

Co-equal and Co-eternal

**reflections on the Nicene Creed as an affirmation of a
non-hierarchical trinitarian understanding of God**

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Introduction

I am really excited about the emphasis on fellowship within the Trinity that is currently coming to the fore in academic and popular Christian writing. It sets a great context for our relationship with God. What could be more inspiring than fellowship within THE FELLOWSHIP?

It would be wrong, though, if in the process we should lose an emphasis on the uniqueness and unity of God. As we increasingly distinguish between the roles and personalities of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we cannot afford to create a level of separation between them that borders on tri-theism. Equally we cannot end up presenting a hierarchy that either leaves the Father open to atonement-centred charges of placing unjust and abusive demands on the Son, or has us seeking atonement theories within redemptive concepts that could leave us open to accusations of universalism.

It seems to me that we need to move forward with caution, strongly emphasising that, alongside the fellowship within the trinity, there is an essential divine unity that expresses itself in levels of agreement that go way beyond those humanity can achieve or perhaps even understand. Furthermore, we need to reassert that an understanding of 'co-equal and co-eternal' is fundamental within trinitarian theology, and must be applied at all times to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In this booklet I want to turn afresh to the Nicene Creed, realising that creedal truth needs to be comprehended as well as recited. I am only too aware that it took just three centuries from the Council of Nicea for the understanding of the trinity to have become so distorted in popular discourse as to be deemed tri-theistic and, therefore, subject to justifiable challenges from Islamic thought. But tri-theistic concepts, be they common-place or alleged, of a 'dominant divine Father physically begetting a divine Son via a deified mother so as to facilitate a substitutional sacrifice that allegedly legitimised licentious living', marked a massive shift from reality and a seismic shift from Nicea too.

I am not actually sure that popular discourse is any closer to Nicea today. How much do 21st Century church members grasp beyond a spattering of vaguely remembered Victorian hymns? Surely a confused world deserves a clear presentation of trinitarian truth. As I turn to the Nicene Creed, I do so aware that we must grasp both the divine agreement that lies behind it and the co-equal and co-eternal nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that it seeks to convey.

As we try to lay hold of these realities, Scripture must be our reference point, and placing a biblical hermeneutic alongside the Creed can be our route to greater clarity.

If the ultimate purpose of the trinity is to open up divine fellowship to fallen humanity, then planning for our creation and redemption must be a major theme within the divine, tri-person discourses of eternity past. In looking at the biblical passages that reflect such conversations, we have to grapple with the thought of a chronology within eternity. I know that such a concept tends to be subsumed into statements about there being 'no time' in eternity, but maybe we could resolve some issues of biblical interpretation, and, indeed, of creedal understanding, more effectively if we were to begin to talk otherwise. After all, in choosing to reveal His relationship with the Son in terms of begetting, God implies a 'begetting point' in eternity past. In doing this He presumably expects us to accept some form of eternal chronology, and to do so without compromising His unity or undermining the co-equal, co-eternal status of His trinitarian nature.

So, in the light of all this, I would like to share with you what goes through my mind as I recite the Nicene Creed. I have a focal point for this as back in September 2017 when I joined the members of Open Door Evangelistic World Ministries, Minneapolis, for their conference, they recited the Nicene Creed in all of their services. They became my creedal co-confessors, but I must stress that the thoughts I share in the following reflections were, and are, my own.

I realise that in presenting my personal reflections in this way I will not only be, somewhat hesitantly, exposing my theological understanding, and perhaps a little more confidently revealing my commitment to biblical interpretation, but ultimately disclosing the intimacy of my worship. Despite this vulnerability, though, who would not want to be known first and foremost as a worshipper?

I trust that if nothing else my sense of adoration will inspire your own response to the wonder of God's co-equal, co-eternal tri-personal unity.

The Nicene Creed¹

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

¹ As far as I can recall this is the version we used at the conference in Minneapolis.

The inclusivity of the Father

The creed has a great beginning, *We believe in one God*.

It is always exciting to be making this statement corporately. As I stand with my co-confessors I do so gladly, even though I have no way of knowing the personal thoughts of those around me. But I am responsible for my own thoughts and right now my heart is rising in adoration, for the God I confess as *One* has an eternal trinitarian reality. My worship is all the greater for realising that I am about to address that *one God* person by person. To my mind this opening phrase warrants a concluding colon to honour that upcoming list.

It is a joy to speak of *the Father* whom I see from the outset as being one with the Son and the Holy Spirit. I call Him *Almighty* knowing that such almightiness is not His alone.

As I describe Him as the *maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen*, my mind goes to the first two chapters of Genesis and the opening chapter of John's Gospel, and sees co-creativity: the Father speaks, the Son is the Word and the Spirit actualises all things by brooding over the face of the deep. And yet I know of *angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*,² a whole unseen realm brought forth in advance to inspire us as the crown of God's coming creation. I also know that this angelic creation reflects the Father's loving desire for the Son and Holy Spirit to be worshipped, the Son's loving desire for the Father and Holy Spirit to be worshipped, and the Holy Spirit's loving desire for the Father and Son to be worshipped.

This expression of mutual love is amazing, and all the more so as I know that the Father's love not only extends to the Son and the Spirit, and theirs to Him and to each other, but that the love of all three persons of the trinity ultimately extends to me.

