Phillip Cary
**The Nicene Creed: An Introduction**
Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2023, pp. 248, Logos Edition

Since it is the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, I have a delightful duty of preaching on the truths of the Nicene Creed to our local Baptist Church in Zadar. There are numerous ancient and modern authors whose works elucidate the Council and its Creed. In my study, I have drawn upon works by authors such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Philip Schaff, J. N. D. Kelly, and Dr. John Behr, which have proved invaluable in their own ways. Nevertheless, I lacked a volume that would serve as a running commentary, providing a starting point for my inquiry. *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction*, by Dr. Phillip Cary, a Professor of Philosophy at Eastern University in the USA, proved to be exactly the work that I needed. His book has seven chapters; two of them serve to introduce the Creed ("Introduction") and to help readers understand and explain the Trinity ("Epilogue"). Between these two book-end chapters, we find five chapters of an orderly exposition of the Nicene Creed.

"Introduction: The Historical Setting" tells a story of how one of the heads of the ancient Hydra was menacing the Church with its attacks upon the very person of Jesus Christ, her Lord and Savior, in the person of an Alexandrian presbyter called Arius, who said that "there was once when he [the Son] was not" (p. 1). And so, the emperor convened a council in AD 325 in a city of Nicaea, today's İznik in Turkey, to settle this issue and bring peace to the Church and his empire (p. 3). The council, later recognized as the First Ecumenical Council, produced a creed against this heresy, but the author explains that what we call "The Nicene Creed" today is actually an expanded version of this creed of the Council of Nicaea, which was "formulated at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and officially accepted as a statement of the Nicene faith at the Council of Chalcedon in 451" (p. 7). The author translated the Creed from the original Greek text to introduce it to us (p. 10). Since it would be too cumbersome and unnecessary to follow the author's commentary on the Creed in detail, my goal in this review is to revisit some of the more significant passages in the Creed and examine how the author has treated them, to better understand the nature of this volume.

Cary's work is both accessible and comprehensible in the way that it introduces us to the Nicene Creed. The author presents it as seen through the eyes of both ancient and modern interpreters, steering clear of both contemporary attempts to maintain Nicene orthodoxy through explanations that actually deny it and highly philosophical explanations of medieval scholasticism. This approach is consistent throughout all chapters, except in the last part of the chapter on the Holy Spirit, where, although still accessible, the commentary becomes more concise. This will be the only real criticism of this work. Let us therefore review some additional

important portions of Cary's volume to gain a sense of what it has to offer its readers.

In the chapter "Article 1: God the Father," Cary explains the identity of the Church's God and his works, which encompass the totality of both material and spiritual creation. He also points out that God did not create evil, as evil is the corruption of God's good creation. Although he does mention ancient religious and philosophical traditions that were at odds or similar to Christian monotheism, his explanations are simple and also replete with Biblical passages, which were in the back of the minds of the church fathers as they struggled to write a creed that would both defeat heresy and uphold biblical witness. The same is true in the two chapters on the Son of God, which deal with his existence before the incarnation ("Article 2, Part 1: The Eternal Son of God") and his existence as God-Man ("Article 2, Part 2: God Incarnate"). The author explained how "one Lord" pertaining to Christ is parallel to "one God" in the previous article, and that when the Creed calls Christ "Lord," it is "applying to him the sacred Name of the LORD, the God of Israel" (p. 40). He connects scriptural passages that show why this is so. Then commenting on the Son being "begotten of the Father before all ages," Cary points out in plain language both the apophatic nature of this description as well as its foundation in God's incomprehensibility and ineffability (p. 61), which is really necessary if we are to understand the Creed in the way that is congruent with its authors. In the portion of the chapter commenting on the Son as having "the same being [or essence] as the Father," the author's explanation of this phrase is to the point. Cary writes that, "The divine *ousia*, the being or essence of God, belongs equally to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but it originates with the Father, who bestows it entirely on the Son when he gives the Son his very being, and likewise on the Spirit..." (p. 85). Indeed, both Athanasius and Augustine would agree with the way he phrased it to the chagrin of some modern (re)interpreters of the Nicene Creed.

Between these two chapters on the Son of God, there is an "Excursus: The Word and Analogies" that is very helpful, as it warns us that we need to be careful in our illustrations of the Trinity, understanding that any creaturely analogies for God are "limited and imperfect" (p. 97). We can see the devotional aspect of this work when the author explains that the Son has become a human being because "love brought him down" (p. 105). He also accepts the mystery of Incarnation when he notices that God's Son came "in mortal flesh… to a place where he was already" because of his divine omnipresence (p. 108; quoting Augustine). Cary is also able to take into consideration doctrinal nuances, as seen when he explains that the Son, as an unchanging God, did not become human, but rather took up humanity (p. 123).

In the chapter on "Article 3: The Holy Spirit," the author explains that the original Creed of Nicaea concluded with the words "And in the Holy Spirit," indicating

that everything that follows was added by the First Council of Constantinople in AD 381. Cary is again both careful and accessible, as he explains in understandable terms the nuances of different Greek words used in the Creed, as well as the need to take these words carefully and not assign them the full meaning given to them afterwards in differing contexts. For example, we should not understand the word "person" in the sense that there are three "personalities" in God, because this would be tritheism. In other words, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are three Persons in a sense that should always be qualified with the explanation that they are only "one God, having one will and power and activity, as well as one essence" (p. 178). When discussing the Western addition to the Creed – [and from the Son], that is, the *filioque* clause – he is observant to both parties. Indeed, he writes that, together with most Western theologians, he agrees with the statement in its original, Augustine's meaning, where the Spirit proceeds from the Father and (through) the Son; nevertheless, "the Father is the source of all that is divine" (p. 187). On the other hand, he agrees with the Eastern church that this addition should not be in the Creed since no truly Ecumenical council has confirmed it.

In further discussion of the Nicene Creed's statement on the Church, Cary's treatment is shorter, allocating a paragraph or so to each of the statements about the Church, which results in a discussion that lacks the nuance and comprehensiveness of his preceding commentary. For example, according to the author, "catholic" means "universal" and "orthodox," which is the primary patristic understanding, but a footnote on the subsequent development of the term would enrich the work. Similarly, when explaining what it means that the church is apostolic, Cary gives a very one-sided understanding of the term: "Since the apostles' preaching, like the words of the prophets of old, now comes to us in holy Scripture, calling the church 'apostolic' is the Creed's way of saying it is biblical" (p. 197). In other words, even if it is true that most of today's evangelicals understand "apostolic" in this way, each church tradition (Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants) has its own way of understanding it in the context of its ecclesiological and hermeneutical commitments. Similarly, there is a lack of explanation regarding how different traditions understand the concept of "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins," an article of faith that is both controversial and rejected by several evangelical traditions. The author's final chapter, "Epilogue: The Trinity in Simple Terms," encourages readers to use Augustine's seven simple statements on the Trinity to answer different questions people might raise on the doctrine, without getting entangled in technicalities and attempting to unravel the mysteries of God's triunity.

Cary's book is not a definitive work on the Nicene Creed for those who want to research its theological and philosophical depths, and even some preachers will want more discussion on its history, protagonists, and meaning. Towards the end, it has shortcomings when discussing the Church and Baptism, possibly because

these truths were not a focus of the Church Fathers at the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). Having said that, I believe that *The Nicene Creed* will serve everyone, from an interested teenager to a college professor, as an excellent resource that will do exactly as its subtitle promises, give *An Introduction* to the Creed. And since it is the 1,700th anniversary of Nicaea, I heartily recommend that all my readers read this insightful book.

Miroslav Balint-Feudvarski