

The Nicene Line as Structural Principle for Christian Doctrine

FRED SANDERS  *

Abstract: Nicaea (both the 325 council and the creed that by 381 perfected its work) instantiates a structural principle for Christian doctrine, a principle called here the Nicene line. Its influence is evident in the main contours of doctrine, and it exerts continuing guidance for the teaching and research of individual theologians. The line that Nicaea draws is clearest in the second article of the Nicene Creed, which establishes the Son's particular filial identity with reference to his eternal relation to the Father before narrating his economic action of creation and of incarnation 'for us and our salvation'. Construing the events of the New Testament as the disclosure of divine sonship, Nicaea thus draws a line between God and creation, locating the blessed Trinity above the line precisely in order to describe the divine work of transformatively blessing creatures below the line. This principle is classically elaborated in pro-Nicene theologies (illustrated here by Theodoret of Cyrrhus), and is already evident in Scripture (illustrated here by the argument of Ephesians).

Introduction

John Webster once characterized the crucial turn in his theological development as a pivot from 'doctrinal criticism', in which the main scholarly task seemed to be 'critical dissection of one or another problematic bit' of Christian belief (followed if possible by some nimble reconstruction) to a kind of rigorous 'conceptual unfolding' or descriptive exposition of the principles of the faith. He implemented this decision 'to teach confessionally' in his classroom labors:

* Torrey Honors College, Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave, La Mirada, CA 90639, USA

I resolved to structure the content of my teaching in accordance with the intellectual and spiritual logic of the Christian confession as it finds expression in the classical creeds, to allow that structure to stand and to explicate itself, and not to press the material into some other format. Thus my survey of Christian doctrine was (and remains) simply a conceptual expansion of the Apostles' Creed as a guide to the Gospel that is set out in Holy Scripture. Once I resolved to work in this way, I quite quickly found that the substance and order of Christian doctrine displayed itself as much more grand, and much more comprehensible, than when I had approached it as a series of critical problems.¹

Beyond the classroom, Webster went on to recognize that the major task of writing constructive theology was 'to understand and think through the categories of classical dogmatics in their totality and their interrelations—to acquire a proper grasp of the architecture of dogmatics and to see its shape as the science of the Church's confession'.² Among other modulations of theological mood (some peculiar to Webster's location and project, but some of abiding value and highly transferable to other projects), the work of expositing the Christian creed meant exercising a preferential option for holism, for giving steady attention not to a series of isolated elements but to the main principles and overall structure of theology.

The programmatic intention to allow classic, creedal doctrine 'to stand and to explicate itself' does not necessarily dictate in advance that every faithful theological undertaking will have the same three-point outline, the same foreordained table of contents, or the same sequence of considerations taken up in traditional order. But a contemporary theology animated by the creedal impulse might instead do its work by abstracting the principles, tensions, dynamisms, and strategies of classic creeds rather than simply working down through the traditional elements *seriatim*. Such an indirect procedure might even underwrite greater fidelity to the creeds themselves. It offers a way for contemporary theologians to shift their habitual attention away from mere rehearsal of items on a list, without giving in to the temptation to let their theological attention simply wander away at large. Theologians today might instead let the substance of the Christian confession explicate itself by formulating and propagating the underlying forces that generated its patterns initially. Even when (as is nearly inevitable in traditional and conservatising agendas) the set of resulting theological topics continue to assert themselves in more or less the predictable dogmatic order, they will fall into those positions afresh, arranged with a deeper understanding and with greater theological self-awareness.

¹ John Webster, 'Discovering Dogmatics', in Darren C. Marks, ed., *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology* (Ashgate, 2002), pp. 130–1.

² Webster, 'Discovering Dogmatics', p. 133.

In what follows I attend to the most important of those underlying principles, called here the Nicene line. I argue that the Nicene Creed gives guidance for the work of Christian theology at the deepest level of significant form and therefore at the highest level of structural organization. Even more definitively than the Apostles' Creed,³ the Nicene Creed governs Christian doctrine and shapes the overall proportions of theology, because to a much greater extent than any earlier credal expression, Nicaea's polemical origin gave it a certain fully alert incisiveness. This Nicene impulse was impressively put in place already by the work of the Council of Nicaea in 325, such that even the briefer creed of 325 would serve quite well for the kind of exposition this essay undertakes. All the major conceptual moves are already epochally articulated there.⁴ But the formative impulse of 325 was perfected in the Nicene Creed of 381, which is the text that has achieved classic status in Christian history.