But my heart is getting ahead of my mind as I stand alongside my co-confessors. I need to steady myself.

² Order for Holy Communion, Book of Common Prayer.

The begetting of the Son

The Creed moves my focus of worship from the Father to the Son. This is great for it is through the Son that I have come to know the Father and through the Son that my salvation has been secured. We affirm that ***We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ***. As *Jesus*, He is my Saviour; as the *Christ* He is the Messiah, anointed by the Holy Spirit in trinitarian agreement before the world was made. I willingly submit to His rule in my life.

Humbly I acknowledge Him as ***the only Son of God***, relieved to be emphasising His uniqueness at a time when those of us who have been redeemed by His grace are often tempted to lose sight of that uniqueness in the light of our own incredibly privileged sonship (and daughterhood).

Still standing, I and my co-confessors are beginning to touch the heart of God's redemptive purposes. We have started worshipping as creatures before the Creator but now we are beginning to worship as sinners indebted to the Saviour. I am grateful that the Creed can have us speak of Jesus, whose name means 'God saves', and yet in its God-centredness graciously make no mention of the act of human rebellion at the fall, or the angelic rebellion that must have preceded it. The Creed marches on, gloriously focused on God and His eternal purposes, speaking of a Son who is begotten with redemption in view, even before any angelic or human departure from divine intent.

So I declare with a renewed redemptive focus, ***eternally begotten of the Father***, and recall the version of the Nicene Creed I memorised in my adolescence, *begotten of His Father before all worlds*. I smile as I realise that the word *before* has never phased me; I must always have believed that there was a 'before' before the *before*, so that it could be equally said of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit *from everlasting to everlasting to everlasting, You are God*.³

As I proclaim ***God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God*** and acknowledge that the Son is ***begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father***, I know that that *one Being* is absolutely indivisible; eternally God, eternally Light and eternally True, the very One who says of Himself *I am the Lord, I do not change*.⁴ Although it is hard to think of 'time' from the perspective of eternity, there are occasions when God reveals Himself in Scripture as having such an understanding. This forces me to conclude that this *one Being* must have been internally differentiate-able even before the Son was begotten, and that begetting must clearly be something other than an *ex nihil* origination.

³ Psalm 90:2. NKJV.

⁴ Malachi 3:6 NKJV.

I am having to think fast as my co-confessors have not stopped for breath, but my mind is inclined to follow those scholars who believe that the paternal nature of the Father finds its meaning primarily in the begetting of the Son.⁵ So perhaps at the moment of the Son's begetting it could be said equally of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God*, with each of the three persons who are differentiate-able within that *one Being* simultaneously taking on a new but unchanged distinctiveness.

If it were not for the Scriptural emphasis on the begetting of the Son,⁶ it would be easy to say quite simply that there has always been a Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, with God implying time within eternity, we have to be more nuanced, and using 'outside of time' is an insufficient explanation when God Himself is speaking of what appears to be a chronological order.

As I catch up with my co-confessors and affirm ***Through Him were all things made*** I still have much on my mind as I celebrate again my awareness of the Son's co-creativity. Yet in pressing on with my creedal confession I am aware that the thoughts of heavenly decrees, which are coming so rapidly into my mind, are being compressed into a sense of joy that is having to make up in height what it is being denied in length.

But wait a moment. In reality I am sitting at my computer recalling and writing, not standing with my co-confessors reciting and reflecting, so I can actually pause and describe why my heart begins to soar as soon as *begotten, not made* passes my lips.

⁵ Rowan Williams makes a similar point in passing in an afterword on *difference*. '...the Father, has no reality except in the act of generating the otherness of the Son.' Rowan Williams, 'Making a Difference' in Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash and Graham Ward. *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, Edinburgh,: T and T Clark 1999, p 176. However, going forward, the full breadth of the Father's fathering is made evident in Ephesians 3:15 where it is said to embrace 'every family in heaven and earth'.

⁶ See 'begotten': John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; Hebrews 1:6; 1 John 4:9; Revelation 1:5. (Also 'firstborn': Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15,18; Hebrews 12:23.)

A pause for thought

I am very much aware that I am taking this pause before the creedal statements that start with *For us and for our salvation*. It is helpful to register that there are aspects of the begetting of the Son which are best understood by keeping *For us and for our salvation* in mind. So let me set out the culmination of my thoughts before unfolding them.

In essence I see God in His tri-personal, internally-agreeing, non-hierarchical *Being*, setting the stage for creation and redemption by making decrees of self-designation that establish a more clearly defined tri-unity of 'the Father', 'the Son' and 'the Holy Spirit', ready to fulfil all aspects of their mutually-agreed, ordained and foreseen creative and redemptive roles.⁷ Put less clinically, I see it as an assigning and defining, arising out of a trinitarian culture of mutual love and honour, accomplished through decrees fulfilled through loving recognition and gracious bestowal, motivated by a 'forthcoming' extension of that love into creation and redemption.

In envisaging such a pre-creation readiness I am not seeking to set time limits on eternity. The words 'ready' and 'fulfil' in my more clinical outline imply a chronological order, but when returned to their 'out of time' context they can either be seen as coming together in an instant or spread out as if aeons apart. This means that there is ample 'time' within eternity for a continuing flow of love, joy, light and life between the three eternally differentiate-able persons of the trinity, now identified as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁸ Whilst the opening statement of the Nicene Creed, *We believe in one God*, leaves space for *Being* prior to defining, the structure of the Creed moves from the defining of the Father, to the begetting of the Son and on to the proceeding of the Holy Spirit, by simply marking out their distinctive roles. If we want to know the 'how' and 'why' of this defining, begetting and proceeding, we have to look elsewhere, to what I call the eternal decrees.

