Chapter 9

**The Father**

As discussed, God as a concept is extremely broad, but the concept of Father is not so. The idea of God as “Father” really does not appear often in the Old Testament, only about 11 times (*Deuteronomy* 32:6; *Isaiah* 63:16, 64:8 for example) and then not as an address. In the New Testament Jesus constantly refers to his “Father”, some 170 times and mostly as an address, with the familiar term “*Abba*” (“*Daddy*”) being prominent (cf. the *Our Father*, *Mt* 6:9ff). But just what does it mean for God to be “Father”?

**The Words**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Nicene Creed*** | ***Some Biblical References*** |
| *I believe in one God,* | *Dt 6:4; Rom 10:8-10; 1 Jn 4:15; Mk 12:29; Eph 4: 6; Jm 2:19* |
| *the Father almighty,* | *Ex 6:3; Mt 6:9* |
| *maker of heaven and earth,* | *Gen 1:1; Ps* |
| *of all things visible and invisible.* | *Col 1:15-16* |

**The Problems**

The problems being dealt with have a historical aspect, as do the Creeds themselves. While we are focused on the Nicene Creed, it did not develop in vacuum. The Church and its struggle to establish itself in a mainly non-Christian world relied heavily on the tools each community had at their disposal. Ultimately, the Truths she professes are timeless, but it took time to bring orthodox beliefs together. The Nicene Creed stands on its own beyond the previous creeds because it is purely ecumenical, dealing not just with local problems of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, but with the foundation of the universal Church. Even so, we will attempt to look at the problems being expressed in this and the following chapters from both an incremental/historical and a theological path. With that in mind, we spoke earlier of the two main creed shaping heresies as Gnosticism and Arianism, so they will be the boundaries of our approach. As Gnosticism is the earlier of the two we will look at its effect first and then move to other controversies.

**Creation Myths:** As we have discussed in the past, the majority of pagan creation myths centered on the ether, a formless, chaos. Within that ether, something forms, sometimes an island – some sort of separation from the ether. On that island, the proto-god, usually a single god or a pair (male and female), forms who then forms the other gods from the ether. Usually these gods are focused on anthropomorphic things like the wind or the sun, something like the Titans for the Greeks. From that group is spawned the groups of gods we are most familiar with like Osiris and Isis, or Zeus and Hera. Ultimately god is inseparable and somewhat indistinguishable from Creation.

**Household gods:** The Romans had spirits, sometimes ancestors who helped around the house. Early Roman religion was very *totem-based*, built less around mighty gods and their exploits and more around a reliance on spirits who exert good or evil influence in daily life which helps to explain why it did not develop great mythologies like the Greeks and was so slow to adopt them.

What that means is that there is a deep-seated sense of *patronage*, that is, Romans saw the gods more as ‘patrons’, with every Roman god watching over a particular part of life. They each had a job to do, some useful office to perform. The sense of ‘household gods’ means that they were a part of everyday life. There were divinities who presided over events like the birth and nursing of an infant, and at the proper time of birth or infant care they were worshipped, in hope for the reciprocal benefits which they would bestow. Every vocation, every household transaction, every action of daily life had its patron Roman god. This is the thinking which in part lent itself to their ‘borrowing’ other gods from the cultures they ‘encountered’. If there was an established patron god of something then that god could be adopted.

**Two Gods**: Polytheism is not the only game in town. Sometimes it is less about multiple gods and more about good and evil. For religions like Zoroasterism, it is a fight against the forces of good and the forces of evil, light and dark, male and female. This kind of Zen thinking, while pointing toward physical beings, is more about concepts in opposition.

**Mystery Cults**: The idea of hidden knowledge, while using a similar definition of mystery, is less about the fullness and transparency of Revelation and more about ‘revealed’ secrets. Gnostics generally combined various and sundry religious and philosophical beliefs into an amalgam of “secret truths”. They believed things like the physical universe is evil and God did not make it. Evil is personified, just as good is personified in God. There is a god of the Old Testament who is material (and therefore evil) who creates the material world and a God of the New Testament who is spiritual (and therefore good) who creates a “new heaven and a new earth.” There were also groups that hailed Mary as the Mother goddess, and that Jesus was born of her not the Father.

