-Christian religions and heretical Christian sects (I prefer this term to “cults”) deny or distort the doctrine of the Trinity in some way, shape, or form.

⁷ I purposely place this term in scare quotes because it is my firm conviction that the “person in the pew” (i.e., the “average” Christian) is a mythical creature. Like everything else, lay-Christians exhibit incredible diversity, so much so that some (many?) congregants could teach their leaders a thing or two concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁸ Tarmo Toom. *Classical Trinitarian Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 9.

theology became a purely speculative endeavor, of interest to precious few, unintelligible to the vast majority. Hence the misleading commonplace that ‘We cannot explain anything about the doctrine of the Trinity since it is a mystery.’ (God is mystery, to be sure; the doctrine is complex but not the same as the Mystery.)”⁹

I approach this subject as both a teacher in a local church and as a student who is devoted to being able to understand as much as I can about God and being able to communicate my understanding as clearly as possible to any who would ask (see 1Pet. 3:15). The doctrine of the Trinity *can*, I will admit, get complex as LaCugna said, but it needn’t if we don’t want it to. The conversations that are taking place amongst scholars of various disciplines on the doctrine of the Trinity are interesting to be sure, and in some ways very beneficial, but they can also get technical to the point where only a select few can understand what’s being said. I’m not opposed to such discussions, and I’ve benefited greatly from them, but my concern as a teacher is to present a doctrine that people at every stage of the faith “get.” So with this desire in mind I’ll outline the manner in which I think teachers and Bible study leaders can teach the doctrine of the Trinity to the congregations they serve.

Starting Points

From where should we begin when offering instruction on the doctrine of the Trinity? The obvious answer seems to be the Bible of course! But the Bible as a starting point (at least from our perspective in time) presents a unique set of challenges. To start, the Bible is not a self-interpreting collection of documents, even though we’re often urged to let “Scripture interpret Scripture.”¹⁰ Everyone

⁹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, from the introduction to Karl Rahner’s *The Trinity*, x.

¹⁰ I understand the term to mean something like we should allow the so-called clear portions to inform our understanding of the so-called obscure portions (I say so-called because there is a certain amount of subjectivity in such descriptions) as well as to compare what Scripture says in one place with what it says in others in order to achieve some kind of synthesis. I have no problem with such an approach to interpreting Scripture—in fact I think it’s ideal—but I have encountered more than a few pastors who use the phrase to suggest that we as readers do not bear the burden of interpretation. Instead we’re just to let Scripture “speak for itself.” In fact, I’d suggest (although I’ve not conducted any surveys and have no studies to base this on) that

who approaches Scripture intending to do more than merely quote it is faced with the task of interpretation. This is an obvious yet underappreciated point given the way that many conversations about the doctrine of the Trinity take place. R. P. C. Hanson noted the problem when he said:

The theologians of the Christian Church were slowly driven to a realization that the deepest questions which face Christianity cannot be answered in purely biblical language, because the questions are about the meaning of the biblical language itself.¹¹

Let's look at it like this: Scripture provides the raw data about the *Trinity* inasmuch as it speaks about *God*. The Church used this raw data to articulate a formal *doctrine* of the Trinity. Merely *quoting* the raw data couldn't settle the various disputes that took place in the early Church since even those (heretical) groups who ultimately disagreed with what would be standardized as the Church's doctrine did that; but rather interpretations of the raw data had to be offered in language that went beyond that found in the Bible. The Nicene Creed of 325 and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381¹² (hereafter N-C Creed) are the products of intense debates¹³ between various groups in the early Christian period, but they are statements that represent the Christian faith in summary form.¹⁴

a great deal of pastors/teachers without formal training in theology or biblical studies uses the term in just this way. It is to this use of the term that I object.

¹¹ R. P. C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), xxi. Cf. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 2.

¹² Many scholars believe the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 to be a revision of the Nicene Creed of 325 but this idea has been challenged by some. See e.g., Adolf Harnack, "Constantinopolitan Creed," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (ed., Samuel Macauley Jackson; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1952), 3.256-60. Cf. the discussion in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 167-77.

