The Council of Nicaea Addressing of the Arianism Controversy and its Implication for the Church

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Introduction

The study of church history not only provides background information into the various victories and struggles of the church, the various movements, controversies, heresies, and doctrinal formulations, but also allows for serious theological reflections. Studying church history provides the answer to the question; what does it mean to be a Christian? Glenn Miller argues that by studying church history we are able to determine the “essence of Christianity; that is, identifying what made Christianity identifiable among other historical movements.”

Throughout church history various councils were called to address a variety of heresies and controversies. The doctrinal formulations from these gatherings, while not settling the questions for all times, have provided the church community guidance and some clarity into these various issues. The Council at Nicaea convened in 325 to consider the question of the nature of the Second Person in the Trinity (Manifestation is the preferred word over Person among Oneness Pentecostals, also called Apostolics, when referring to the Godhead, and instead of Trinity, this same group prefers the word Godhead). Specifically, it sought to determine whether or not Jesus Christ was of the same substance with the Father as was the orthodox teaching, or was he of a similar substance as the Arians insisted. The answer to that question impinges upon the deity of the Son of God, for if he were not of the same substance as the Father, he would not be equal with the Father. And if he were not equal with the Father, then could the Son be considered fully God? Does the Son of God owe his existence to a prior existing substance, or was he made ex nihilo? These were some of the questions that faced the church fathers at that day, which was proving to be divisive. In an effort to bring closure to this question, and to reestablish unity in the church, Constantine called for this ecumenical council.

The scope of this paper is not to provide the history of church development from the first century to the present. Rather its goal is modest as it seeks only to examine the Council of Nicaea, the controversy leading to the convening of that counsel, its conclusions, and the implications for the church.

Thesis

In spite of the major accomplishment of Nicaea, with the adoption of the term homoousios, meaning that the Father and the Son are of the same substance, this did not put to rest the question of the nature of the Second Person in the Trinity for all times, for Arian thought continues to be a reality even to the twenty first century, as evidenced by the Jehovah Witnesses Christology.

Controversy Leading to Nicaea

The early church found itself having to deal with several heresies. Each heresy challenged the early church fathers with their own set of truth claims. Church councils were called to deal with these matters. As important as the Council of Nicaea is to church history, it was not the first meeting of the church fathers to address a Christological controversy in the church. The Synod of Antioch (268/269) met to deal with the controversy spawned by Paul of Samosata, with his adoptionism view, who rejected the idea that the divine Logos should be compounded with a human body. Uwe Lang states that Paul felt that to compound the Logos with a human body would be, “contrary to his dignity or rank as the Son of God” Malchion,
objected to Paul and insisted instead that divinity and humanity have been united in Christ.

In *The Ecclesiastical History of Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus*, book I, chapter XV translated by Chester Hartranft, Hartranft reports that Sozomenus provides a history of the Arian heresy that eventually lead to the ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325. He records that Arius was ordained deacon by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, but who excommunicated Arius because Arius berated Bishop Peter who had anathematized the zealots of Melitius and rejected their baptism. Arius was upset with Peter for his actions against the zealots, and could not be persuaded to relent in his criticism.

Following the martyrdom of Peter, Arius petitioned Achillas and asked forgiveness from him. Achillas forgave Arius and restored him to his office as deacon, and Arius was subsequently appointed to the presbytery. As a presbyter Arius began to articulate a Christology that departed from the understanding of orthodoxy. The thrust of this doctrine was that: “the Son of God was made out of that which had no prior existence, that there was a period of time in which he existed not; that, as possessing free will, he was capable of vice and virtue, and that he was created and made.” Arius’s position amounts to a denial that Jesus Christ was consubstantial and co-eternal with the Father.

The church historian Theodoret, in his work, *The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret, Book I*, surmised that Arius acted out of jealousy when he saw that the “high priesthood was committed to Alexander.” According to Theodoret, not only did Arius depart from orthodoxy in affirming that the Son of God was a created being, he approached this with vigor, teaching it in the church, in general meetings, and also going from house to house, “endeavouring to make men the slaves of his error.” There was nothing sinister about Arius’s efforts because he was sincere in what he believed. Church fathers then, as do most theologians now, may consider Arius to have been sincerely wrong in his doctrine, but a case could be made that his was a mistake of the head, and not the product of a deceptive heart.