**Atheism and Agnosticism**: Yeah that is right, nothing new about this one. People have stopped looking beyond the ends of their noses for a long time. There are various and sundry reasons but in the end they all add up to a failure to see God as the architect of everything around them, or even see anything as possible beyond the momentary experience.

Okay, that was just a sampling of the environment in which Christianity arrived and grew up. God is not an easy concept. The idea of approaching God using the method of *via negativa* (the negative way) has a certain appeal. But not in a creed. We must make the statements of Truth, not the statements of human reasoning. These are Revelation, not speculation.

**The Solutions**

This section is not really about solutions to problems but more about how the Truth is way ahead of them. Our Tradition teaches us that first (and this may seem silly) *there is a God* and second, that this God, is not only *the* God, but is the *only one*. So the concept of God is greater than the concepts of gods, meaning that God is the only creator. All other gods are not lesser because God is the meanest and the baddest god there is, but because He does not belong to the physical universe – He is literally above and beyond all other beings. The physical world around us is real and is the result of a gracious and loving God, not anthropomorphized spirits or beings related to physical objects. The spiritual world is not separate from the physical world; God creates it all, but at the same time one cannot make a graven image of God because God is not contained within the physical world. All that we experience and all that we can reason was created by the one God. And God is not hidden such that we cannot know Him. No, His creation shouts out His name. We know Him by His works, but His works are not Him.

Ultimately, there must be a God for all else to make sense. Still these popular beliefs can cause confusion and the Creed is a way of not so much answering them but more of a way of directing the conversation. That is to say, they are the framework, the premises from which we begin our profession and therefore our practice. So we will begin to discuss each statement while keeping in mind the problems which exist while they were being promulgated.

**God Is One**

So not only does God exist, there is only one God. Scripture tells us "*Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!*" (*Dt* 6:4) These words are tacked to the door post of every Jewish home, and are reverenced upon entering and exiting the home. Other possible translations are “*the Lord our God is one Lord*”; “*the Lord our God, the Lord is one*”; “*the Lord is our God, the Lord is one*.” God is one and He is the only one. This is the truth which foils the arguments of polytheists, dualists, and pagans. We understand all that is to come in this fact about God. It also speaks to the understanding of the nature of God in three persons. They are not separate, with separate wills, but one will working in concert.

Ultimately, as with Israel, this statement is really about our response to God. This singleness of God means a singleness of mind for us. We, like Israel, must love him with an undivided heart, mind, soul, our very being, and with every ounce of our strength. "*Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength*." (v. 5) Jesus will reiterate this.

It also means that nothing other than God has the *abilities of* or the *ability to be* God. This leads us to the next profession.

**God Is Almighty**

What are the theological and practical ramifications of this title? We pretty much take this idea for granted. Even those who oppose God work from the idea that any god must be all powerful. This is not a Christian title but comes to us from the Old Testament. In Hebrew the term is *El Shaddai*; *El* is the reference to God Himself, like *El-ohim,* *El-i-jah*, or *Micha-el*. *Shaddai* comes from the word for breast, which implies one who nourishes, provides, and satisfies. Overall the picture of God in the Scripture gives us the sense that He is all-powerful. There is no other person or so-called god who compares with His power. Additionally this title speaks not just to the Father's power but to our response to that power, to the sense of wonder and awe that we must feel in His presence. There is no act of strength too big for Him and in our wonder and in our awe we would never ask questions like "*Can God make a rock too big for Him to move*?" Instead it invokes a response like “*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*” (*Job* 42:2)

So once again it is in the end a title about our response to God the Father – a response of worship and awe.

**Creation**

We have briefly touched on this idea, and it really flows from God being the Father, the Almighty. When we think of creation, we think of the first chapter of Genesis: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*.” And the meaning has been long debated, especially now in scientific terms, but we have to think differently. Creation is *everything*. The heavens and the earth, the visible and the invisible are *everything*, from every subatomic particle to every thought. God is the author, the poet (if we think of Him in a Hebraic way), and Creation is His masterpiece. God is the one with the power to create everything! He makes everything come into being. Everything has essence within the mind of God and His will brings it into existence. God is therefore separate from His creation. We are the creature, He the Creator. We are part of it, He is not. He is in complete control of His creation.