So what are these decrees and how do we know of them? The answer is that from time to time in the vast range of Scriptural revelation, God in His triune agreement allowed His scribes to eavesdrop on His internal conversations. Sometimes these conversations seem to be immediately historically apposite, such as that recorded in Genesis 1:26, *Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our*

⁷ Prior to the self-designation that I see as constituting the begetting, I would prefer to speak of 'three differentiate-able persons' within the divine Being, rather than to describe them numerically and hierarchically as the First person, Second Person and Third Person, which seems to undermine the concept of co-equal and co-eternal. The justification for such ordering could more appropriately lie within the 'sending' that is to be addressed next within the Creed.

⁸ The theological term for this flow is *perichoresis*, which comes from two Greek words, *peri*, meaning 'around', and *chorein*, meaning 'to give way' or 'to make room'. The Collins English Dictionary defines *perichoresis*: (*perɪkə'ri:sɪs*) Christian theology: the relationship between or interlinking of the three Persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

likeness. At other times it appears that something is being slipped into the text that indicates a conversation set way back in the past, sometimes located 'at the foundation of the world', but on other occasions seeming to go 'back' into eternity even 'prior' to that.

An example of one of these 'way back in the past' statements can be found in Revelation 13:8 where, in speaking of one of two 'Church-persecuting' beasts that have been given authority by an already operational 'Church-persecuting' dragon (probably jointly representing a trinitarian parody established from within a rebellious angelic host), the Revelator declares that *'All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world'*.

At this point it is relatively immaterial as to whether the Revelator is indicating that it was the writing of the names that took place at the foundation of the world or the slaying of the Lamb, as both take us into the realm of foreknowledge. For me, the link with Peter's words recorded in His Pentecost message ten days after Christ's ascension point to the latter, *'Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death, whom God raised up having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.'*⁹

Furthermore, Peter went on in his Pentecost sermon to use David's words from Psalm 16:8-10 to validate his claim of God's longstanding resurrection intentions, pointing out that the Psalm was more than a conversation between God and David, it was in fact a conversation in eternity past between the co-equal Father and Son. All of this indicates that there must have been agreement within God *from the foundation of the world* about the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, making sense of statements such as *Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven,*¹⁰ and of the supplication in the Lord's prayer, *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*¹¹

It is the psalmists who so often draw me into the realm of these divine conversations. There were moments it seems, as these psalmists sought to address their words to King David, when they were caught up by the Holy Spirit to declare greater truths – truths that in reality were being proclaimed from God's throne concerning David's greater Son. And it is fascinating to see how the writer to the Hebrews confirms these Messianic insights and sets them into an ascension setting, aware that

⁹ Acts 2:23-24.

¹⁰ Psalm 119:89.

¹¹ Matthew 6:10.

decrees such as these echo through the ages and locate within history, sometimes more than once, in order to achieve their redemptive purposes.¹²

Much as I would like to take the full range of Scriptures for which the writer to the Hebrews affirms a post-resurrection, ascension-celebratory, Messianic context,¹³ I will focus on Psalms 2 and 110 so as not to lose too much of the Nicene Creed's momentum. I will gather my thoughts under three headings: the powers, the positioning and the people.

These are the psalms:

Psalm 2: The Messiah's Triumph and Kingdom

*Why do the nations rage,
And the people plot a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying,
"Let us break Their bonds in pieces
And cast away Their cords from us."*

*He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,
And distress them in His deep displeasure:
"Yet I have set My King
On My holy hill of Zion."*

*"I will declare the decree:
The Lord has said to Me,
'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.
Ask of Me, and I will give You
The nations for Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron;
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' "*

¹² Hebrews 1:5 – 2:13.

¹³ The Hebrews 1 and 2 OT references are: Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; (an allusion to Ps 89:27); Ps 92:7; Ps 104:4; Ps 45:6-7; Ps 102:25-27; Ps 101:1; Ps 8:4-6; PS 22:22; 2 Sam 22:3; Is 8:18. (See also: Deuteronomy 22:43, Psalms 24 and 133, and Isaiah 53:11 and 63:1-4.)

*Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish in the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.*

Psalm 110: Announcement of the Messiah's Reign

A Psalm of David.

*The LORD said to my Lord,
"Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."
The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies!*

*Your people shall be volunteers
In the day of Your power;
In the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning,
You have the dew of Your youth.
The LORD has sworn
And will not relent,
"You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek."*

*The Lord is at Your right hand;
He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath.
He shall judge among the nations,
He shall fill the places with dead bodies,
He shall execute the heads of many countries.
He shall drink of the brook by the wayside;
Therefore He shall lift up the head.*

The powers

At a superficial level, Psalm 2 highlights the pointlessness of the nations' rage in the light of God's positioning of David. But it is clear from Acts 4:25-26 and Hebrews 1:5 that the real focus of the psalm is the pointlessness of their rage in the light of the positioning of God the Son. Given that this psalm was written before such a positioning (*I have set My Son on My holy hill of Zion*) could have taken place physically within history, it must have taken place by divine determination and decree in the heavenly realms within eternity past.

