

The Assembly/Executive Commission has approved this proposal for its study, use and comment and has called for comments to be sent to the Convenor of the Confessions Task Team – July 2013

Proposed English Translation of the Nicene Creed

[For rationales for the details of this translation see the endnotes below it.]

We believe in one God, the Father,
ruler over all things,¹
maker of heaven and earth,
²all that is, seen and unseen;
And³ in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten⁴ Son of God,
eternally⁵ begotten from the Father,
⁶Light from Light, very God from very God⁷,
begotten not made,
of the same being as the Father,⁸
through whom all things came to exist⁹
and¹⁰ who for us human beings¹¹ and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit from¹² the Virgin Mary
and became a human being¹³,
was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,
suffered death¹⁴ and was buried,
and rose on the third day according to the Scriptures,
ascended to heaven,
sits on the right hand of the Father
and will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his reign¹⁵ will have no end¹⁶;
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life,

who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]¹⁷,
 who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son,¹⁸
 who spoke¹⁹ through the prophets;
 and²⁰ in one holy catholic²¹ and apostolic Church.

We confess one baptism for the remission of sins;
 we await the resurrection of the dead
 and the life of the age to come.

Endnotes to the English translation

¹ Whether this line should read “the Almighty” or “ruler of all things” or “ruler over all things” is perhaps the most debatable question in the proposed translation. The Greek word is *pantokratōr*. This is a noun, not an adjective as in the traditional English version. ICET therefore translated it as “the almighty”, and ELLC as “the Almighty”. It is derived from the Greek words *kratos*, which means “force, strength, might, power” or the “supremacy” that power confers. In the Septuagint it translates the Hebrew words *Yahweh Sebhāōth* and *El Shaddai*, the divine titles translated into English as “the LORD of hosts” and “God almighty”. The “hosts” were first “the battle array of Israel” and later, in the prophets, the heavenly hosts, i.e. “the angels and stars as God’s army”. *Shaddai* probably originally meant “mountain”, used as a metaphor for might and majesty. *El Shaddai*, according to Ex. 6:3 (cf. Gen. 17:1, 35:11), is the name by which God revealed himself to the patriarchs. In the New Testament *pantokratōr* occurs in II Cor. 6:18 and in Rev. 1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6, 21:22, 16:14, 19:15, where it is linked with God’s sovereignty. W. Michaelis in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. 3, p.914f. and n.) comments: “The conventional character of *pantokratōr* in the New Testament and the paucity of instances, makes it likely that the adoption of the term in the creed was determined more by OT than by NT usage.” He adds that the word refers “not so much to God’s activity in creation as to His supremacy over all things.... That the addition [in the Creed] of ‘Creator of heaven and earth’ was...felt to be necessary shows that the specific ref. of *pantokratōr* itself is not to God’s power as Creator.” J. Burnaby comments:

The central idea of Biblical religion is not of “omnipotence” as an attribute of God, but of his sovereignty, his rule in action. The kingdom of God is his rule, the government which he exercises in the world. For the prophets, the rule of God means that the history of mankind...is in reality controlled throughout by the will and purpose of God. (*The Belief of Christendom*, p.28)

This means that a more nuanced or precise translation of the Greek noun than “the Almighty”, which derives from the Latin *omnipotentem*, is “ruler (or Ruler) of/over all things”. This conveys a more dynamic and active meaning than the more static term “omnipotent” or “almighty” and makes the point that God’s authority extends over every area of life—a point that Reformed theology and ethics emphasize—rather than stressing just God’s power. The Task Team proposes “ruler over all” because it is slightly looser than “ruler of all”. (Cf. the Confession of Faith, Art. 14.1: “God loves the world and has always ultimately ruled over it and its history, even if in a hidden way.”)

² The Greek has the light conjunction *te* here, but this is probably intended as expegetical.

³ In accordance with the Greek original and Pickstock’s main argument, “We believe” is stated once, at the beginning of the Creed, and (in contrast with the modern English translations of the Creed) not repeated at the beginning of the second and third paragraphs. In the Greek the non-repetition of *pisteuomen* (“We believe”) is facilitated by the fact that the whole of the second paragraph and the first part of the third run on without any full stop. We have copied this, using commas and conjunctions and between the three main sections only semicolons.