**God As Father**

The Greek/Latin *pater* denotes one who is both progenitor and caretaker. The Hebrew Scriptures really focus on this role, in opposition to the understandings of gods in the cultures around them. Jesus, on the other hand, speaks to the Father directly, not as a description of his role but in a conversational tone. “Father…” (cf. *Jn* 17, among others) There is a shift in the point of the term within Jesus, a fulfillment of its meaning, if you will. The Father begets, initially Creation, but ultimately Jesus, and eventually a new heaven and a new earth – and in different ways. But as we will deal with Jesus more in the next chapter, we will turn toward the primary Hebrew definition, especially as it is applied to the Father in this first section.

So here is where our discussion of “person” comes into play, but it does bear some expansion at this point. Each person of the Trinity has a role to play but it must be played in concert with the other persons because God is one. The Father is not independent of the Son and the Spirit, nor they from him, but each is inter-dependent. Each of the persons still only accomplishes God’s one will. God’s will plays out differently in each person, but it is still *God’s will*. Philosophically and theologically the term “will” is not base desire, as with Aristotle’s vegetable and animal souls, nor is it merely as with the human rational soul – though the rational soul is certainly a reflection of God’s will. God’s will play into the purposefulness of His actions. Unlike the ancient gods, like Plato’s Demiurge, or the gods of the Gnostics who create somewhat arbitrarily, God creates with a purpose. Nothing external compels God to create (as the Gnostics taught) – He does it from love, because of the fact of Himself.

We can see echoes of God’s oneness and His title of Almighty within this title. Again, we should not infer that there is a “god of” sense in the Creed as the Gnostics teach.

All of salvation history plays into the act of Creation, it is part of the Economy of Salvation.

The Fathers and Doctors speak of the Father as *the absolute source of divinity* meaning that the Father has a sort of pre-eminence within the Trinity having within him a sort monarchial role. We will look at how this applies to the other persons of the Trinity a bit more in the next chapters but use it now to strictly discuss the person of the Father. Basically [The Father is the eternal source of eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit.] There are many dangers in this discussion such as the demotion of the other persons *beneath* the Father (not just as distinct), and the Creed directly addresses those in these seemingly simple statements.

**God As Creator**

Because the will is one (because God is one) God creates. As we understand this action of the one God, the Father is *the* Creator, *with* the Son, and *through* the Spirit – all in concert, each with the other. “*God did not stand in need of...* [other beings]*, in order to the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying,* ‘Let Us make man after Our image and likeness;’ [*Gen* 1:26] *He taking from Himself the substance of the creatures* [formed]*, and the pattern of things made, and the type of all the adornments in the world*.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4) It is the role of the Father to initiate creation. It is the role of the Son and the Spirit to help the Father create, but it is the Father who is the Creator.

The term “creator” as used in the Creed seems to imply a past action. “*God created the heavens and the earth*.” (*Gen* 1:1) But that is not the full truth. If we examined the Hebrew words used (*bara* – “to fatten”, which we translate as “to create, fashion, or shape” and *asah*, “to make or do” – a fascinating discussion in its own right), we would see that they do not merely define a past event. The Hebrew points to the *mystery* of Creation and therefore *beyond* time. It is not so much that God *created* but that God *creates*. When we read the first chapter of Genesis, at times He creates and at others He makes and sometimes the two are interchangeable – again, a fascinating discussion in its own right but not for this time. The point is, that we must understand that creation happens all of the time, not just once. Every moment of every day God *sustains* creation through creating. He is not the God of the Deists, who winds up the clock and then disappears. God is eternally and intimately involved in the creative process. Creation does not exist without His constant intervention.

Secondly, God is Creator, and He creates new. This is not a process of assembling existing pieces together, but creating from scratch. It can imply *ex nihilo* but it can also imply forming something new from something else, like Eve from Adam’s rib. This also may not seem like much to those of us sophisticated 20th century science types but what we have to remember is that this type of creation is different from the creation of other religions at the time, or even the science/religion of today. Those old gods create from within the ether using the forces of the ether, and are themselves a product of that ether (just like the conservation of matter and energy). But with the Father, there is no magic in the old sense (taking the power and material from one place and using it to create in another) or science in the new sense but *will*, God’s will to create from nothing. Things which had no existence, He gave/gives existence.

Lastly God creates *for* *us* – humanity. That is the plan (cf. *Gen* 1:26-30). This too is in terms of our response. Our dominion over Creation is not *carte blanche* to do as we please with Creation but like God’s role (as we are His image and likeness) to do what is best for Creation. This is not just about recycling, though that is part of it, but more about making sure the right/good things happen.

