

## **The Nicene Creed in Reformed Churches: rejected, optional or normative?**

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What is the actuality of the Council of Nicaea and the place given to its creed affirming the divinity and humanity of Christ? This is a crucial question for Reformed churches on the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, held in 325 in present day Türkiye.

From the outset, Jesus' identity has been a "sign of contradiction". Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" has been put to every generation (Matt. 16:15).

The Council of Nicaea attempted to answer Jesus' question about his identity by strongly and unequivocally affirming his divinity, at a time when it was denied to varying degrees.

This confession - contested from the outset - is "*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*" - the article by which the Church stands or falls. A Church without the God who became Man, crucified and really risen, will not stand, if this God is not at the heart of its identity.

### **I. The 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation**

At the time of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, the Reformers unanimously confessed the faith defined at Nicaea, regarding it as a faithful interpretation of the Scriptures. They recognized that the Nicene Fathers had preserved the kerygma. The Christological dogma defined at Nicaea is for them the normative and permanent context for the explanation of the Christian faith.

They emphasize the importance of Christology, rejecting any mediation other than that of Christ. "The exclusivism of Solo Christo - "through Christ alone" - ...makes Christological dogma even more important".<sup>2</sup>

For Martin Luther, the assertions on the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son are part of the "high articles of the divine majesty" (Smalcald Articles, Part 1). The Augsburg Confession begins with the "Fundamental Articles of Faith and Doctrine". Its first article affirms that "our Churches teach with perfect unanimity the doctrine proclaimed by the Council of Nicaea".

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<sup>1</sup> Paper for the Online Webinar, organized by "Pasqua Together 2025", February 8th, 2024. FROM NICAIA WALKING TOGETHER TO UNITY. THE BEGINNING OF A NEW BEGINNING. See the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkvzfGjIGOE&list=PLQxDjaVvYI47m-hBLQg3oq3L3BdGOXOaf&index=1&t=10s>

<sup>2</sup> Henri Blocher, *La doctrine du Christ*, Edifac, Vaux-sur-Seine, 2002, p. 101

The work of John Calvin, the *La Rochelle Confession of Faith* begins by stating the sovereign authority of Scripture, then accepts the three Symbols of the Apostles, Nicaea and Athanasius, "because they are in conformity with the Word of God". (Art. 5)

About the terms Trinity, substance, and hypostasis - all three absent from Scripture - Calvin justifies their use, even though they are not biblical.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to read his refutation of the later liberal thesis of a Hellenization of Christology in the process initiated at Nicaea and concluded at Chalcedon. The Nicene Fathers would have betrayed the "simple Gospel" with categories from Greek philosophy. For Calvin, the opposite is true: it was the Gospel that transformed Greek philosophy, where the ideas of the incarnation of God and the Trinity did not exist.

## **II. The confessional evolution of the Reformed Churches...without Nicaea!**

From the Enlightenment onwards, the normative status of confessions of faith was called into question in several Reformed churches. Following the process of secularization, Protestantism substituted a "subjective" conception of the confession of faith for the "objective" one supported by the Reformers.<sup>4</sup>

The Confessions of Faith of the Reformed Churches, as well as those of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed and other early Church confessions, were challenged for their claim to "regulate the faith" in the teaching of the Church.

As early as the mid 19<sup>e</sup> century, the Reformed churches of Switzerland, for example, abandoned the recitation of the Apostles' Creed during the celebration of baptism and gave up asking pastors to subscribe to a confession of faith at the time of their ordination. The confession of faith is therefore freely available to the celebrants. Today, although confessions of faith are included in liturgies, their communal recitation is optional.

Subsequently, many Reformed theologians rejected the Nicene dogma. In recent years, denominational differences have become less important. But extreme modernism has grown - and even more, perhaps, the tolerance, even benevolence, that we have for it. It is well known that the synods of the Reformed churches in Switzerland offer it a broad platform.

## **III. Confessing currents**

However, despite this liberal evolution, the confessing trend has continued, with varying degrees of vigor, in the Reformed churches of Switzerland and other countries in the northern hemisphere, albeit in a minority today.

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<sup>3</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, XIII, 5

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Confessions et catéchismes de la foi réformée*. Labor et Fides, Genève, 1986, p. 14f.

In French-speaking Switzerland, for example, the "Blue Manifesto" of the "Rally for a Reformed Renewal" (R3) begins by quoting the two symbols of the faith: "In response to Jesus Christ's 'Come to me', we reaffirm our adherence to the two confessions of faith in which generations of Christians have recognized the identity of God, his Being and his Action: the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinople Creed".<sup>5</sup>

According to these movements, in order to renew itself, the Reformed Church will be - to use German terms - neither "Konfessionslos", without a confession of faith, nor "Konfessionsfrei", that is free to choose the confession of faith that suits our convictions.

No, the Reformed Church will simply be "confessing"!

#### **IV. The challenge of the ecumenical movement**

Right from the start of the ecumenical movement, at the 1927 Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne (Switzerland), liberal Reformed voices protested against the inclusion of the two Confessions of Faith of the early Church (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinople Creed) as the theological basis of the ecumenical movement.

What would those liberal delegates of 1927 say today, when the World Council of Churches (WCC) introduced the Nicene - Constantinople symbol into its Constitution at the Porto Alegre World Assembly in 2006, as one of the determining criteria for membership? Acceptance of this symbol of faith, in its original form, has now become mandatory for all member churches.

