

The Council and the Creed: How the Council of Nicea Impacted the Church

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Introduction

The church, during its history, has called several councils to deal with diverse aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. One of such councils is the Council of Nicea which met in A.D

325. This Council has a unique place in the history of Christian thought as ‘the Great Ecumenical Synod’. The Council of Nicea served as the normative basis for subsequent Ecumenical councils. The result of deliberations from the Council of Nicea is the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is regarded as one of the most important statements of Christian faith that the church has ever produced. It predates the Apostles’ Creed and is the oldest written expression of the faith in the church’s treasury. The Nicene Creed came at a crossroad in church history. During this period, some critical theological questions were asked and the explanation given to those questions by a few theologians challenged the very essence of the Christian Gospel-Christology. The questions that faced the church were these: “who is Jesus Christ?”, “what is the relationship of Jesus with God?”, “is Christ more human than divine or is he more divine than human?” and was Jesus created or begotten?”

The plethora of questions pitted Christians against Christians. To resolve the issue, Constantine convened a great council of 318 Bishops. At Nicea, the Bishops produced a statement of doctrine called the “Nicene Creed” upholding Christ’s true divinity. That statement of compromise formed the basis of Christian ideology. What are the consequences and significances of their decisions? Would Christianity have survived had it been the compromise was not reached? This paper seeks to examine the historical and theological background to the council. We will also examine the significance and impact of the Nicene Creed.

Historical Context

The unique nature of Christ as the “Word becoming flesh”¹ or as the *logos* had been an issue which the church had struggled how best to explain for years. Many theologians and church

leaders have held differing opinions on the issue. While some held the view that emphasized the full divinity of Christ as God the Son others held to the view that emphasized the full humanity. Yet there were those that held the view which emphasized both the full divinity and full humanity of Christ. As the Church grappled to provide an acceptable definition of Christ's person, these differing views to Christology proved to be problematic to the development of Christianity. This issue came to a head when Arius, who was a popular Prebyster in the Church of Alexandria, clashed with Bishop Alexander concerning the manner of interpretation of the divinity of Jesus.

Arius posits the Son did not emanate from the Father. He was neither part of the Father's substance nor was he a being similar to the Father². According to Arius "the Son cannot be without a beginning, for then he would be a "brother" of the Father, and not a Son. Therefore, the Son has a beginning, and was created by the Father out of nothing"³. Arius postulated that the Son was not divine but a created being that was created out of nothing. The Son was the first and greatest of all created beings. He was the agent through which the universe was created.

¹John 1: 14

²Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 262.

³Ibid, 262- 263.

With regards to the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Son was neither equal nor co-eternal. The father and the Son were of "similar substance". However, they were not the same. When describing Christ, Arius used the Greek word *Heteroousios* to reference his relationship to God⁴. This means "of a different substance". What this implies is that Christ

wasn't really God but a created being. He was a messenger created by God who was not worthy of worship or obedience. To Arius and his followers "there was a time when he was not"⁵. Thus, they saw Jesus only as a remarkable leader who was inferior to the Father and lacking in absolute divinity.

The doctrine of Arius was vehemently opposed by Bishop Alexander, his deacon at that time, Athanasius, and their followers. They had insisted that the Son was fully and truly God. Alexander and Athanasius had argued that the theology of Arius denied the trinity. They assert that Christ is not a like substance to God but the same substance (*Homoousios*)⁶. Alexander in a bid to quell the influence of Arius convoked a synod in Egypt where close to a hundred bishops condemned and disposed Arius. Not taking his disposition lightly, Arius sought the help of bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia who not only supported Arius but also gave him protection. Thus the stage was set for a schism that could affect the unity of the church. Despite the condemnation, Arius and his supporters did not fizzle out. The schism pitted Christians against Christians and bishop against bishop.

⁴ Frank H. Seilhamer, *We Believe: An Historical and Spiritual Guide to the Nicene Creed* (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S Publishing, 1993), 11.

⁵ Gonzalez, *Christian Thought*, 265

⁶ Seilhamer, *We Believe*, 12.