¹³ Outlining the history and content of these debates is beyond the scope of this paper but those interested should consult J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th rev. ed.; Peabody, MA: Prince, 2004); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Vol. 1: The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); R. P. C. Hanson *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth Century Trinitarian*

So I propose that we use the N-C Creed as our point of departure for teaching the doctrine of the Trinity. There are many reasons for doing so but I think at the top of the list is the fact that it's a distillation of the NT's central themes and message. As Gerald Bray says, "The Fathers of the church... borrowed the language of ancient philosophy and law in order to express their beliefs, but the Bible was always their guide."¹⁵ Athanasius put it more succinctly when he remarked, "they of Nicaea breathe the spirit of Scripture." (*Ad Afros* 4) In addition to this it's probably the most widely recognized symbol of Christian orthodoxy that exists. And it should also be mentioned that the creed is ecumenical in the true sense of the term since it's the product of a genuine ecumenical council in which the Eastern and Western Church was represented (long before any schism). It's also a creed that was accepted by the Lutheran and Reformed (= Protestant) churches after they broke with the Catholic Church (a schism after the "Great Schism" between the Eastern and Western Church) so Protestants *should* have no problems accepting its contents (although as we'll see, some do).

From a pedagogical standpoint the N-C Creed is ideal to teach from because it is a beautifully condensed statement. Unlike the lengthy confessions of the Reformed and Lutheran churches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries¹⁶ the N-C Creed is concise and focuses on the bare essentials of the faith (i.e., the Trinity, the Gospel, the Church, and the Eschaton). The student can easily retain the information in the creed by rote memorization; a feat not so easy for later Christian confessions! This no

Theology (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006); and Franz Dünzel, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (trans., John Bowden; New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

¹⁴ Thomas C. Oden has recently edited the 5 volume "Ancient Christian Doctrine" series (IVP Academic, 2009-10) in which each volume combs through the vast body of patristic literature for quotations relevant to the articles of the N-C Creed. This series does not present commentary on the creed itself since many of the quotations were made before either of the first two Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church but therein lays the significance of this series: it shows how the N-C Creed was an accurate and faithful representation of early Christian belief.

¹⁵ Gerald Bray, "Foreward," in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology* (eds., Fred Sanders and Klauss Issler; Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), xi.

¹⁶ E.g., The Augsburg Confession (1530); The Thirty-Nine Articles (1571); The Belgic Confession (1618); The Canons of Dordt (1618); The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646); The Baptist Confession of Faith (1689); etc.

doubt was a reason it was used in some places as an early baptismal confession¹⁷ which also shows the practical aspect of the creed (a subject we will return to in the conclusion to this essay).

Please note that I'm not saying that we should simply teach people the N-C Creed; I'm saying that the N-C Creed is as good a starting point for the teaching the doctrine of the Trinity as any. It offers us the opportunity to look at Scripture with the Church's collective insight. And we're on firm footing when we think about interpreting the Bible in this manner since this is historically how the Church has thought to do it. Christopher A. Hall tells us that:

the fathers believed the best exegesis occurs within the community of the church. The Scriptures have been given to the church, are read, preached, heard and comprehended within the community of the church, and are safely interpreted only by those whose character is continually being formed by prayer, worship, meditation, self-examination, confession and other means by which Christ's grace is communicated to his body. That is to say, the fathers argue that any divorce between personal character, Christian community and the study of Scripture will be fatal for any attempt to understand the Bible.¹⁸

So then we're back to asking why we shouldn't just start with the Bible if all we're doing is using the N-C Creed to talk about the Bible. Look at like this: reading the OT in light of the NT helps us to understand it better because of the added insight that the NT authors offer in light of Jesus' life, death,

¹⁷ See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 753; 768;

¹⁸ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 42. N.B., one cannot read through the Magisterial Reformers or some of the great Puritan theologians like John Owen without finding constant reference to the early Church Fathers.