Socrates Scholasticus, in *The Ecclesiastical History, Book I* reports that in view of the rapid spread of Arius’s doctrine, Alexander Bishop of Alexandria sent out a letter to ministers of the church to warn them of these “lawless and anti−christian men,” whom he characterized as the “forerunner of Antichrist.” Alexander names as apostates: Arius, Achillas Aithales, Carpnes, another Arius, Sarmates, Euzoius, Lucius Julian, Menas, Helladis, Gaius, Secundus, and Theonas. Alexander summarizes their teaching as being contrary to Scriptures, and involving these elements: that God was not always the Father; that the Word of God [Jesus Christ] was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing by ‘the I AM, meaning that there was a time when Jesus did not exist; that the Son is neither like the Father as it regards his essence but one of the Father’s works; that Jesus is mutable and susceptible of change; “hence the Word is alien to and other than the essence of God.”

The heart of Arius is felt in his letter to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia as Theodoret reports in chapter IV of his history. Complaining to Eusebius of his banishment from Alexandria, and excommunication from the church he writes:

He has driven us out of the city as atheists, because we do not concur in what he publicly preaches, namely, God always, the Son always; as the Father so the Son; the Son Co−exists unbegotten with God; He is everlasting; neither by thought nor by any interval does God precede the Son; always God, always Son; he is begotten of the unbegotten; the Son is of God Himself.

Arius’s objection to the orthodox doctrine of Jesus seems to have sprung out of what would appear to be a logical inconsistency. In other words, how could a begotten being be co-eternal
with the begetter? In that same letter Arius complained that all the bishops of the East have been likewise condemned for holding his view on the Godhead, and particularly as it applies to the Son.

That Arius was not alone in his opinion is documented elsewhere. According to Sozomenus, presbyters Aithalas, Achillas, Carpones, Sarmates, and Arius, and deacons Euzoïus, Macarius, Julius, Menas, and Helladius join Arius. In addition to these, several others in Alexandria embraced this doctrine and took sides with Arius and these men. One notable supporter of Arius and a promoter of Arianism was Eusebius. When Eusebius and his supporters had petitioned Alexander, bishop of Alexandria to embrace Arius’s position and were not successful in persuading him, they took this as an insult, and as a result, “they became indignant and came to a stronger determination to support the doctrine of Arius.” Sozomenus surmised that these joined Arius for at least two reasons; first, because they believed that this doctrine was of God; second, others embraced these men out of sympathy, believing that they were ill-treated and excommunicated without just cause. So, while some supported this teaching for political reasons, at least some of the supporters of Arius, like Arius himself, believed that this teaching was of God.

Sozomenus notes that attempts to resolve this doctrinal dispute did not avail. Arius and his followers held fast to their view on the nature of the Son of God. How to resolve such church matters was no longer solely in the purview of the bishop and other church men. With the conversion of Constantine the Great, to Christianity in 312, the emperor now took a keen interest in church matters. After his conversion Constantine, desiring to foster unity among the bishops, convened an ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 to deal with Arianism. Among those present at the conference were notables such as Macarius of Jerusalem, Eustathius, and Alexander of Alexandria. On account of his advanced age, Julius, bishop of Rome, could not attend, but was represented by Vito and Vicentius, presbyters of his church. According to Sozomenus, in all, there were approximately “three hundred and twenty bishops present, accompanied by a multitude of presbyters and deacons.”

But why did Constantine take such keen interest in church matters? After all, he was not a churchman. Generally, the prevailing view expressed as to why he called for this church council was to achieve universality and authority in church matters. But a secondary, and perhaps even more pressing purpose was Constantine's desire to hold a council to establish political unity. To Constantine political unity was not probable without ecclesiastical unity, for these two were interdependent. Carnegie Calían states that “the possibility of unity was threatened at the time by Arius and his followers. It was Constantine's hope to establish a unifying bond among the feuding churchmen and thereby create the semblance of a state church.” The Arian controversy evolved over several decades. Schaff noted three stages: (1) From the outbreak of the controversy to the temporary victory of orthodoxy at the council of Nicaea; a.d. 318–325; (2) the Arian and semi-Arian reaction, and its prevalence to the death of Constantius; a.d. 325–361; and (3) The final victory, and the completion of the Nicene creed; to the council of Constantinople, a.d. 381.

The Council of Nicaea brings to an end the first phase of this controversy. The Council’s main concern was Arius’s and his followers’ teaching on the nature of Jesus Christ, which directly related to the church’s understanding of the Trinity. Philip Schaff states that if the biblical teaching of monotheism is presumed, that is, if God is One, (Deut. 6:4), “and if Christ and the Holy Ghost are distinct from the Father and yet participate in the divine substance, God must be triune.” Any statement therefore at Nicaea regarding Jesus Christ’s divinity also touches
on the nature of the godhead. It was under the monumental weight of this Christological question that these churchmen gathered in an attempt to clarify this doctrine with the view toward forging unity in the church, and from the emperor’s perspective, also unity in the empire which was threatened by this ongoing feud.