⁴ The word in the Greek text is *monogenēs*. Its use in the Creed harks back to Jn. 1:14,18, 3:16,18, I Jn. 4:9. It is a compound adjective from *monos* (“only, single”) and *genos* (“kind, sort”), and elsewhere in the New Testament means simply “only” (Lk. 7:12, 8:42, 9:38, Heb. 11:17). But the Johannine literature uses it of Jesus alone, and there is some question whether it does so with the close but heightened meaning “only-begotten”. The following should be noted:

- Jerome translated *monogenēs* as *unigenitus* (“only-begotten”) in the Johannine texts in the Vulgate, but did so with anti-Arian motives;
- the KJV followed the Vg in translating the term as “only begotten Son” in the Johannine texts, which made it the traditional English translation;
- modern translations like the RSV, NRSV, NIV and REB, however, favour “only Son”;
- The standard *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1979), p.527, states: “The meanings *only, unique* may be quite adequate for all its occurrences” in the Johannine literature as well as elsewhere in the New Testament.

- C.H. Dodd maintains more categorically that at any rate when the Gospel and the Johannine letters were written in the 1st century *monogenēs* meant “alone of his/its kind, unique”. He distinguishes it from *monogennētos* (“only-begotten”, from *monos* + *gennētos*, “born, begotten”)—which does not occur in the New Testament (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, London: CUP, 1968, p.305n.).
- R.E. Brown likewise states, “Although *genos* is distantly related to *gennan*, ‘to beget,’ there is little Greek justification for the translation of *monogenēs* as ‘only begotten’” in the Gospel (*The Gospel according to John*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), vol. 1, p.13).
- On the other hand W. Bauer in his *commentary* on Jn. regards *monogenēs* as already in Jn. and I Jn having the somewhat heightened meaning “only-begotten” (or possibly “begotten of the Only One”) in view of Jn. 1:13 with its emphasis on *gennasthae ek theou* (see W. Bauer *et al.*: *Greek-English Lexicon*, p.527).
- F. Büchsel in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol.4, p.736-741) specifies the word as having two meanings: “only, unique” and “of sole descent, only-begotten”. He states:

It is not wholly clear whether *monogenēs* in Jn. denotes also the birth or begetting from God; it probably does. Jn. calls Jesus *ho gennētheis ek tou theou*, 1 Jn. 5:18. Though many will not accept this, he here understands the concept of sonship in terms of begetting. For him to be the Son of God is not just to be the recipient of God's love. It is to be begotten of God. This is true both of believers [Jn. 1:12f.] and also of Jesus. For this reason *monogenēs* probably includes also begetting by God.

- Even if, as Dodd and Brown maintain, the meaning of *monogenēs* in the 1st century was “only Son”, later in the quarrel with the Arians some orthodox Greek Fathers seem to have understood the word to mean “only-begotten”.
- That this is the meaning the Creed intends may be evidenced by the juxtaposition of the following phrase, *ton ek tou patros gennēthenta pro pantōn tōn aiōnōn* (“begotten from the Father before the ages”), and a little later *gennēthenta ou poiēthenta* (“begotten, not made”).
- Both J.N.D. Kelly (*Early Christian Creeds*, p.297) and A. Grillmeier (*Christ in Christian Tradition*, p.267) translate the term “only-begotten” in the Creed.

It is thus uncertain how the word should be translated, but we have followed Büchsel, Kelly and Grillmeier in preferring “only-begotten” to the ICET and ELLC translation “only”.

⁵ Literally “before all ages”. We here follow the ELLC translation.

⁶ “God of/from God” is omitted. As already mentioned, though part of the original Creed of Nicaea, it was not part of the text of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed but added in its Latin translation; as also noted, it is in any case a phrase that the Arians did not oppose; more importantly, it adds nothing to “very God from very God”.

⁷ We have retained the traditional English version's adjective “very” rather than use the ELLC “true”, because it makes the point more clearly and emphatically.