The argument here will not be about the consensual, conciliar, or confessional authority with which the creed can be wielded, nor about the claims it may have to our attentive docility or respect by virtue of its antiquity and history of influence. Rather, the goal of the present article is to display Nicaea's own material content in terms that highlight its effective presence throughout the Christian theological system.⁵ What follows is an indication of the coherence of the Christian theological system structured according to the internal conceptual power of the Nicene Creed and its conceptual line.

Prolog in heaven

The unique shaping power of the Nicene Creed may not be evident right on its surface, for three reasons. First, the creed is quite brief: only 75 words in Greek, rendered as about 139 in Latin, and usually around 215 in English.

³ Contrasting the Apostles' Creed to the Nicene foregrounds the one specific feature of the Nicene that is our concern here, but the two creeds are not in competition. For a recent exploration of their harmonious presence in theological tradition, see Khaled Anatolios, 'The Apostles' Creed in Light of Nicene Hermeneutics: A Program for Trinitarian Deification', in *The Creed and the Scriptures*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Nathan Eubank (Mohr Siebeck, 2024), pp. 141–52.

⁴ There are of course highly significant differences between the creeds of 325 and 381; for a recent discussion of them see Mark J. Edwards, 'The Creed', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 135–57. The present essay attends only to the continuities.

⁵ One advantage of bracketing authority questions and focusing on the creed's material content and structural dynamics is that the resulting portrayal may be persuasive to Christians whose ecclesial settings do not routinely appeal to credal traditioning. A vast number of Pentecostal congregations around the world, and some free church traditions, are included among these groups who may be formally non-creedal but materially open to agreement.

That is a short document; hardly an elaborate confession or a detailed catalog. Second, the creed contains nearly nothing novel, being almost entirely composed of words and phrases taken directly from Scripture (the single word *homoousios* is the most famous exception). Third, the outline of the Nicene Creed is not even unique as a creed: it transmits and perpetuates an order of elements already widely found in numerous earlier confessional statements. It follows a triadic Father-Son-Spirit structure (originally from the dominical speech of Matt 28:19) found in various local baptismal confessions; this triadic structure is centered on a disproportionately large second article rehearsing major events from the life of Jesus. Even the selection of events in that second, Christological article tracks closely with the selection of events picked out by the Apostles' Creed. Out of all the events reported by the Gospels, both creeds name the conception or birth of Christ, then leap forward over his active ministry to the climactic events of his life: He was 'crucified for our sake under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and is coming again with glory to judge the living and the dead'.⁶ None of this is unique to Nicaea. It is a brief document that retails biblical material in an already traditional order.⁷

Where the Nicene Creed asserts its unique profile, however, is in what it alone says about the Son before it begins this narrative summary of the Gospels. Nicaea affirms that the Son 'was begotten from the Father before all ages' and that this same one 'came down from the heavens, and became incarnate ... and became human'. This 'prolog in heaven'⁸ appears almost as a kind of story behind the story. Where the Apostles' Creed moves directly from a cluster of Christological titles ('Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord') into the Gospel events ('who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary'), the Nicene Creed instead inserts, as a kind of bridge between

⁶ I will quote the Nicene Creed from Mark DelCogliano's translation, *The Creed of the Council of Constantinople (381)*, found in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings, Vol I: God*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 268–9.

⁷ Perhaps the intentional lack of novelty in the Nicene Creed has contributed to the way popular histories often exaggerate the importance of the word *homoousios*. The presupposition may be that since it was the only new thing in the Nicene Creed, it must explain the Creed's powerful effects. Without discounting the strategic importance of *homoousios*, however, we can recognize that such accounts foreshorten the Creed's structure drastically. By attending to the larger dynamics shaping the rest of the creed, we can do better justice even to the effectiveness of deploying *homoousios* within it.

⁸ 'Prolog im Himmel' is the title of the opening section of Goethe's *Faust*, itself alluding to the dramatic framing of the book of Job. The Nicene Creed, however, envisions an infinitely greater transcendence than the angelic court of Goethe or even Job.

Christological titles and economic events, this account of the Son's eternal origin ('begotten from the Father before all ages') and descent ('came down from the heavens'), along with some more theological terms for the distinction between his former and latter spheres of action ('became incarnate ... and became human').