When Emperor Constantine heard the news of the dispute, he was very distressed. However, his worry was more about the unity of the church than theological truth. He was a patron of the church, thus he sought the unity of the church. Constantine hoped to turn the church into "the cement of the Empire"⁷ that has previously been fragmented. With the counsel and

assistance of Hosius of Cordova, who was his theological adviser, a general assembly of Bishops was summoned by Constantine to Nicea in an attempt to resolve the Arian controversy. In his comment of the Nicene Council, Noll pointed out that “the doctrinal issue that was to be discussed in Nicea was absolutely critical because it centered not only on who Jesus was his person but also who Jesus was in his works as savior”⁸.

Homoousios, Heteroousios or Homoiousios

The Council of Nicea opened in May 325 and in attendance was Emperor Constantine arrayed in royal splendor. It is reported that in attendance was 318 Episcopal representatives. Majority of the Bishops in attendance were from the East. Those in attendance were divided into three groups. The first group was made up of Arius and his supporters. Other notable leaders of this group are Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia and two Bishops from Egypt- Theonas and Secundus. Their view of Christ is that he was of a different substance (Heteroousios). The second group was made up of those who hold the view point that Christ was of the same substance with the Father (Homoousios). This group represents the view of the Orthodox Church.

⁷ Gonzalez, *Christian Thought*, 273.

⁸ Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1997), 52

The leaders of this group were Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, Bishop Hosius of Cordova, and Athanasius. Deacon Athanasius who served Alexander and later succeeded him was to become the champion of the Nicene cause. The third group held the view that Christ was of a similar substance with the Father (Homoiousios). The leader of this group was Eusebius of Caesarea.

Constantine addressed the council by declaring that “division in the church is worse than war”⁹. It is recorded that Constantine pointedly stated “I won my battles for the glory of God and to my dismay I hear there are divisions among you. We are here to fix it.”¹⁰ With that opening salvo the stage was set for the commencement of the council proceedings. It should be pointed out that though Constantine was the Chairman of the Council; he never imposed his will over the council. His goal was to ensure that he guided the different groups towards a resolution. First to present their argument were the Arians. They were represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia, who presented the Arian view in the form of a creed. The Arians argued for the subordination of Christ. The Orthodox belief that Jesus was the Son of God, fully divine, and part of the Godhead was challenged by the Arians who claimed that Jesus was created as a son.¹¹ The Arians assert that Christ was not equal with God but a perfect representation of God. Gonzalez states “those present were scandalized, and from that moment the Arian cause was lost.”¹² This view was expressly dismissed by the council.

⁹ Gregory Simpson, *The Nicene Creed for Today* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1989), 32.

¹⁰ Williston Walker, *A History of The Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1959), 14.

¹¹ Charles Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason* (New York, 2003), 164.

¹² Gonzalez, *Christian Thought*, 267.

The next person that made a presentation was Eusebius of Caesarea who was regarded as one of the most respected Bishops of his day. To prove his orthodoxy, he presented a creed to the council.¹³ The creed which was submitted by Eusebius was the one that he used new converts in Caesarea. At baptism, the new converts recited the creed.¹⁴ Though Eusebius had previously

aligned himself with Arius, all the issues raised by the latter one of which was the subordination of Christ, was cleverly avoided in the creed that Eusebius submitted to the council.¹⁵ Though Eusebius' creed seemed orthodox, it was only a colloquial explanation of the separate existence of the three persons of Trinity. The creed did not unify the divine persons as one nor did it explicitly deny the Arian position.¹⁶ Even though the creed did not expressly deny the Arian interpretation, it was embraced by the bishops and the emperor and received an initial approval. However, it was not given the final approval. It should be noted that when it came to the final drafting and approval of the Nicene Creed, some excerpts from the creed by Eusebius were used. When it came to their turn to make presentations to the council, the orthodox group led by Bishop Alexander argued that the Son was eternally generated because the Son was always Son while the Father was always Father. What this implies is that the Son has always been with the Father. He represents and shares the Father's being. They assert that the Son is of the same substance with the Father.

¹³ Anthony Lane, "The Council of Nicaea: Purposes and Themes" *The Debate*. http://debate.org.uk/topics/theo/council_nicaea.html (accessed December 2, 2017)

¹⁴ Simpson, *Nicene Creed*, 35.