Drawing such a conclusion has further implications in that it presupposes a divine pre-creation anticipation of the rage of the nations. It could be postulated that such an anticipation could have been based on a divine expectation of a rebellious element within a yet-to-be established angelic creation, which in turn could lead to, and gain expression through, the subversion of a yet-to-be created humanity.

Interpreting Psalm 2 in this way highlights that a redemptive plan formulated in eternity past would have had a focus on the subjugation of manipulative principalities and powers, both human and angelic. Psalm 110 echoes this emphasis, and the lifting of humanity out of the consequences of the fall into the intimacy of the freely-flowing relationship shared by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is in no way at odds with this subjugation. It stands in contrast to it, alongside it and above it, as the ultimate and eternally-intended outcome of creation.

The positioning

Having looked at one aspect of positioning decreed as recorded in Psalm 2, we can now consider an even more important positioning, the actual begetting of the Son. For this the psalmist records the Son's recollection of the Father's words, *You are My Son, today I have begotten You*, which He announces as the decree spoken to Him by the One He describes as 'Lord' (doing so without denying His own Lordship or dismissing the title of 'Father' that will characterise their future relationship). The words are few but make up what is probably the most significant statement recorded in Scripture.

This statement may not be just a 'reference' to the begetting but the very act of begetting itself, not a speaking to bring forth from nothing as with the creation, but an ordering within the *one Being* of

the triune God, begetting as it were by decree. I want to pause for a long time here, but Psalm 110 presents us with two other powerful positioning statements to consider.

Psalm 110 has a similar theme to that of Psalm 2 and the subjugation of powers it refers to once again goes beyond David's reign. This time it is Jesus Himself who confirms the decree's true Messianic meaning.¹⁴

The first positioning statement in Psalm 110 clearly emanates from a conversation between the Father and Son, and is doubtless set in eternity past. It involves an invitation from the Father (the One whom David refers to as 'the Lord') to the Son (the One whom David refers to as 'my Lord') to *sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool*. There is no reason to believe that there was not an immediate fulfilment of this invitational decree that saw the Son seated at the right hand of the Father, co-reigning from before creation and throughout the history of the Old Testament. The decree, though, was to become further established in time at the ascension. Here the incarnated Son, being fully God and fully man, took His place alongside His Father in heaven, having been raised from the dead after completing His work on the cross.¹⁵ He reigned then, He reigns now and even reigned from the manger.¹⁶ His rule has never been broken.

The beauty of all this unfolding of eternal pre-creation positioning is that it presents a pattern for exercising authority that right from the beginning was the complete antithesis of that arrogant, impositional, and oppositional power that seeks to cast off every righteous restraint. It is a Son who is to rule as King in voluntary submission to His Father, and it is a hill outside Jerusalem's walls, serving as the city's rubbish dump, which is to be the earthly counterpart of the holy hill of Zion. Here, the Son is crucified, holding sway from a Roman cross, in order to establish through His resurrection and ascension the transcendent authority of a nail-pierced reign. Amazingly, whereas earthly rulers can only 'rule over', He obediently exemplifies a greater grace, the grace to *Rule in the midst of Your enemies*.

Again we need to pause, for here, at the cross, we are witnessing the Son, as the Seed of woman, delivering a mortal blow to the principal architect of abusive authoritarianism and in the process disarming every principality that architect had ever empowered.¹⁷

¹⁴ Matthew 22:44.

¹⁵ Hebrews 1:13.

¹⁶ Matthew 2:2.

¹⁷ Genesis 3:15. Colossians 2:15.

We now return to the second decree in Psalm 110, the one establishing the Son as *a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*. The writer to the Hebrews explains why the Son had to become a priest after Melchizedek rather than after Aaron.¹⁸ The Aaronic priesthood was raised up to teach that God's redemptive plan requires sacrifice but it was to be through a single, once-for-all sacrifice that redemption would ultimately be secured.

Before the foundation of the world the Father and the Holy Spirit accepted the Son's willingness to offer Himself as that redeeming sacrifice as part of His priestly role. It was an act that opened the way for humanity to be lifted into a new realm, far above that arena where righteous indignation is justly set against the works of those rebellious principalities that would usher in sin and disrupt creation. It was a redemptive deed that would enable the Son, our great High Priest, to stand before heaven's throne and declare *Here am I and the children whom God has given Me*.¹⁹

At the cross, the Son was both the Lamb being slain and the King establishing His crucified reign. After the ascension His kingly reign and priestly service have continued from His Father's side where He sits as the *Anointed* Son of God. We know He was anointed as the Holy Spirit descended on Him at His baptism. We also know that He was anointed at His ascension, and if we follow the typography of Psalm 133, we can see that anointing flowing down onto those in the Upper Room and onto the three thousand who responded in repentance and faith following Peter's gospel presentation. Unsurprisingly that anointing continues to flow today.²⁰ Yet He was not anointed to become the *Anointed*, for Psalm 2 confirms that He was The Anointed One from eternity past: *the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed*.