The Product of Nicaea: The Nicene Creedal Statement

What was the Council at Nicaea able to produce? Philip Schaff, in his translation of the work, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* presents the Nicene Creed as found in several historical documents: in the Acts of the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, in the Epistle of Eusebius of Caesarea to his own Church, in the Epistle of St. Athanasius Ad Jovianum Imp., in the Ecclesiastical Histories of Theodoret and Socrates, and elsewhere. He notes that there are some variations in some of these texts, but that such variations are not materially important. According to Schaff, the Nicene Creed reads:

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, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten (γεννηθέντα), not made, being of one substance (ὁμοούσιον, consubstantialem) with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not (ἤν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν), or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion—all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.

This is the creedal statement with which the church has been familiar, and has taken for granted for seventeen millennia. But this statement was hard fought with each word or phrase deliberately chosen to communicate the clearest statement about the Trinity and the nature of the Logos. Schaff observes that at Nicaea a series of attempts were made to develop language that was acceptable to all. They concluded that they needed language that was clear and unequivocal if there is to be unity of faith. It was for the desired goal of unity that the phrase *homoousios* was proposed and eventually adopted.

What precisely did the Council mean by selecting *homoousios*? According to Schaff, St. Athanasius was clear what it meant. Athanasius’ understanding was that Jesus, the Son was not only like to the Father, but the same as the Father. Jesus as the Son differs from us in that “the resemblance of the Son to the Father, and his immutability, are different from ours.” With other humans, some attributes are acquired, which arise from “our fulfilling the divine commands.” Jesus acquired nothing from the Father that was not properly his by virtue of his being of the same nature as the Father. To Athanasius the “Son is not only like to the Father, but inseparable from the substance of the Father.”

But how the attendees arrived at this statement about the incarnate Word gives insight into their understanding of two phrases, *homoousios* (of the same substance or essence) and *homoiousios* (of like substance or essence). Christopher Hall states that many of these doctrinal controversies were grounded in linguistics. For example at the Council of Nicaea the participants debated which of these two words more clearly defined who Jesus is. There the term *homoousios*, meaning the Son is of one essence with the Father, and the phrase *homoiousios*,
meaning that the Son is of like essence with the Father were under consideration. Whereas the forces representing Arianism preferred *homoiousois*, those representing orthodoxy as led by Athanasius’ camp insisted on *homoousios*. In his letter to Paulinus, Bishop of Tyre, Eusebius, a staunch supporter of Arianism wrote that he affirmed that the unbegotten [the Father] is one and that there is one [the Son] which exists by Him, yet the Son was the same substance as the Father. In his affirmation Eusebius wrote that the Son: “does not at all participate in the nature or substance of the unbegotten, entirely distinct in nature and in power, and made after perfect likeness both of character and power to the maker.” Eusebius here describes the essence of *homoiousois*.

Nicaea adopted the term *homoousios* instead of *homoiousois*. Pier Beatrice states that the use of *homoousios* at Nicaea was curious because the word is not mentioned in Scripture, and it has an obscure history before 325. As to why it was employed at this council is indicated in only three historical sources. According to Beatrice, only Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria and Ambrose of Milan explicitly stated why it was used. Ambrose suggests that *homoousios* was used polemically against the Arian embrace of a letter by Eusebius of Nicomedia which states that “If we speak of a true and uncreated Son of God, we begin to confess him consubstantial with the Father” which admission the Arians were not prepared to make. From Athanasius’ point of view “the Fathers of the council wrote the word *homoousios* in order to avoid, once and for all, the tendentious and corrupted interpretations of the Arians.” Eusebius who was present at the council and who gave ascent to the final document was forced to defend his approval notwithstanding the inclusion of the word *homoousios*. In this defense Eusebius wrote that he had proposed a creed to the assembly that was absolutely orthodox and was accepted without any reservation by Constantine who thought that what Eusebius presented was orthodox. Beatrice indicates that Eusebius wrote that Constantine, while endorsing the document nevertheless ordered the insertion of the single word ‘consubstantial.’