None of the Nicene Creed's bridge material is quite detailed enough to risk sounding mythological. It is not as if the Creed narrates a series of adventures that the Son engaged in, in some distant time or place prior to the economic ministry which is the obvious focal point of the Creed's instruction. The Creed is considerably more restrained than that. In fact, the preexistence clauses of the Nicene Creed's second article can hardly be said to narrate activities at all; they rather report a status, or limn an identity. To speak carefully, we would not call it a story behind the story but rather an elaborate identification of the transcendent identity of the one who will be the central agent of the story. The Apostles' Creed already identified that agent by titles (Jesus, Christ, Son, Lord) and then immediately launched into the Gospels story. The Nicene Creed says considerably more about that agent, and does so precisely by elaborately expanding the title 'Son'. The identifying move is not mythological in structure.⁹ Nevertheless, by contrast with the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed certainly goes out of its way to say something about the pre-existent Son's life before, or above, or beyond his effective presence among us as the sent and incarnated savior. That transcendent life is one in which he is 'begotten from the Father' and 'the same-in-substance with the Father'.

Saying anything about the life that the Son of God shared monogenetically and consubstantially with the Father 'before all ages' effectively establishes a strongly unique conceptual zone in which Father and Son coexist. This is the context in which Nicaea sets forth what we can call the Nicene line, a line distinguishing between that supreme life of God above and the existence of everything else below. Nicaea draws this line most clearly here in the second article, which was elaborated in the fourth-century conflict with Arian proposals. That struggle with Arianism also led Nicaea to consider carefully where the line should be drawn most instructively. Nicaea's answer was to inscribe it not just within soteriology (that is, within the economy in the narrow sense of the Lord Jesus Christ's incarnate ministry) but somewhat

⁹ The gold standard for mythologizing in the western theological and philosophical tradition was set by Homer's narrative cutaways to events in Olympus in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, along with Hesiod's divine origin stories in his *Theogony*. But these primitive myths were powerfully present in later centuries (see Richard Hunter, *The Measure of Homer: The Ancient Reception of the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)), and proved capable of sophisticated philosophical elaboration by Hellenistic thinkers like Proclus. See Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonic Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (University of California Press, 1986).

earlier, as an aspect of the newly clarified creator-creature distinction. The Son is

begotten, not made,
the same-in-substance with the Father,
through whom all things came to be,
who for us humans and for our salvation.
came down from the heavens...

The creed inserts the theological claim about the filial mediation of creation here first, before introducing the theme of the Son's economic sending. The Nicene line interposes itself precisely as this frontier, and from here governs our understanding of the creed's Christology. There is a 'down' established, into which it can now be said that the Son descended, 'came down'. The claim that 'all things came to be' through him must be understood in connection with the claim that the Son himself is 'begotten, not made'. That claim that the Son is uncreated has priority, and exerts its priority both in terms of the order of exposition and, as it happens, in terms of ontology. The Son belongs first of all within the account of *theologia*, the nature of God, rather than only appearing later in the account of *oikonomia*, the outer work of God. The entire economy of salvation is assigned a purpose through the deployment of the clause 'for us and our salvation', a very important element of the Creed's structure. But the Nicene line itself is not simply or exhaustively the line between Christ's preexistent divinity and his incarnation. Instead, the Creed carefully draws the line at creation itself, establishing the conditions for a rightly ordered recognition of the sphere in which the economy of salvation obtains. There is not much verbiage or attention given in the Nicene Creed to the doctrine of creation proper, because the focal point is the Son's identity. That identity is the central focus, which uncreatedness serves to highlight.

The region of deity

The centrality of the Son's identity is worth emphasizing here; this strictly and the properly Christological question is the bright center around which everything else comes eventually into focus. Histories of doctrine sometimes exposit the anti-Arian dynamic of Nicaea as if the deliberations started with a clear line between God and the world, the world being explicated in terms of creation from nothing. On that account, the decision to reject Arianism would be the decision to locate the Son above the line. But that framing centers cosmology more than is warranted conceptually, and more than was the case historically. In fact the Son's divine identity is the first point of clarity in Nicene exposition, and that identity is worked out with reference to the Father-Son relation rather than the God-world relation. The Father-centered identity of the Son is clearer and more elaborate in Nicaea than the creator-creature distinction. The Christology is more thematically explicit than the cosmology, and the cosmology comes into

sharper focus not out of any independent interest in cosmological concerns, but only to accommodate the Christology of the preexistent creator Son.¹⁰ It is not so much the case that Nicaea sorted the Son into a preexisting zone above the line, as that the Son's identity projected and focused the line, snapping the two zones into place around him.

We could imagine other theological projects that might begin with cosmological concerns, asking and answering questions about the world and its divine source. Some of the early apologists undertook such explanations well before Nicaea, evoking Aristotelian and Stoic themes in setting forth a theology in which the Logos of John's prolog stood behind the rational structure of the cosmos.¹¹ There is nothing illegitimate about theologizing in this way. But the Nicene Creed's judgments are not about something between God and the world so much as they are about something between the Father and salvation. We have to reckon with a Father-centered account of the Son's identity. The Creed confesses the deity of the Son not by looking down on creation but up to the Father as the source of all. It stakes the Son's identity not mainly on contrast with the world but on coordination with the Father, the one to whom the Son is proper. The deity of the Son cannot be measured by things below but only by the divine measure itself.