and resurrection. Well in the same manner, reading the Bible in light of the N-C Creed offers added insight based on the Church's experience of God in salvation. Sandra Marie Schneiders aptly notes:

The simplicity (if not poverty) of the apostolic writings in comparison with the richness of subsequent tradition is striking. In fact, the paucity of the writings is itself a gift because it leaves to succeeding ages the responsibility of drawing out the potential of the tradition and this responsibility keeps the Christian intelligence and imagination engaged with the mystery tradition mediates. Were this not the case, Christian witness would long ago have degenerated into the wooden repetition of a body of material no longer being freshly appropriated, even recreated, for new times and circumstances.¹⁹

Scripture and Tradition

The relationship between Scripture and tradition is one that's understood differently by the three major branches of Christianity. If I were to sum up the positions of each branch I'd describe them in this way:

1. Scripture *and* Tradition (The Roman Catholic view)
2. Scripture *as* Tradition (The Eastern Orthodox view)
3. Scripture *vs.* Tradition (The Protestant view)

The Catholic Church views Scripture and tradition as two distinct modes of divine revelation both of which occupy a position of authority in the hands of the Church. The Vatican II dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* clearly expresses the Catholic view saying:

¹⁹ Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999), 77.

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.²⁰

The Orthodox Church views the relationship less in terms of their actually being a relationship *between* Scripture *and* tradition and more in terms of Scripture *as* tradition. John Anthony McGuckin says:

Scripture, for the Orthodox, is one of the purest manifestations of tradition. It is constitutively within sacred tradition, not apart from it. The Scriptures stand at the head of other bulwarks of the Holy Tradition because they were the first written and didactic expression of the tradition after the generation of Jesus and the apostles. But the church existed before it actually had a recognized New Testament, and the evangelical writings themselves were the first outflowings of the Holy Tradition presided over by the Spirit of God. Similarly, the writings of the saints and Fathers which have been gathered together across time, were written under the inspiration of the same Spirit, offering clarifications

²⁰ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (Vatican II, November 18, 1965), 9. Cf. the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 80-83.

of the same truth in different forms for different eras. Scripture is qualitatively the highest expression of the Holy Tradition, but Orthodoxy does not ‘close’ the ever-flowing river of inspiration from the Spirit in ways that other traditions seem to us to do. For such reasons the various bulwarks of the sacred tradition are approached in a holistic and organically united fashion. Scripture is read for what it is, part of the celebration of the mystery of Resurrection within Christian worship. Equally, the conciliar formulations of doctrine are read for what they essentially were, exegetical commentaries on the Holy Scriptures that underlie them all. It is impossible to read any patristic text at all without recognizing that they are all, without exception, talking incessantly of either Scripture or Christian worship.²¹

Protestant thought on the subject isn’t as neatly packaged as either Catholic or Orthodox thought mainly because there is more diversity within Protestantism.²² In general Protestants are more leery about the role tradition is to play than their Catholic and Orthodox counterparts are. In reaction to what was perceived as the Catholic Church’s deviation from the biblical faith the Magisterial Reformers emphasized Scripture as the sole *infallible* authority for faith and practice (the doctrine that would come to be known as *Sola Scriptura*).²³ Tradition, while not being disregarded completely, was understood as manmade and fallible and therefore inferior to God’s revelation in Scripture. At best tradition could only

²¹ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 101-02. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly’s statement that “by tradition the fathers usually mean doctrine which the Lord or His apostles committed to the Church, irrespective of whether it was handed down orally or in documents...” (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 31).

²² Lest my Protestant brethren object to this description I do acknowledge that there is variation within both groups. E.g., the Roman Catholic Church has experienced some inner turmoil since Vatican II with the rise of groups such as the Traditionalists and even the more radical Sedevacantists (who reject the Pope’s authority).