⁸ This, of course, translates the famous credal phrase *homoousion tō patri*. In the ELLC version of the Creed this is translated as “of one Being with the Father”. This English phrase, however, may well be understood in a Sabellian, or “modalistic”, sense, i.e. as meaning that the Son is one *hypostasis*, or being, one entity, with the Father, instead of that the Son *shares* the same being or “substance” with the Father. (The Sabellians actually used the term *homousios* in a Sabellian sense.) This is aggravated by spelling “Being” with a capital letter, which one might expect if a being or *hypostasis* were meant, as both the ICET and the ELLC versions do and so confuse the point.. (The creed itself, of course, seeks to make a distinction between the one *ousia* that is shared by the three *hypostases* and the *hypostases* themselves.) We therefore prefer “of the same being as the Father” as a more literal and appropriate translation of the Greek. J.N.D. Kelly's comment should be noted:

whatever the deeper implications of *homoousios*, the original Nicene teaching was, not that the Father and Son are numerically one in substance, but that They share the same divine nature. There is, [however], no real antithesis between generic and numerical oneness so long as the Son's essential deity is acknowledged, for Godhead (as these fathers were never tired of pointing out) is *ex hypothesi* simple and indivisible.

(J.N.D. Kelly: *Early Christian Doctrines*, p.254. See further p.233-255.)

⁹ The ELLC translation has “were made”, but the verb is *egeneto*, not *epoiēse* or *ektisthē*. The first section of the Creed uses *poiētēn* with reference to the Father.

¹⁰ Adding “and” to this line to make clear that the previous line refers to the Son as the *Logos* (Jn. 1:3, I Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:16, Heb. 1:2), not to the Father.

¹¹ This is what the Greek reads, not just “for us” as the ELLC translates, which, as has been pointed out, could be taken to mean only “for us believers or Christians”. See the comment above from the Lutheran Church of Australia.

¹² The Greek uses one preposition, *ek*, before “the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary”, but *ek* has both the meanings “by, by means of” and “from, out of”, and surely the two meanings are intended respectively here. The traditional versions recognized this by translating “by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary”. See also the comment above from the Uniting Church in Australia.

¹³ Greek *enanthrōpēsanta*. The traditional and ICET rendering “and was made *man*” is unnecessarily sexist; the Greek means that Christ became a human being, not that he became male in gender. On the other hand the ELLC rendering “and was made truly human” could, as we have seen, be taken to imply that God's Son took on all human attributes without actually becoming a particular human being. See the comment above from the Lutheran Church of Australia. Besides, the Greek has no adverb “truly” here.

¹⁴ The Greek reads just *kai pathonta*, but *paschein* sometimes means, as here, not just “to suffer” but “to

suffer death". (See W. Bauer *et al.*: *Greek English Lexicon*, p.633f.)

- ¹⁵ This is a more exact and stronger translation of the Greek than the traditional, ICET and ELLC word "kingdom". The biblical word means the dynamic and victorious activity of God against evil and injustice and the state of affairs that that brings about. The English word "kingdom" by contrast, though it had a wider meaning in the 16th century, today is confined to the static meaning of a geographic area, a royal realm.
- ¹⁶ Literally "of whose kingdom there will be no end", but the English pronoun "whose" can be either singular or plural, which opens the clause to being misunderstood to mean the kingdom of "the living and the dead" who are mentioned in the immediately preceding line.
- ¹⁷ We have discussed the addition of these words (the *filioque*). Whether they should be retained in the Creed is a serious question. Hence our translation follows the ELLC in bracketing them. As already mentioned, the Task Team plans to present a report next year on whether they should be said or deleted.
- ¹⁸ The ELLC has this clause the other way around, but in the Greek the emphasis is on "with" (which it repeats three times).
- ¹⁹ The Greek uses the aorist tense, not the perfect, as the ELLC translation does.
- ²⁰ This run-on corresponds to the Greek and expresses the connection between the Spirit and the Church. However, the Greek lacks "and" here.
- ²¹ The Greek word is *katholikēn*. Luther substituted the word "Christian", because the Roman Catholic Church applies the term "Catholic" to itself. But neither "Christian" nor "universal" are adequate translations of *katholikē*. The original Calvinistic tradition, like the Anglican and ecumenical traditions, therefore retained the word "catholic". Besides we should not surrender the claim to be (part of) the catholic (small "c") Church. See the extensive discussion on this issue in the essay "Should we Drop the Word Catholic?" in the *Papers for the 8th General Assembly 2008*, p.317-320.