We can summarise much of what we have seen in terms of positioning by saying: the words of Psalm 2 set the Son in His kingly anointing and those of Psalm 110 set Him in His priestly anointing. It was Isaiah 61 that set Him in His prophetic anointing.²¹

As with the decrees mentioned earlier, there can be a pattern of multiple fulfilments. The Son is begotten: to make the Father known, to live among us through His incarnation, and to be raised to give life as the firstborn from the dead. The Son is anointed: by the Holy Spirit to minister, and is further anointed to pour out the Holy Spirit. The Son is enthroned: on Zion's hill, to rule from heaven and to reign from Calvary. The Son is seated: at the Father's side throughout eternity, yet set at the Father's right hand in triumph at His ascension.

¹⁸ Hebrews 4:14 – 5:11; 6:19 – 10:25.

¹⁹ Hebrews 2:13, quoting Isaiah 8:18.

²⁰ Hebrews 1:8-9 in fulfilment of Psalm 45:6-7, with the typology of Psalm 133 fulfilled in Acts 2.

²¹ Isaiah 61:1-3.

In speaking of the anointing, we not only refer to an Anointed Saviour, but to an anointed people. We must now pursue the people's anointing further.

The people

'The people' do not really figure in Psalm 2 until the last line, *Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him*. Even though the psalm is strong on dealing with oppositional power, there is an encouragement within it to reconcile with the Son. The promised blessing is the intended reward. Psalm 110, on the other hand, contains the Father's promise to the Son *Your people shall be volunteers in the day of Your power*. If we see the *day of Your power* extending from the cross to an ultimate end-time victory, we can envisage a company of willing people, whom God has redeemed and empowered, working to counter 'powers', righting ravages of injustice the 'powers' have wrought and promoting the Son's rule.

As we move from 'powers' and 'positioning' to 'people', we must ensure that our focus on decrees has not undermined our understanding of redemption as an act of divine love. We need to remind ourselves that, whilst the plan of redemption was purposefully determined, the need for redemption was foreknown.²² Expressing this more straightforwardly, God did not purpose or determine humanity's fall but gave humanity options while foreseeing the outcome.

So what were the options? When the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were involved in breathing life into humanity, it was not all the fullness of divine life that was imparted. More divine life was to be made available by choice. This choice (centred on the tree of life) was set against the option (focussed on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) of living by human wit, physicality and personality as an antidote to the internal deadness that stems from a lack of appetite for a life-giving relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Choosing the way that deprioritised the divine relationship was costly; the preparations required to restore the original choice for subsequent generations would stretch across the centuries as much would need to be communicated and facilitated, even though everything necessary had been decreed in eternity past.

Ultimately the power required by the Son's *volunteers*, those opting for life once the original choice has been restored, would come through their receiving of the Holy Spirit. So far, in line with seeing the begetting of the Son as a 'defining by decree', we have assumed that the proceeding of the Holy Spirit would have been contemporaneous with the Son's begetting. The proposition is that the

²² Acts 2:23.

begetting of the Son may be seen as ‘an assigning and defining, arising out of a trinitarian culture of mutual love and honour, accomplished through decrees fulfilled through loving recognition and gracious bestowal, motivated by a “forthcoming” extension of that love into creation and redemption’. The proceeding of the Holy Spirit, therefore, might best be expressed, albeit equally inadequately, as a powerful and passionately loving, mutually-agreed acknowledgement of the outgoing role of the One who was already discernibly, but who would forever be distinctively, the Implementer, Indweller, Anointer, Comforter, Helper and Enabler.

In some ways it makes little difference if this proceeding did or did not take place simultaneously with the Son’s begetting and the establishing of the Father’s fathering. The important thing is to see a transition rather than an origination. The construction of the Nicene Creed appears to affirm a three-step approach: establishing the fatherhood of the Father, securing the begetting of the Son and facilitating the proceeding of the Spirit. If the begetting of the Son happened by decree, then a simultaneous defining of the Father’s fatherhood and the Holy Spirit’s proceeding would seem more likely. Every aspect of the positioning revealed in Scripture through verses such as those of Psalms 2 and 110 could have happened at the same moment in eternity.

While it is primarily the begetting of the Son that causes us to think about the proceeding of the Holy Spirit, we do have to take account of Acts 15:26: *‘But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me’*. The important thing for me in affirming a co-equal and co-eternal trinity is to see the ‘proceeding’ in a context of the prior existence of the Holy Spirit as a ‘person’ (albeit unnamed) among a differentiable trinity within the One Being of God.

But neither the begetting nor the proceeding marks the end of the story. By the time Psalms 2 and 110 were written, the incarnation and crucifixion had long since been heralded at the fall.²³ Also by then Abraham had been called as a man of faith to search for *a city whose builder and maker is God*,²⁴ the children of Israel had grown into a nation and been brought out of Egypt by Moses,²⁵ an Aaronic priesthood had been established while in the wilderness,²⁶ and David, whom God regarded

²³ Genesis 3:15. It could be said that the resurrection was also prefigured in that the bruising of the Seed would be limited to the heel.

²⁴ Hebrews 11:8-9, but see also Psalm 87:5, Galatians 4:24-27 and Revelation 21:1, 9 – 22:5. Interestingly Abraham probably offered Isaac where the earthly Jerusalem (formerly Jebusi) was ultimately established by David. Genesis 22:2; 2 Chronicles 3:1.

²⁵ Genesis 15:12-16; Exodus 19:1-7.

²⁶ Exodus 28:1.

as *a man after My own heart*, had come to the throne as kingship had been established in the land.²⁷ That which had been decreed was already unfolding in the preparatory lessons of history.