On the other hand, the Global Christian Forum, which extended the ecumenical space to the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, took as its theological basis a formula inspired by Nicaea, welcoming representatives of all Christian communities that "confess the Triune God and Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man".

The Nicene - Constantinople symbol has also been accepted as the basis for dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican Churches. For example, the "Joint Declaration on the Holy Trinity," following the dialogue between Reformed and Orthodox in 1992, begins by confessing together "the evangelical and ancient faith of the Catholic Church in the Trinity promulgated by the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople".<sup>6</sup>

The 1993 dialogue on authority in the Church between the Orthodox and Lutherans does not hesitate to affirm that the Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the Nicene-

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<sup>5</sup> "Le Manifeste bleu," p. 11s <https://www.ler3.ch/manifeste> R3 is the Reformed partner of the Protestant Theological High School of the French part of Switzerland (HET-PRO), where I teach ecumenical theology.

<sup>6</sup> [https://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1992\\_orth\\_warc\\_trinity.pdf](https://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1992_orth_warc_trinity.pdf)

Constantinople creed are "an indispensable guide to understanding the saving work of God in Christ" and constitute the "foundation of all subsequent dogmatic clarifications". They are "normative for the faith and life of our Churches today".<sup>7</sup>

As far as the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are concerned, reactions to the latest Faith and Order study - "The Church. Towards a common vision" - show that these churches declare that their fundamental beliefs agree with the Nicene symbol, but do not use it in worship. But Scriptures are the ultimate standard. Greetings for this online seminar from Thomas Schirrmacher, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, emphasize that "it is important for Evangelicals, that all churches re-establish the doctrine formulated together at Nicaea in every generation from the original revelation, the Holy Scriptures".

## **V. Nicaea: neither rejected nor optional, but once again normative!**

We might also ask how these dialogues, too often ignored, are being received. Especially since many influential Reformed theologians have openly rejected the Nicene dogma.

If the Reformed churches are giving a place to the Nicene creed and if the confessing current has regained new vigor, let's not forget that the norm above all norms in their synods is pluralism, which includes contradictory statements, considered as legitimate.

These Churches accept Jesus as the "true God", according to Nicaea, but accept also his denial. For many pastors and theologians in my Church, Jesus is no longer God in person. He is only a man, certainly inhabited by God, inspired by him, used by him, united to him and transparent to him, but not God himself. And his resurrection is understood symbolically.

However, the essential question remains whether the testimony of Scripture is the basis of Jesus' divinity. Is the divinity of Jesus affirmed at Nicaea an adequate formulation of the New Testament data? Is the Nicene confession of Christ as God the result of a pious projection or, through the prophetic and apostolic witness, the fruit of a revelation?

The Nicene Creed unequivocally affirmed the divinity of Jesus Christ, according to the Scriptures, as "*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*". In other words, it must be neither rejected nor optional, but must once again become normative in the Reformed churches, otherwise they risk disappearing. And in fact, some of them are in the advanced stages of crumbling!

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<sup>7</sup> 7th Plenary Session of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission. 5-10 July 1993, Sandbjerg/Denmark. *Authority in and of the Church*, §4

## Conclusion: Nicaea 2025, a call to reformed Churches

Repentance is an essential part of the Jubilee tradition. In the Old Testament, the Jubilee year begins and ends on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:8ff). I hope that the Jubilee of the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea in 2025 will be an opportunity for the Reformed churches to start reflecting on the counter-testimony of their exaggerated pluralism.

I hope I'm not being too harsh, but I say this with tears in my eyes and because I love my Church: tolerance of the denial of the divinity of Christ and his resurrection (or their symbolic understanding) in the Reformed Church is destroying the foundation of Christian unity.

A process to be lived in the spirit of 'receptive ecumenism', where each tradition must not hide its internal tensions and wounds, but acknowledge them in a spirit of humility and conversion. "Receptive ecumenism starts with humble recognition of the wounds, tears, and difficulties in one's own tradition and asks how the particular and different gifts, experiences, and ways of proceeding in the other traditions can speak to and help to heal these wounds that elude the capacity of one's own tradition to heal itself".<sup>8</sup>

This call to "conversion"- in the spirit of the Dombes group<sup>9</sup>- is central. It can only be the work of the Holy Spirit, who opens our hearts and pours into them his witness, which alone can convince us of the true identity of Jesus (cf. 1 John 5, 6-7). This is why 2025 will be a year of the Holy Spirit, to be invoked as never before (1 John 5, 6-7). It is he who gives the gifts of humility, repentance, and permanent conversion.

Who knows what God might grant us if we pray, humbly seek his face and turn away from more than two centuries of theological compromises? (cf 2 Chron 7:14).

However, what we also need to see is that this is not just a matter for Reformed theologians and pastors, but for every disciple of Jesus Christ and for every Church. We all struggle to bear witness to the uniqueness of the person of Christ in modern pluralism. We all have to ask ourselves whether Jesus' question concerns us: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Hence the need for all of us to experience a penitential dimension in 2025... in the pilgrimage towards 2033, the great Jubilee of 2000 years since Christ's Resurrection.

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<sup>8</sup> Quote from Paul Murray, a great promoter of this fruitful ecumenical approach. See "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism". *The Ecumenist*, Vol. 51, No. 2 Spring 2014/1, p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Groupe des Dombes, *Pour la conversion des Églises : Identité et changement dans la dynamique de communion*. Centurion, Paris, 1991