²³ As with the history of the early Church my passing summary statements cannot do justice to all that was involved in the Reformation. For an introduction to these issues see Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

enjoy a subordinate position to Scripture and possess only a derivative authority inasmuch as it agrees with Scripture.²⁴ Many Protestant scholars view this as a return to the faith of the earliest Church.²⁵

Keith A. Matheson brings attention to an alternative Protestant movement when he says:

At the other end of the spectrum were those who responded to the current Roman Catholic concept of tradition—not by adopting the early Church's concept of tradition—but by rejecting tradition altogether. These Radical Reformers insisted that not only was Scripture the sole infallible authority, but that it was the sole authority altogether. Secondary authorities such as the Church, the *regula fidei*, and the fathers were considered irrelevant at best. All that was necessary, according to these men, was the individual and his Bible. Each individual had the right to interpret the Scripture by himself and for himself.²⁶

It would be an understatement to say that there was a mere remnant of these Radical Reformers in the modern Church, since in truth this is one of the foundational views of Protestant fundamentalists, and a belief that has infected countless Evangelicals. I can't recall how many conversations I've had with

²⁴ This is not to say that tradition has no place in Protestant theology and practice—it does—but traditions can be dispensed with at ease since they are fallible and Scripture holds the ultimate and sole infallible position of authority.

²⁵ See esp. Keith A. Matheson, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001) who borrows Heiko Oberman's terminology of "Tradition I" and "Tradition II" from his book *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1986). "Tradition I" is the concept that there is one source of tradition, i.e., Scripture which needed to be interpreted according to the apostolic *regula fidei*. This idea, according to Matheson, was "universally held for the first three centuries of the Church." (32) "Tradition II" is the concept that there are two sources, i.e., Scripture and unwritten ecclesial traditions and this doesn't show up in Church history until the fourth century. Matheson does however note that "a remarkable scholarly consensus shows that in the early church, Scripture and Tradition were in no way mutually exclusive concepts because they coincided with each other completely." (19) He continues, "What this means is that throughout the history of the Church, including the Protestant Reformation, what we find is a battle that cannot often be characterized accurately in terms of Scripture vs. tradition. Instead what we find are competing concepts of the relationship between Scripture and tradition." (20)

²⁶ Matheson, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 123.

people who have accused me of going beyond the Bible for using terms and formulations that are not explicitly stated in Scripture. But there's no need to be suspicious of a traditional statements of faith such as the N-C Creed because, as was stated above,²⁷ it's a summary of the Church's understanding of Scripture. J. N. D. Kelly offers a bit of reassurance when informing us that:

...if the concept of tradition was expanded and made more concrete in these ways [i.e. by Creeds], the estimate of its position vis-à-vis Scripture as a doctrinal norm remained basically unaltered. The clearest token of the prestige by the latter is the fact that almost the entire theological effort of the fathers, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to the exposition of the Bible. Further, it was everywhere taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had to first establish its Scriptural basis.²⁸

I personally believe that the Orthodox approach to Scripture *as* tradition is the best of the bunch, and not because “Eastern Orthodoxy is the new black,”²⁹ but rather because it recognizes just how dynamic God and his people truly are. It sees the Spirit active in a continuing manner in every facet of the Church's life; something that cannot always be truthfully said of Protestantism.³⁰ It recognizes that the central message that was later inscripturated was alive and well before ever being relegated to paper

²⁷ See p. 5 above.

²⁸ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 46.

²⁹ See the first sentence of Ben Meyers, “Why I still confess the filioque,” (Faith and Theology, 25 Oct. 2009) online at <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/2009/10/why-i-still-confess-filioque.html>, accessed on 28 May 2010.

³⁰ I speak as a Pentecostal whose experience is rooted in the Spirit's continuing activity in the life of God's people. Sadly, from my perspective, the Reformed tradition at times seems akin to deism in its view of a God who at one time worked in and through the Church but has ceased doing so since the completion of his written revelation. I offer here a personal observation and one that is not meant as generalization of all Reformed Christians although I have spoken generally of the “Reformed tradition.” I do however recognize diversity within this sector of Christianity.

and this message derives its meaning and power from the Triune God himself. It was expressed first in word and then in deed in the ministry of Jesus Christ. This message was then carried to the nations in the preaching of the apostles *and then* recorded as Scripture. The N-C Creed is merely a continuation of an ongoing Christian tradition; a summary of this ancient faith. It's something that has been built into the liturgies of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches and the end result is a faith that is deeply and richly Trinitarian.³¹ My desire is for Protestants³² to enjoy this same sense of intimacy with the *Trinity* by better understanding the *doctrine* of the Trinity.