It would be possible to trace the shaping power of the Nicene line in any number of influential Christian texts. After its classic delineation in the Nicene Creed it becomes a prominent feature of the full range of pro-Nicene theologies throughout Christian antiquity. The Cappadocians and Augustine are obvious authorities to whom appeal is frequently and justly made. But it may be more instructive to take up a less famous document from the early fifth century, because calling a relatively minor witness helps indicate how pervasive the structural principle became. That minor witness is Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393–457), whose brief *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*¹² makes especially instructive use of the

¹⁰ Georges Florovsky, 'St. Athanasius' Concept of Creation', *Collected Works IV* (Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 39–62. See also Paul Gavriluk, 'Creation in Early Christian Polemical Literature: Irenaeus Against the Gnostics and Athanasius Against the Arians', *Modern Theology* 29 (April 2013), pp. 22–32.

¹¹ For a sympathetic but ultimately critical account of those projects, see T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹² The *Exposition* was somehow attributed very early to Justin Martyr, and down into the period of the Protestant Scholastics it was still frequently cited as Justin's by authors like Zanchi and Polanus. By the time of Migne this attribution was known to be false, so the work is included in the *Patrologia Graecae* as an appendix along with other Justin spuria: *Patrologiae Graecae* 6 (1857), columns 1207–40. Only in the twentieth century was it identified as Theodoret's work; see R.V. Sellers, 'Pseudo-Justin's *Expositio rectae fidei*: A Work of Theodoret of Cyrus', *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1945), pp. 145–60. The work itself has been influential even pseudonymously and anonymously. Its restoration to Theodoret is now an important factor in an ongoing reconsideration of Theodoret's overall theological contribution. See István Pásztori-Kupán, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (Routledge, 2006).

Nicene line. The *Exposition* covers the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation in about 8000 words (17 columns of Migne), undertaking to explain the true Christian confession at more than an introductory level. Theodoret's goal is to enable teachers to distinguish between 'mere glorification of the Father and the Son' on the one hand and actual 'sound confession' on the other hand. Its presentation of doctrine is designed to help identify those who may be able to join in 'hymning the Father and the Son' but who are not 'offering worship in the true sense' leading to 'a pure comprehension of the truth'.¹³ The *Exposition's* tone is something more than catechetical, or perhaps it is better to identify it as a kind of higher catechism designed for teaching teachers.¹⁴ In this way, the *Exposition* aligns very well with the Nicene Creed, which was from its origin was more of a creed by bishops for bishops, rather than a baptismal confession of faith.

Theodoret begins by affirming the single divine essence and then distinguishing the persons, relating the Son and Spirit to the Father respectively in terms of their begetting and proceeding. Essence (*ousia*) designates, for Theodoret as for the Cappadocians before him, that which is common in the Godhead (*theotētos*), while what is distinct he designates as *tēs huparxeōs tropoi*.¹⁵ 'As a result, unbegottenness, begottenness, and procession are not revelatory of substance, but are indicative of the hypostases. For it suffices for us to distinguish the persons and to point individually to the hypostasis of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit'.¹⁶ Only after this rehearsal of Trinitarian relations of origin does Theodoret turn his attention to the creator-creature distinction. When he does so, it is with the confidence of a metaphysical cartographer: 'And let us first of all make a distinction between beings. For we will find everything divided into the [categories of] created and uncreated. If a thing has a place among beings, its nature is either uncreated or created'.¹⁷

Given this division of the possible regions of being, and with the pointed exclusion of a middle region, Theodoret examines the scriptures 'to see how they teach us to rank the Son and the Spirit together'.¹⁸ He canvasses for the passages that contain impressive catalogs or, or comprehensive statements about, all

¹³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, introduction and translation by Vasilije Vranic, revised and edited by Mark DeCogliano, in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings, volume 3: Christ: Through the Nestorian Controversy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 535–55; at 537. When I supply Greek terms, I draw them from Migne.

¹⁴ This is admittedly conjectural; Vranic and DeCogliano call it just 'a pedagogical work' (DeCogliano, *Exposition*, 536). For a very full account of the *Exposition's* context and contents, see Vasilije Vranic, *The Constancy and Development in the Christology of Theodoret of Cyrrhus* (Brill, 2015), pp. 73–128.