¹⁵ Freeman, *Rise of Faith*, 168

¹⁶ John Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Continuum, 1972), 244.

We Believe in one God, The Father, The Almighty.

After robust debates by the council, an overwhelming majority of bishops in attendance voted to adopt the orthodox creed which clearly states that the Son was consubstantial (*homoousios*) or of the same substance with the Father. The divinity of Christ was made clear

with the inclusion of *homoousios* in the creed.¹⁷ The statement of faith which became known as the Nicene creed states:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the same substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead; And in the Holy Spirit. But as for those who say, there was when He was not, and before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change-these the Catholic Church anathematizes.¹⁸

Commenting on creed, Torrance states “at the very heart of the Nicene creed stand the affirmation that Jesus Christ is ‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father, and that through Him all things were made’ “¹⁹. It is explicitly affirmed without any ambiguity that Christ is none other than God and that God came both in a human being and as a human being.

¹⁷ Gonzalez, 267.

¹⁸ John Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1950), 215-216.

¹⁹ Alan Torrance, “Being of One Substance with the Father”, in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 49.

Significance and Impact of the Nicene Creed

What was at stake at the Council of Nicea was whether Jesus was simply “a good example, an inspired prophet, a liberating presence, a symbol of fulfilled existence or a person

with spiritual insight or the very presence of God?”²⁰ To avoid confusion and misinterpretation, the Bishops at the council were extremely careful in the choice of words and phrases used in the creed. The possibility of Gnostic or Arian interpretation was put to rest with the insertion and use of the Word *Homoousios*, which explains that both the Father and the Son are one and that the Son is and always was. One can identify three powerful theological statements about Christ from the creed- the reality of his nature, his incarnation as a human being and the work of salvation that he accomplished.²¹

The Nicene Creed begins with the words “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty” The Monotheistic view of Christianity is vividly expressed in the line. From the opening line, there is a clarification of God as the sole creator of heaven and earth. Furthermore, the creed refutes the Arian claim that Christ was a separate creation with the words “begotten from the Father” Another Arian view that was refuted was the doctrine that Christ was a man who was later elevated to divinity.²² With the words “only begotten” the creed not only establishes Jesus as the only Son of God, it reveals that no human being can or will come in the manner which Christ came from the Father.

²⁰ Torrance, *Nicene Christianity*, 49-50

²¹ Noll, *Turning points*, 59

²² Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Double Day, 2003), 119-120.

The Arian position on the essence of Christ took a powerful hit with the inclusion of the word “begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father” The Bishops were determined to expel any heretical interpretation with the precise inclusion of the phrase “of one substance with

the Father” The phrase is an indication that Christ is of the same essence with the Father. The statement “God from God, light from light” is an affirmation of Jesus as true God. This counters the Arian teaching that Jesus was a human elevated to divinity. The inclusion of “through whom all things were made” reveals that Jesus created all things. What this implies is that the one who created all things could not be a made thing. To further contradict the Arian teaching the Jesus was a human who was later made divine, the council added the words “came down and became incarnate”

The Nicene Creed established a formula for all orthodox believers. It was a clear statement of faith which served as the confirmation for the orthodox belief of those who recited them. Going forward, the church was able to explain with clarity the teaching on trinity and how the three persons of trinity relate to one another. The Nicene Creed put to rest, heretical teachings on the person of Christ. Church schism was reduced as those who did not conform to the guidelines set out in the creed were excommunicated and banished.

23 Johnson, The Creed, 133

Conclusion

The Nicene Creed is an authoritative summary of Christian faith. The core truth of Christianity is embodied in the Creed. Even though the Council of Nicea did not end the Arian

heresy which it original set out to combat it produced a statement of faith which impacted Christianity and still remains the foundation for orthodox theology. The creed is accepted by Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians making it the most universally accepted statement of faith. Centuries after the council of Nicea, the church has survived and continues to survive heretical attacks against the very core of the message delivered in the Nicene Creed. The council of Nicea set in a clear statement truth that was taught by Christ and the apostles. Thus, Christians were and are still able to identify heresies and falsehoods being spread as true Christian teachings.

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