The N-C Creed

We finally move to the N-C Creed itself. Below you will find the full text of the creed in English. Unfortunately time prohibits me³³ from offering a full commentary and exposition of the creed itself; for those interested in such material then I'd highly recommend Allen Ross' online series "Sound Doctrine: A Study of the Biblical Doctrines in the Nicene Creed."³⁴ What I hope to do is point out the significant teaching points with reference to their underlying Scriptural support. I will not be commenting on the creed as it pertains to Christ's virginal conception, his crucifixion, resurrection, or return from heaven. Nor will I comment on the sacrament of baptism or the resurrection of the dead. My focus here is the doctrine of the Trinity and that alone.

³¹ I can't communicate how appreciative I am of the decidedly Trinitarian structure of the liturgy whenever I attend Mass in the Catholic Church. This is something that I cannot (or rather do not) get in Pentecostal services.

³² I have in mind mainly those Protestants who worship in a "low-church" context such as the one I worship in.

³³ Full disclosure: I procrastinated in preparing this essay, as I'm wont to do, so my complete vision has not been able to come to fruition. I hope to add an outline and exposition of the N-C Creed in a future incarnation of this essay that pastors and teachers in local churches can use as a study guide for teaching the doctrine of the Trinity.

³⁴ Allen Ross, "Sound Doctrine: A Study of the Biblical Doctrines in the Nicene Creed," (Bible.org, 2003) online at <http://bible.org/series/sound-doctrine-biblical-study-doctrines-nicene-creed>, accessed on 29 May 2010.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten from the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same substance as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. *Amen.*

Significant Points of Trinitarian Pedagogy

Monotheism

Moses declared, “YHWH is God; besides him there is no other.” (Deut. 4:35) Isaiah is just as emphatic in recording the words of YHWH. He says, “I am the first and I am the last, apart from me there is no God... Is there any other God besides me? No, there is no other Rock, I know not one.” (Isa. 44:6, 8); “I am YHWH, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may know there is none besides me. I am the YHWH, and there is no other.” (Isa. 45:5-6) The psalmist declared that “all the gods of the nations are idols, but YHWH made the heavens.” (Ps. 95:5) Paul is in agreement with all of

these OT authors when he says that “We know that ‘an idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’” (1Cor. 8:4) So it is only fitting then that the N-C Creed opens with an unambiguously monotheistic statement, “We believe in one God...” and this contrary to the claims of many non-Trinitarians.³⁵

But there’s also something to be said of the order of the Persons. The creed begins with the Father from whom the Son is eternally begotten and the Spirit proceeds. This trinitarian *taxis* (order) of Father, Son, and Spirit has its foundation in the NT. One sees it most clearly in Jesus’ command to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) but these causal relationships are also spelled out for us in other portions of Scripture. In establishing Christ’s superiority over angels the author of Hebrews asks, “For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I *begotten* thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?” (Heb. 1:5) Commenting on this passage Susan Docherty says:

A subtle interplay between genuine exegesis of the scriptural text and the author’s own christological beliefs thus enabled the author of Hebrews to read it in the way he does, because the reference earlier in the psalm to the Lord’s anointed (Ps 2:2), and the fact that this speech is portrayed as part of a heavenly conversation, may have led him to conclude that these words could only really have been about Jesus.³⁶

³⁵ See e.g., *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* (Georgetown, Ontario: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, 1989) [a publication produced by Jehovah’s Witnesses]; David C. Pack, *The Trinity—Is God three in one?* (Wadsworth, OH: Restored Church of God, 2005) [a publication produced by an Armstrongite splinter group]; David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame, 2000) [a publication produced by a leader in Oneness Pentecostalism]. In all of these publications the doctrine of the Trinity is accused of being tri-theistic at one point or another.