¹⁵ Theodoret, *Exposition*, p. 538. For the way Theodoret skillfully uses key pro-Nicene terminology, see Vasilije Vranic, 'The Cappadocian Theological Lexis in the *Expositio rectae fidei* of Theodoret of Cyrrhus', *Philotheos* 14 (2014), pp. 131–9.

¹⁶ Theodoret, *Exposition*, p. 539.

¹⁷ Theodoret, *Exposition*, p. 539. 'Nature...uncreated' is *aktistos phusis*.

¹⁸ Theodoret, *Exposition*, p. 540.

creatures in heaven and earth. In passages like Psalm 148 ('a hymn to God on behalf of the entire creation') and Romans 8:38–39, Theodoret points out that the Son and the Spirit are not to be found listed among the things which have been created. Rather, we find creation all on one side, and the two persons constantly ranked with the Father as his own proper Son and Spirit. In Romans 8, after Paul 'enumerated the world, life, death, angels, powers, and rulers, things present and things to come, height and depth, he found nothing left in the created nature ... and he concludes his statement by adding a hyperbole, when he introduces "anything else in all creation."' ¹⁹ The conclusion, for Theodoret, is obvious: 'If we have shown extensively that the Son and the Spirit are different from creation because they cannot be numbered with anything created but are conjoined to the Father everywhere, what utter folly would it be not to consider them to belong to the uncreated substance!' ²⁰ With its delineation of a region of deity, its assigning of all creatures to a different region, and its insistence on assimilating the Son and the Spirit to the homeland of the Father by nature, Theodoret's *Exposition* is a classic example of a theological project structured by the Nicene line. ²¹

The Nicene Creed itself draws this characteristic line most clearly and explicitly in the second, Christological article, but on this basis the line can be discerned also in the first and third articles, though with admittedly less precision. The first article identifies 'one God, Father, almighty, maker of heaven and earth'. The titles 'God' and 'Father' seem to be predicated of the divinity as such. We might recognize between 'God' and 'Father' a distinction between absolute and common predication, with 'God' indicating what is common to the persons and 'Father' immediately specifying what is proper. 'Maker of heaven and earth', on the other hand, seems to mark a turn to God's outward action toward the cosmos. If it were not followed by the clearer deliberations of the second article, the line here might be too vague to attract any attention. But in context, it functions as an opening orientation that at least establishes the agent before describing the action.

Similarly, in the third article we hear of 'the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with Father and Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets'. The cluster of pneumatological titles ('Holy Spirit, the Lord' and 'giver of life') is combined with the claim that the Spirit 'proceeds from the Father', which is Nicene language indicating an eternal spiration that correlates with the Son's eternal generation. 'Lifegiver' (*zōopoion*)

¹⁹ Theodoret, *Exposition*, p. 540.

²⁰ Theodoret, *Exposition*, p. 543.

²¹ Some advocates for an 'early high Christology' in the New Testament have focused on elevating the Son to divine status in isolation, invoking the criteria of monotheism and appealing to markers of divine identity. As Wesley Hill has argued, this direct route to deity bypasses important categories like relation and person. The pro-Nicene strategy, by contrast, attends first to the personal relation of Son to Father. See Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Eerdmans, 2015).

is a resonant title which probably cannot be located without remainder above or below the Nicene line. It may already include a glimpse across the line into the Spirit's creating work, at least for the creation of humanity: in the beginning the Lord breathed life into Adam (Gen 2:7). This creational interpretation is attractive because it aligns the third person as a source along with the first person who is 'maker of heaven and earth' and the second person 'through whom all things came to be'. But 'giver of life' may instead indicate not biological life but the spiritual life imparted to believers in particular. Either way, if Nicaea envisions this lifegiving as outward action toward creatures, then the Nicene line is to be drawn here between the Spirit's identity as 'Lord' and his work as 'giver of life'. But if so, then the sequence of the exposition would cross back over into the eternal procession of the Spirit ('who proceeds from the Father') and from there to his rightful worship and glorification (an economic response from creatures to the Spirit himself). On the other hand, 'giver of life' might be interpreted as a pneumatological title that remains above the Nicene line. It might characterize the Spirit's vivifying power as the divine breath immanently indwelling the living God. In this case, the Spirit's outward work would not be introduced until we are told that he 'has spoken through the prophets'. The point is that the Nicene line, drawn sharply and decisively in the second article, is present but less clearly in the rest of the Creed.