Throughout all this, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, having functioned distinguishably and unitedly in creation, were continuing in similar active agreement in readiness for the giving of the Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

But I have paused long enough and must now hastily re-join my co-confessors.

²⁷ 1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22.

The ministry of the Son

We have moved on and are no longer speaking of begetting. As we declare ***For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven***, I recognise that the Son who was begotten to secure my eternal salvation is now being given into this world to accomplish it. As John recorded, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*²⁸

I think of the years of waiting for that precise moment which the Bible calls *the fullness of time*.²⁹ I marvel at the divine patience, and think it must have been with a mixture of heavenly joy and palpable pain that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit unfolded the history of the Old Testament – reigning, calling, shaping, speaking, empowering, intervening. And not surprisingly, there were moments when from their role in the unseen realm they broke into the world more visibly.³⁰ Such appearances, though, were as nothing compared with the incarnation of the Son to which every type, figure, historical pattern, preparatory illustration and revelatory word had been building.

So I confess ***by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man***. This at last is God in our midst, growing up among us, walking our streets, identifying with our lives. He is here to re-introduce the choice, the opportunity for humanity to know the fullness of life and to be caught up into the eternal fellowship that He shares with the Father and Holy Spirit. It was for this sending that he was begotten; to come *in the fullness of time... to bring many sons to glory*.³¹

The résumé of the Son's ministry is moving on at a pace. We find ourselves saying, ***For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried***, and I realise that we have encapsulated in just a few words more pain than we can possibly imagine. The greatest agony was surely that instant when, as our sin offering, He experienced a sense of separation from the Father and cried *My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?*³² But agony though it was, He was putting death to death so that He could bring life to life. He had already laid down so much in taking on our humanity but through it all He had retained a connectivity with His Father and the Holy Spirit that exemplified a divine intimacy which had largely eluded humanity ever since the fall. For that

²⁸ John 3:16.

²⁹ Galatians 4:4.

³⁰ Technically such moments are referred to as *Theophanies* or *Christophanies*. Genesis 18:1-22 is often seen as a Trinitarian *theophany*.

³¹ Hebrews 2:10. NKJV.

³² Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, anticipated in Psalm 22:1.

connectivity to become ours, a work of reconciliation had to be completed on the cross.³³ Barriers had to be pulled down and dividing walls demolished, not only between people and people but between God and His people.³⁴ A humanity that had rejected the fullness of life needed to be reconnected to that life.³⁵ A three-fold strategy would secure it: the cross to remove the barriers, the resurrection to liberate the life, and the Holy Spirit to impart that life into broken and believing hearts. Even on the cross the Son could see the travail of His soul and be satisfied.³⁶ He was enduring the cross for the joy of the transformed humanity He could see set before Him.³⁷

The Creed moves even more quickly than the historical events. We are now declaring, ***On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures***. This is the liberation of life. Some scriptures speak of the resurrection as a work performed on, or for, the Son,³⁸ but this needs to be linked to the Son's active participation and the power of divine love:

*Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again, No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment I have received from My Father.*³⁹

The love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit means so much to me that I can almost feel the Son's enjoyment of the Father's unconditional commitment. I know that the Son's self-sacrifice was mutually agreed in order to lift a penitent humanity above the focus of the trinity's shared indignation at arrogance and rebellion. I can also see that, given its cosmic significance, the Son's self-giving was mutually undergirded. In His dying moments on the cross the Son committed Himself into His Father's hands,⁴⁰ knowing that in death and the grave He would be upheld by the Father's loving-command and the Holy Spirit's energising power. I can see that the bonds of death were broken by the might of trinitarian agreement and that the resurrection not only proved love to be as strong as death but, as Jesus asserted at the tomb of Lazarus when defining Himself as *the resurrection and the life*, the very nature of God's life is indestructible.⁴¹

In a way that is hard to describe, I know too that the triumph over death has added more power to life, and liberated it. The Son is *declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of*

³³ 2 Corinthians 5:19.

³⁴ Ephesians 2:14.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:17; John 10:10.

³⁶ Isaiah 53:11.

³⁷ Hebrews 12:2.

³⁸ Acts 2:24; 5:30; Romans 8:11; Ephesians 15:17-20.

³⁹ John 10:17-18.

⁴⁰ Luke 23:46.

⁴¹ Acts 2:24; Song of Songs 8:6; Hebrews 7:16; John 11:25.

*holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.*⁴² There is a link between Him being *the firstborn from the dead* and the new birth being provided for humanity.⁴³ The Father *has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*⁴⁴ So the love that empowered the resurrection was a love for me as well as a love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are still on an upward trajectory as we say together ***he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*** Once again I am caught up with the pre-creation decrees and their multiple fulfilments. Now is the moment for the victorious King to retake His heavenly throne. It is as if the triumph over death has not only added to, and liberated, His life, but has also multiplied His authority. Psalm 24 sets out His heavenly welcome, Ephesians 1:15-23 (and 4:9-10) highlights His sweep from grave to glory, and Philippians 2:5-11 offers us His parabolic journey, from equality to earth to exaltation. Caught up with Him,⁴⁵ I can almost hear the Psalm 24:7 shouts and the trumpet fanfares that must have accompanied the opening of heaven's gates.