³⁶ Susan E. Docherty, *The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews: A Case Study in Early Jewish Bible Interpretation* (WUNT II/260; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 147-48.

In other words, the N-C Creed accurately represents the Son's begotten-ness as being eternal or "before all ages" (πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων as the Greek of the N-C Creed literally says). Richard Bauckham agrees in saying that "The 'today' of 'Today I have begotten you' would be the eternal today of the divine eternity."³⁷ That this sonship is eternal can be seen also in Hebrews 1:2 where God is said to have made the universe through his Son establishing a Father-Son relationship before time.³⁸ Likewise, Jesus tells his disciples that he will send the Comforter from the Father, the Spirit of truth who *proceeds* from the Father. (John 15:26) And like the Son we find God's Spirit preexisting creation in Genesis 1:2.

Creation

Isaiah 44:24 is quite explicit that it was YHWH "who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by himself," so it was already quite significant that in the first century John, Paul, and the author of Hebrews could write about Christ as active agent in creation (John 1:3, 10; 1Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2).³⁹ Richard Bauckham has argued at length that God's role as Creator is one of the defining factors of his "unique divine identity."⁴⁰ It is significant, even if unsurprising, then that both the Father and the Son (in agreement with Scripture) are presented as

³⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 252; reprinted in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (eds., Richard Bauckham, et al.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 34.

³⁸ I note the irony in the expression "before time" since "before" only has meaning in reference to "time." Unfortunately I know of no better way to phrase it.

³⁹ These are the explicit affirmations of Christ as agent of creation. In his recent monograph *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) Sean M. McDonough draws out a number of less obvious allusions and parallels to Christ's role as creator in the NT.

⁴⁰ See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); idem., *Jesus and the God of Israel*. For a brief summary of Bauckham's argument see Nick Norelli, "The Creator's Uniqueness" (Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth, 11 Oct. 2008) online at <http://rdtwot.wordpress.com/2008/10/11/the-creators-uniqueness/>, accessed on 29 May, 2010. Cf. N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1: The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 248-50. Wright makes a case for a "creational monotheism" that rules out henotheism, pantheism, deism, Gnosticism, and paganism.

active in creation in the N-C Creed. While not stated in the same terms, the Spirit can be seen to be included in creation as well since he's said to be, "the Lord, the giver of life" (see Job 33:4; cf. Ps. 33:6).

The Father-Son Relationship

Once again we should take note of the casual relationships within the Trinity. The N-C Creed affirms what the NT says about the Son being the only begotten of the Father (see John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1John 4:9). But this is also expressed in the language of "God *from* God" (John 1:18), "Light *from* Light" (1John 1:5; John 1:9, cf. 8:12; 9:5), "true God *from* true God" (John 17:3; 1John 5:20).

The major theological battle being fought in the early part of the fourth century was over the Son's relationship to the Father.⁴¹ The Arians insisted that "there was when he [the Son] was not" and taught that Christ was the first of God's creations although he was created before time (there goes that expression again!). John's Gospel refutes this notion in both its prologue (1:1-18) and in Jesus' high priestly prayer of John 17 (see esp. vs. 5; cf. comments on Hebrews above) but the above referenced material in regard to Christ's role as Creator refutes this as well. Christ cannot have been the one through whom all things were made if he himself was one of those things! Likewise, if all of creation awaited redemption (Rom. 8:19ff.), then how could a part of that creation redeem it?

When the creed says that the Son is of the "same substance" (ὁμοούσιον) as the Father its purpose is not to delve too deeply into the mystery of God by suggesting exactly what deity is; its purpose is rather to safeguard against the latent polytheism of Arian theology. If the Father and the Son don't somehow share the same substance (the creed does not get into particulars about *how* this is supposed to work—how could it?—no one other than God could know that!) then the Church has at least two objects of worship and is guilty of idolatry.