**Heaven And Earth**

But just what does He create? Here the Creed introduces two phrases: “heaven and earth” and “visible and invisible”. These may seem redundant but they are not, though they are related. The term “Heaven and Earth” tells us that they are not part of God, but a creation of God, sustained by God. Through them, even though they are not God, they reveal God through their very existence. So this sets God the Father apart from so many of the pagan notions of creator gods. This statement grounds all of the other statements to come, similarly to the way “one God” founds everything.

God creates all there is, all that we can know. We obviously live in a world, on a solid planet circling a gaseous sun. Physical, quantifiable, sensible. But we also know of something more, of another place a place which is not this solid earth on which we stand or the gaseous sun in the sky we see. Something beyond all of that; a place where the non-solid happens. Heaven. The word "Heaven" carries with it the double meaning of the heavenly bodies such as the planets and the stars, and the dwelling place of all things spiritual (angels, saints, etc.).

This profession mirrors the understanding of the Trinity. As there is one God in three persons, all is one creation but there is also a distinction. I will cheat here and fall back on the language of the Catechism: “*The Scriptural expression heaven and earth means all that exists, creation in its entirety. It also indicates the bond, deep within creation, that both unites heaven and earth and distinguishes the one from the other: ‘the earth’ is the world of men, while ‘heaven’ or ‘the heavens’ can designate both the firmament and God’s own ‘place’—‘our Father in heaven’ and consequently ‘the heaven’ too which is eschatological glory. Finally, ‘heaven’ refers to the saints and the ‘place’ of the spiritual creatures, the angels, who surround God*.” (CCC 326)

God makes things. That is what we know from the first words of Scripture onward. It is attested to again and again by the psalmists and the prophets. And from that derives the second statement.

**Visible And Invisible**

While last, this is certainly not least. This is important; it may not seem an important distinction but it is. Just like it is important to confess what we have done and what we have *failed* to do. God creates everything, and so everything created is *good*, both the spiritual *and* the physical. There is the problem of the spiritual versus the physical though. If God is all that is good and He is non-corporeal or as we might also say spiritual and we who are physical beings are, let us say, not so good, then there is a direct correlation between the invisible and good and visible and not good.

So this also answers the arguments that can be fought from a Platonic material/evil – immaterial/good by various and sundry groups over the years. The material world is corruptible and passing and therefore cannot be good. This statement tells us instead that 1) anything that can be created has been, whether material or immaterial, and 2) since God created it, it is all *good*. “*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the invocation of God in prayer*.” (*1 Tm* 4:4-5)

But these lines profess that it is more than a simple light/dark, material/immaterial creation. Not only does God create the heavens and the earth, He creates all of the things we can and cannot see. As Shakespeare points out, “*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than* [sic] *are dreamt of in your philosophy*.” (*Hamlet*) Shakespeare, like me and like the Creed, is not pointing out ignorance or things unknown but the paltry nature of our thought in comprehending larger things. It is not just what we can see but also what we cannot see – in a word, *everything*.

**Putting It Together**

Okay – these chapters keep getting longer and longer. Because of the comprehensive nature of the Faith and the theology which explores it, it is difficult to keep the points contained to small sound-bites.

God the Father is distinct from the Son and the Spirit, without being separate from them. God the Father creates and creates constantly. Heaven and Earth and things visible and invisible are just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. God the Father creates, nurtures, sustains. He creates anew, from nothing, heaven and earth; in Jesus, a new humanity; and eventually, from this heaven and earth, a new heaven and a new earth (cf. *Rev* 21:1-5).

Many groups fought the nature of God and Creation. What the Creed is telling us is that all things, whatever their nature, owe their origin and continued existence to God the Father.

We should probably end as we began “*Is he not your father who begot you, the one who made and established you?*” (*Deuteronomy* 32:6)

*“One does not hunt for God as if He were some sort of quarry such that when one finds God, one hides off in the shadows, furtively glancing and aiming with the hopes of capturing, subduing, devouring, and hanging on a wall in triumph; to find God is just the opposite: one exposes oneself to God – to be captured, subdued, and devoured – subduing one’s self and submitting like the lost sheep allowing God to find them and carry them home on His shoulders in triumph.”*

**Anonymous**