These creedal statements just keep rising higher and higher. ***He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*** I guess we all hear our own music in our minds in these moments and whilst my head is full of the triumphant choruses of Handel's Messiah, I can only guess at what my co-confessors might be hearing. I wonder if in eternity to come we all will be attuned to the same sounds. Even so the triumphant chords that for me reflect the glory of Christ's second coming and eternal reign are tempered with some more sombre notes that centre around His great white throne judgement.⁴⁶

But even they cannot turn the rhapsody into a dirge, as I sense that everything will be being fully and finally settled. In that moment we will understand the whole pattern of creation and redemption. As principalities and powers, seen and unseen, meet their downfall,⁴⁷ we will grasp God's wisdom in persistently fulfilling every decree in the face of their constant subversions. We will see why, with triune grace and overwhelming patience, the Father set His Son to rule and redeem in the midst of rebellion. We will also appreciate why, in divine agreement, the Son gave Himself sacrificially to free humanity so that we could be caught up as volunteers in the great trinitarian plan to bring down oppressive authoritarianism and liberate transformative hope through a counter culture of light, life and love. Surely, when everyone who has ever lived catches sight of the One who took on our

⁴² Romans 1:4.

⁴³ Colossians 1:18 and John 3:3.

⁴⁴ 1 Peter 1:3.

⁴⁵ Ephesians 2:6.

⁴⁶ Revelation 20:11

⁴⁷ Revelation 20:10.

humanity to save us, walked our walk and faced our challenges, there will be no questions about the fairness of His justice.⁴⁸ Who could complain after multiple centuries of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit lovingly seeking to draw each of us into their eternal fellowship?⁴⁹ We will all bend our knees to accept His verdict and gaze at Him,⁵⁰ either through unrepentant, hard-hearted tears of remorse or tears of joyful amazement at His undeserved favour.⁵¹

I notice a change in my mind-music. The chords are calmer and the mood is quieter. We are moving from the Son in His glory to the Holy Spirit in His gentle persuasiveness. I know the Holy Spirit can come as fire but as I stand before Him here I sense Him as a gentle breeze.

⁴⁸ Acts 17:31.

⁴⁹ 1 John 1:3.

⁵⁰ Philippians 2:9-11.

⁵¹ Revelation 7:17.

The proceeding of the Spirit

I am filled with reverential awe as we confess, ***We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.*** His Lordship is no less than that of the Father and the Son. He is, and always has been, the giver of life. When and where the Father and Son bestow, the Holy Spirit imparts. It was true in creation and is true in re-creation. He breathes redemptive life into fallen humanity's spiritual deadness, becoming one with our spirits so that we might live in the resurrection fullness of the life of God.⁵²

And so, having confessed the Son's begetting, we now confess the Holy Spirit's proceeding, ***who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*** I feel the anguish of Church history here, the separation between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches over the addition of the words *and the Son*. I revisit Jesus' words concerning the Holy Spirit in John 15:26, *I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father.* Maybe one day we will find an agreed phrasing for such realities. I reflect on my earlier pause for thought and wonder if my observation, that the proceeding itself may have emanated from decrees made from the Father to the Son in trinitarian agreement in eternity past, might help. The begetting and giving of the Son and the proceeding and sending of the Holy Spirit would then stand as successive fulfillments of that which was decreed.

But I lay aside these longings and find myself asking where the Church would be if the Holy Spirit had not come. Imagine a lifeless company, forgiven and reconciled, yet proclaiming a resurrection message without the evidence of any personal impartation of resurrection power. We need to praise God for the sending of the Holy Spirit at that post-ascension Pentecost.

So having given our adoration to the Father and the Son it is time to express our adoration to the Holy Spirit, for ***With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.*** How amazing that the angels that encircle the heavenly throne cry *Holy, holy, holy.*⁵³ They worshipfully acknowledge a trinitarian reality even as they express their reverential respect in superlative terms. As we continue to stand we do the same, and I for one wish the Council of Nicea had provided us with a fuller formulation so we could linger longer. I am pleased, though, that we are not left thinking that the sending at Pentecost marked the initiation of the Holy Spirit's ministry. He was certainly not sidelined throughout Old Testament history; ***He has spoken through the Prophets*** and will continue to speak to the Church with the full authority of the Father and the Son with whom He is, ever has been and ever will be, one.

⁵² Ephesians 2:1; 1 Corinthians 7:17; John 10:10.

⁵³ Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8.

The calling of the Church

Our confessions are coming to an end and I sense that at times my reflections may have slowed down my co-confessors, but somehow they do not seem to have noticed. We move on steadily to affirm ***We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*** Where some see division, I choose to focus on diversity, for that surely must reflect God's heart. Where some see brokenness, I choose to see a crucified empowerment within that God-ordained brokenness, creating an apostolically-inspired company that is willing to effectively demonstrate God's love, light and life in this the day of His power.⁵⁴

From the corporate expression of life we come back to our personal reception of it: ***We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*** I join in this acknowledgement wholeheartedly. I think of the words of John the Baptist, *He who is coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*⁵⁵ I conclude that there must be a correlation in God's heart between a baptism in water that washes away sin and a baptism with the Holy Spirit that imparts spiritual life. The Apostle Peter seemed to think so as he exhorted the crowds after his Pentecost sermon,⁵⁶ so I hope my co-confessors concur.