The disclosure of Sonship

The Nicene line, the 'prologue in heaven', and the region of divinity are important for establishing order among the elements of Christian theology. But in the Nicene Creed itself, these maneuvers are largely formal when compared to the main substantive concern, which is to present the person of the Son. The New Testament teaches that in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son (Gal 4:4; Heb 1:1–3), disclosing his eternal identity as Son in his very act of bringing about salvation. The Nicene Creed responds to this manifestation of the Son by codifying it in a confession of faith centered on the Son's identity.

The Creed confesses belief in 'one Lord, Jesus Christ' using all these titles, but above all by calling him 'the Son of God', a title to which it devotes its most focused analysis. Clarifying and specifying what it means to call Jesus the Son is the task at the heart of Nicaea. Indeed, as soon as the Creed deploys the title 'Son', it engages in no less than a ninefold exposition of the meaning of this sonship. Following the exact Greek word order,²² we can see the unfolding confession that he is the Son of God in these ways:

²² Most English translations rearrange this sequence from the Greek order 'Son – the only begotten – from the Father – begotten – before all ages' to 'the only begotten – Son – begotten – from the Father – before all ages'. The result certainly flows better in English, but it obscures the orderly unfolding of the specifications.

1. the only begotten [*ton Monogenē*], who was
2. from the Father
3. begotten [*gennēthenta*]
4. before all ages,
5. light from light,
6. true God from true God,
7. begotten [*gennēthenta*], not made,
8. the same-in-substance [*homoousion*] with the Father,
9. through whom all things came to be.

The first four specifications are a tight cluster that together give a deepening account of the Son's eternal generation. He is '*ton monogenē*', a word borrowed from the Johannine writings (John 1:14; 1:18; 3:16; 3:18; 1 John 4:9), and deployed here as a Christological title: The One who is Only-Begotten. This one's origin is 'from the Father' precisely by way of being 'begotten' (*gennēthenta*)²³ and that 'before all ages'. The idea of Sonship thus unfolds: Son, by which we mean uniquely begotten, by which we mean from the Father, which is to say begotten, eternally. Syntactically the conceptual elaboration moves from noun ('Son') through the complex adjectival title (*monogenē*) to the verb, 'begotten'. As the noun 'Son' gives way to the verb 'begotten', Nicaea faces the urgent question of how to characterize the action indicated by the verb. If we use a verb, are we on the brink of telling a story? Is the Son about to be revealed as the subject of a theogonic mythological narrative? Was the Son begotten at a certain place, and at a certain time?

No and no are the Creed's implied answers. As for the place of his begetting, the Creed declines to comment and instead offers the prepositional phrase, 'from the Father'. The Father is of course a person rather than a place, so to identify the Son as having his origin from the Father is to say he is related to a personal principle, comprehensively and exhaustively. His origin from the Father completely accounts for his identity. 'From the Father begotten' refers the Son to this personal source, and 'the Father' stands out as the sole origin, the one to whom alone 'the Son' is necessarily correlated.

As for the time of his begetting, the Creed answers this implicit question with an explicit paradox: 'Before all ages'. Any statement about an action taking place 'before' something else might have the appearance of being a time statement. But 'before all ages' rather relativizes time itself. It treats the entire phenomenon of temporal sequence as a reality that can have another reality

²³ By using both *monogenē* and *gennēthenta* of the same person, the Nicene Creed seems to leap over the often-disputed difference between the verbs *gennaō*/*gignomai* and *gennaō*. At least it identifies both as characterizing the Son. For the rationale behind rendering *monogenēs* as "only begotten" even in its New Testament usage, see Charles Lee Irons, 'A Lexical Defense of the Johannine "Only-Begotten"', in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017), pp. 98–116.

already before it. Before the eons, there was a begetting. The implication is that there is not a single one of the eons in which this begetting took place. The Son was begotten before the entire sequence, in a fashion that must be not just an ordinally prior eon, but qualitatively transcendent over them. This formula, famously shaped by anti-Arian polemic, says that there was no time when the begotten Son was not.

In this first quartet of specifications (*ton Monogenē*, begotten, from the Father, before all ages), the Nicene Creed has already achieved a fairly comprehensive exposition of the Son's identity. But it presses on with a double deployment of 'X from X' formulas.²⁴ The Son is 'light from light' and 'true God from true God'. By invoking the biblical imagery of light, the Creed is speaking in more poetic idiom than it has so far. Theodoret is sensitive to the imagery's effectiveness, and lists three different doctrinal conclusions that can be drawn from the confession that the Son is light from light:

For the image suffices to communicate their co-eternity, their identity of substance, and the passionlessness of the begetting. After all, if he has shone forth, he has coexisted timelessly with the one who caused him to shine forth. By what interval of time could the shining of light have been disrupted? And if light is from light, it would reveal the same [light] as that of the one from which it has been begotten. And again, if the light was also that which was begotten, the begetting would also be passionless. For the shining of light happens through neither cutting nor flowing nor division, but it comes forth in a passionless manner from the substance itself.²⁵

Having begun in the register of light, the Creed now continues in the register of essence: Light from light can be restated as true God from true God. The 'from' relation is a simple tool that does the complex work of distinguishing person from person within a common essence. An X from X formula is a structure for reducing all of this to a kind of algebraic form. It is a structure so elegant that any number of appropriate variables could be inserted into it and the doctrinal point would be equally clear. In fact, throughout the fourth century a number of theologians produced variations on it: 'God from God, whole from whole, sole from sole, perfect from perfect, king from king, Lord from Lord', and so on.²⁶

It is only at this point that the Creed brings in creation as a contrast term. Having set forth the nature of the Son's eternal generation from the

²⁴ The Creed of Nicaea (325) had a triad of X from X formulas: 'God from God, light from light, true God from true God'. The Nicene Creed (381) in Greek dropped the first formula, but the Latin tradition has restored it. See Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (De Gruyter, 2024) p. 616.

²⁵ Theodoret, *Exposition*, 545.

²⁶ Michel Rene Barnes, *The Power of God: Dynamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), pp. 119–24.

Father, it now clarifies that generation by contrasting it with creation. To be created is to come forth from God in a way that is infinitely and qualitatively different from being begotten. The Nicene Creed rather tersely sums this up by saying the Son is ‘begotten, not made’. After insisting on the difference between making and begetting, the Creed finally brandishes what became the famous watchword of pro-Nicene theology, *homoousios*: the Son is ‘the same-in-substance with the Father’. It does in fact function as a point of coalescence in Nicaea’s definition of what kind of sonship the Son has, though of course it must be preceded by the unfolding of the logic of eternal generation. Having reached this high point, the Nicene Creed concludes its series of Son-specifications with its ninth claim, that the Son is the one ‘through whom all things came to be’. It is an important claim about the Son’s status as the creator. But within the Creed’s structure, it marks the transition from expounding his eternal identity in the region of deity to narrating his outward work in the economy of creation and salvation. The second article of the Creed now turns from the Son’s being *ad intra* to the Son’s work *ad extra*. His eternal generation and consubstantiality belong to what the church fathers called *theologia*, while his work in creation, especially his descent “for us and our salvation,” belongs to the *oikonomia*. Precisely here the Nicene line is inscribed. Taken as a hermeneutical protocol, the Nicene Creed construes the New Testament as the disclosure of the Son. This construal is what gives the Creed its dogmatic force, the force that shapes Christian doctrine and guides theological reasoning in its central task.

Measureless proportion

The Nicene line between *theologia* and *oikonomia* governs not only the Christian doctrine of God but also God’s relation to the world, and does so in a way that especially raises the question of the significance of salvation history. The relation between these two domains has been not just a disputed question but a rather sprawling and densely networked set of such questions in the systematic theology of recent decades, surfacing especially in theological method and in trinitarian theology. Jared Michelson has recently offered a helpful typology of different positions on theology and economy, sorting major figures according to whether they affirm, following Barth at various removes, that ‘the “form” in which God reveals Godself in the person of Jesus somewhat isomorphically corresponds to God in Godself’.²⁷ The relation of God to creation, and of theology to economy, hangs in the balance of this more or less isomorphic correspondence. In our evocation of the Nicene line, we have focused on a careful reading of the Creed’s dynamics and its ongoing

²⁷ Jared Michelson, ‘Theology and Economy “After” Barth’, *Modern Theology* 40 (July 2024), pp. 600–25; at p. 600.

effects, but have not staked out a position that would determine all of these disputes in advance. In their contemporary form, each of them is detailed and many of them are vexed.²⁸ But if the particular account of the Nicene line given here is correct, there we must recognize a considerable interval between theology and economy. With what proportion are theology and economy related across that conceptual interval?