⁴¹ For detailed descriptions of these issues see the works noted on p. 5n. 13. My description is necessarily brief and can't possibly begin to do justice to all that was involved in these debates.

Salvation

The early Church, contrary to popular opinion, was more concerned with salvation than they were with metaphysical descriptions of God.⁴² The early Christians (as noted above) wondered how a creature could redeem creation. To be part of that creation is to be in need of the very redemption that it was purported to be providing! The relation of the Trinity and the Incarnation of Christ to salvation is one taken over from Scripture. Paul makes several statements concerning salvation in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all present and accounted for (Eph. 2:18; 1Thess. 1:4-6; 2Thess. 2:13-14 cf. Heb. 9:14)⁴³. Likewise, Peter's Pentecost sermon has a distinctly Trinitarian character to it (see Acts 2, esp. vv. 32-33 for a nice summary of the gospel). And the Gospel of John predicates eternal life on knowing both Father and Son (John 17:3) while also informing us that unless one is born of the Spirit they cannot enter God's kingdom (John 3:5). Likewise, we find pervasive links of the Incarnation of Christ to salvation in the NT (Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11; John 1:1-18 [esp. 12-13], 29; Rom. 9:1-5; Gal. 4:1-7; Phil. 2:1-11; Col. 1:15-23; 1Tim. 3:14-16 [in reference to sanctification which as I understand it is part of the salvation process = justification → sanctification → glorification]; Heb. 1:1-14; 2:5-18; 10:1-18).

Worship

To assert that the Spirit is worshiped along with the Father and Son is to make a significant statement about his deity. Larry Hurtado has spent the past twenty years writing about early Christian devotion. While his work focuses mainly on Christ-devotion it has implication for Spirit-devotion as well. The main emphasis of Hurtado's work has been on "cultic worship" which he describes:

⁴² Contra Bauckham's insistence that patristic Christology was focused on 'ontic' categories (see *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 31).

⁴³ See Gordon D. Fee, "Paul and the Trinity: The Experience of Christ and the Spirit for Paul's Understanding of God" in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (ed., Stephen T. Davis, et al.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 49-72.

Because the word “worship” and its Greek and Hebrew equivalents can connote a variety of degrees and forms of reverence, I wish to make it clear that by “worship” here I mean the sort of reverence that was reserved by ancient devout Jews for God alone and was intended by them to indicate God's uniqueness. I use the term to designate “cultic” worship, especially devotion offered in a specifically worship (liturgical) setting and expressive of the thanksgiving, praise, communion, and petition that directly represent, manifest, and reinforce the relationship of the worshipers with the deity.⁴⁴

Much like salvation itself, the broader Christian experience as it relates to these facets of cultic devotion exhibit a Trinitarian character. Note the following examples:

Songs of Praise: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Eph. 5:18-20)

Worship: “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” (John 4:23-24)

Prayer: “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. “If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because

⁴⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 31n. 10.

it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:13-17)

“But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.” (Jud. 1:20-21)

Conclusion

As can be seen the Christian experience of God in salvation and the life that follows is Trinitarian in character. This experience reflects the Triune God whom we experience thus allowing us to articulate that experience in a way that's intelligible. The end result is the doctrine of the Trinity. When thought about in these terms it should be easy to see just why teaching believers the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. It's the most distinctly Christian doctrine there is which makes sense since it describes our completely unique God.

The N-C Creed serves as a symbol of the Christian faith that has endured for more than sixteen centuries. While not usurping Scripture it leads the student deeper into Scripture and serves to strengthen and clarify the biblical message. As a teaching tool I suggest that it's better than starting with Scripture itself due to the inevitability of having to reach outside of Scripture to articulate the *doctrine* of the Trinity. I also find it more beneficial than other methods I've encountered such as teaching from analogy. While I won't cite specific examples I have yet to find the analogy for the Trinity that doesn't devolve into modalism, tritheism, or deny God's simplicity. In short, analogies fail, and rightly so since God is unique and there is none like him.

I leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2Cor. 13:14)