Together we have affirmed so much and now we must declare our ultimate hope, ***We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*** As we say ***Amen*** we complete a cycle that has taken us from eternity past into the eternity that is to come. The eternity past is an eternity where the Father, Son and Holy Spirit existed without us, co-equally and co-eternally. The eternity that is to come is an eternity that I believe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have opened up for us within themselves through a creative and redemptive, decree-based self-defining that guarantees a high level of trinitarian fellowship for all who respond to God's grace. As I look for that world to come and anticipate that fellowship in the heavenly Jerusalem decreed in eternity past, I revel in the measure of resurrection life that is now mine through my identification with Christ, and glory in the foretaste of that divine fellowship that even now provides the context for my daily living.

I take a deep breath and release it slowly. It has been quite a journey.

We take our seats, and some of us glance at each other and nod politely. We are back in a very real world. I suspect that I am not the only one whose thoughts have travelled the length and breadth of eternity. Maybe, by God's grace, we have all touched something of the heart of God.

⁵⁴ Psalm 110:3.

⁵⁵ Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16.

⁵⁶ See Peter's Pentecost exhortation, Acts 2:38.

Theological underpinning

For the sake of my own theological integrity, I want to add a postscript to my line-upon-line reflections. I will do this by posing the question ‘Does my reading of the Nicene Creed in any way question the historic theology of the Church, or place me outside the bounds of orthodoxy?’

I am convinced that it does not. I am sure that whenever the Church has gathered in Council it has sought and received the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ I believe the Council of Nicea was led by the Holy Spirit both in its understanding of the trinity and in the credal formulation that now summarises its understanding.

I think that it is perfectly acceptable to refer to the one Being of God as ‘the Father’ and to reinforce the eternal reality of the Son and Holy Spirit by speaking of an eternal begetting by the Father (in the case of the Son), and an eternal proceeding from the Father (in the case of the Holy Spirit). I think to have done otherwise would have placed further pressure on the Council when seeking to articulate a sense of ‘before’ within eternity, a challenge that could not be avoided as it is the biblical revelation of the begetting of the Son that forces us (and required those at the Council) to speak somehow of such an eternal chronology. And those formulating credal statements have to be true, above all, to biblical revelation.

Those at the Council of Nicea would have been well aware though that, just as the Father had to be present to beget, so the Son had to be present to be begotten. Likewise, just as the Father (and, in Catholic thought, the Son) had to be present for the Holy Spirit to proceed, so the Holy Spirit had to be present in order for such proceeding to be effected. This not only points to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit being eternally present, but requires an understanding of begetting that is devoid of all sense of origination. However, the likelihood of gaining an understanding of the nature of begetting is reduced when chronology and eternity are granted an interchangeable fluidity. The confusion that arises from describing things as though happening ‘in time’ is dismissed by saying they really happened in eternity, where ‘subsequently’ and ‘simultaneously’ have no meaning. Philosophy may require this blurring but biblical terminology does not rely on it, maybe because God had always intended to open up further insights into eternity through Scripture.

We are grateful for the credal statement, *eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father*. Yet if my

⁵⁷ John 16:13. The specific words spoken to the twelve in the Upper Room were *guide you into all truth*. I am applying them by extension on the basis of the Holy Spirit’s character and ongoing ministry.

reading of the eternal decrees is correct, we should also be grateful that we can embrace a reality in which, even 'prior' to the begetting, the three persons of the trinity were equally and eternally present in one Being, differentiate-able and capable of holding council, communicating their love for one another in a divine relationship that involved honour and bestowal, able to determine decrees that would find their fulfilment in creation and redemption. Nonetheless, in theory, a glimpse into the divine preparations being made for creation and redemption in eternity past could indeed make it possible to pin-point a moment when the Son was being begotten by the Father, and the Holy Spirit was proceeding from the Father (and the Son). There had to be defining of these inwardly known realities as an outcome of earlier heavenly trinitarian conversations. So my contention from Scripture that the 'begetting' and 'proceeding' were accomplished by agreed decree, does nothing to counter the Nicene Creed's effective unfolding of all that followed the making of these decrees: the defining of the Father, the begetting of the Son and the proceeding of the Holy Spirit.

In all of this chronological timetabling we need to bear in mind that the ultimate purpose of creation and redemption is that the eternal relationship the three persons of the trinity have uninterruptedly enjoyed from eternity past should be more widely appreciated. Through *bringing many sons to glory* we, through penitence and faith, can come into that joyous, loving, light-filled and life-filled relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is glory indeed.

Over the years the Church has lost out by seeking to understand the trinity from too great a distance. It has ended up assuming a hierarchy where the Father imposes His will on the Son, the Son and the Father control the moving of the Holy Spirit, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit jointly place unrealistic demands on us. But a blind proximity can also misjudge, not seeing that when inter-trinitarian submissiveness gives the appearance of hierarchy in creation and redemption there are in fact underlying transactional dynamics based on prior agreement and voluntary surrender within the trinity's totally mutual love and understanding. In reality we have a testimony from eternity to eternity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit humbly acting together in the best interests of their creation; first anticipated, then realised and ultimately redeemed.

As we go forward, let us insist on co-equality and co-eternity, and on the power of agreement that marks the essence of divine oneness, rightly affirming the nature of our tri-une God who is both the focus of our worship and the locus of our fellowship.