The New Testament book of Ephesians, which in any case is a source for Nicene thought and an excellent specimen of the apostolic way of teaching the Nicene line before Nicaea, works with a profound sense of the proportionality between God and salvation. The epistle's opening gambit is an elaborate doxology (1:3–14) in which readers are summoned to bless the God who has blessed them (1:3). Balanced on the fulcrum of the same repeated word, *eulogetos*, the relation between divine action and human response swings immediately into view. We are to bless God correspondingly and appropriately, according to the measure with which he has blessed us. The long sequence of blessings running through 1:3–14 includes election, adoption, redemption, and sealing. The letter's doxological rehearsal of these divine actions enshrines the content of God's work within the words of human response. And indeed, the God who we bless is the God who is always already blessed in himself. Ephesians has a lively awareness that God is so full that nothing can be given to him; rather he is 'rich (*plousios*) in mercy' (2:4), gives from 'the riches of his inheritance' (1:18); will display 'immeasurable riches' of grace (2:7); and in general has 'unsearchable riches' (3:8). This is the God who is to be given praise because of what he has given to us. God's own beatitude, the blessedness which is a divine perfection, looms above the blessing of Ephesians 1. It establishes Ephesians as a meditation on soteriological correspondence to a measureless God.

From this doxological beginning, the epistle develops a running theme of measure, proportion, and correspondence. Paul prays for his readers to be given 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation' so that they 'may perceive...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power' (1:17–19). Astonishingly, that 'power for us' is indexed to the power of Christ's own resurrection and ascension, a power that has placed him above all other powers. Ephesians registers the disproportionality between the unbounded power of God in the resurrection and our participation in it. Only by another miracle can his readers "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge," an apparent contradiction in terms followed immediately by another: 'so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (3:19). Not shrinking from the Ephesians idiom of excess and abundance, Paul commits his teaching 'to him who by the power at work

²⁸ A fault line well worth attending to is the parting of the ways signaled by Bruce Marshall, 'Karl Barth: A Catholic Appraisal', *Pro Ecclesia* 31 (November 2022), pp. 504–20, along with the substantial critical responses to him in that journal and then his surrejoinder, 'Reasons to Say Farewell', *Pro Ecclesia* 31 (2022), pp. 569–84.

within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine' (3:20).

The second half of Ephesians turns to paraenesis, but even here the tone hardly becomes more reserved, and the fascination with impossible proportionality continues in an ethical mode. Believers are exhorted 'to walk in a manner worthy of the calling' with which God has called them (4:1); here 'worthy' is itself a correspondence word, *axios*. Their empowerment for ministry is sourced in 'grace according to the measure of Christ's gift' (4:7) and completed when the community attains 'the measure of the full stature of Christ' (4:13). The overall ethical framework is characteristically concerned with correspondence to God: the new self is 'created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (4:24); believers are to 'be kind to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (4:32); and even to be 'imitators of God, as beloved children' (5:1) and to 'walk in love, as Christ loved us' (5:2). If this Christian conduct is strictly isomorphic to grace or the God of grace, it is an unbearable burden. And yet Ephesians is insistent that believers God's workmanship (2:10) who by grace will walk in some sense worthily, *axios*.

It is crucial to remember that between the high view of God's blessed fullness on the one hand and Christian behavior on the other, Ephesians sets in place the New Testament's most comprehensive and sustained reflection on what it means for God to have enacted the economy of salvation as an unfolding mystery. In fact, Christian usage of the term economy in a theological sense, from Irenaeus down to the present, is based largely on the highly significant occurrence of the word *oikonomia* at 1:10 ('plan', NRSV). Similarly, Ephesians has pondered the apparent surprise of Gentile inclusion and has traced it all the way back into God: Paul proclaims 'what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things' (3:9). God and the plan of salvation, theology and economy, are somehow aligned here, but how?

The Ephesians vision of measureless proportion, of correspondence to an incommensurable divine reality, can hardly be described as mere isomorphism. The blessed God in whom salvation is grounded necessarily exceeds the measure of human salvation and of the created world within which salvation takes place. We have traced the Nicene line in its clearest expression in the Creed itself, and have considered the way it dictates a relatively well-ordered arrangement of doctrine, centered on the manifestation of the Son. The aseity of God stands on one side of it, and the incarnate one's death and resurrection 'for us and our salvation' stand on the other. It is admirably tidy and conducive to sound doctrine; it preempts a horde of theological woes. When we turn to Ephesians, we can still trace the Nicene line, or rather the primal expressions in divinely inspired text of what will be worked out as the Nicene line under the pressures of heterodoxy. But Ephesians sets it before us under the sign of mystery, in the language of abundance and excess, filled to overflowing with praise for the God who has given himself to us with a lavishness that corresponds not so much to

our need as to his inherent fullness. The Nicene line does run through Ephesians, but in the idiom of wonder. ‘Let us praise, then, through theology and *oikonomia* the one who made known to us the hidden mystery, and preparing ourselves [to be] temples for God by the purity of our life, let us accept him to dwell within us’.²⁹

²⁹ Theodoret, ‘On the Inhumanation of the Lord’, in István Pásztori-Kupán, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (Routledge, 2006), p. 171.