Scholasticus Socrates reports that of the three hundred and eighteen bishops assembled at Nicaea only five did not embrace the decision of the council that affirmed the true deity of the Son and his equality with the Father. Those dissenting objected to the term *homoousios*, believing that Jesus was not of the same essence, or consubstantial with the father. These were Eusebius bishop of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nice, Maris of Chalcedon, Theonas of Marmarica, and Secundus of Ptolemais.

In chapter XX of his book, *The Ecclesiastical History of Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus*, translated by Chester Hartranft, Hartranft, states that according to Sozomenus’ account, “all the priests agreed with one another and conceded that the Son is consubstantial with the Father.” He reports that at the beginning of the council there were but seventeen who supported Arius, but that in the end most of them yielded to the orthodox view. Constantine sided with the opponents of Arius and “regarded the unanimity of the conference to be a divine approbation.” He ordered that those who opposed should be forthwith banished, “as guilty of endeavoring to overthrow the Divine definitions.”

In spite of Sozomenus’ optimistic assessment of the work at the Nicene Council it did not resolve the dispute for all times. Indeed we see in Philip Schaff’s translation of Saint Augustine’s work, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Augustine addressing this issue. He wrote: “it remains therefore that he [Jesus] is equal according to substance; therefore the substance of both is the same.” Arthur McGiffert, concurs that the Council of Nicaea, notwithstanding its creed, to which the participants, under the watchful eyes of Constantine agreed, did not bring the Arian controversy to an end. Indeed, Bede
in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, Book I*, Chapter VIII, notes that although the Arian heresy was condemned in the Council of Nicaea, its influence was felt not only in all the churches of the continent, but even those churches in Britain, “with its pestilent and fatal doctrines.”

But not only had Arianism infected Asia, Europe, and even across the English Channel, it had also descended into Africa. Sarah Lancaster states that as late as 410-418, St Augustine was forced to address this controversy. She states that Augustine’s project, “namely to defend the Catholic faith that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of one substance, implies that the error with which he is most concerned is the objection that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not of one substance.” Augustine wanted to make sure it is understood that being “sent” does not imply inferiority, or change in the immutable substance of God.

Although orthodoxy carried the day, the Arians were not willing to abandon their cause. Motivated by their displeasure toward those who had opposed Arius, they hoped that by continuing to carry the banner of Arianism, they might eventually win this Christological argument. The antagonism between the two camps continued and within a few years after the Council ended its work, a quarrel broke out between Eusebius, the Arian and Eustathius, bishop of Antioch, a determined supporter of the Nicene conclusions. McGiffert states that Eustathius accused Eusebius of perverting the Nicene doctrines. Eusebius denied the charge, and in turn accused Eustathius with Sabellianism. Sabellianism, also known as Modalism, holds that Father, Son and Holy Spirit, sometimes referred to as manifestations of the Godhead, are not entirely distinct persons but rather, are modes of God’s being and activity.

When the dispute gained momentum, and there was no hope that it would be settled without intervention, a council was convened in 330 in Antioch to adjudicate the matter. The council, according to McGiffert was comprised primarily of bishops of Arian or semi-Arian tendencies. The result of the Council in favor of Eusebius, and against Eustathius is hardly surprising giving the makeup of the council. Eustathius was condemned and deposed from his bishopric and was banished by the Emperor to Illyria, where he eventually died.

Besides dealing with the central question before the council, on its agenda were other ecclesiastical matters. Schaff states that these men assembled at Nicaea issued a number of canons, twenty in all, dealing with questions of discipline, and the validity of heretical baptism, among others. The council also dealt with the calculation of the time of Easter, but by far its most important statement was the Nicene Creedal statement on the Godhead.

**Conclusion**

Although Nicaea did not settle the critical question on the Godhead, and the nature of the Son to the satisfaction of all, it marked an important milestone in church history. Here for the first time the church had a creedal statement philosophically conceived and articulated that supported a fundamental Christian understanding of the One God. This creed affirmed the One God in Three Persons without subordination of persons. It also avoids Sabellianism by affirming distinction of persons. Nicaea demonstrates that Jesus was not simply a product of divine activity, but was rather one with, and inseparable from the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God.

Nicaea may be criticized for basing its most important creedal statement on the word *homoousios* which according to Beatrice, its use was curious because the word is not mentioned in Scripture, and it has an obscure history before 325. Notwithstanding that observation, and the political motive which may have been partially responsible for the convening of these churchmen, it is remarkable that they were able to produce a document that some seventeen
hundred years later, is still considered as representative of orthodoxy.

But the Council of Nicaea had broader implications for the church for several hundred years. Following the conversion of Constantine persecution of the church came to an end. With his conversion and active involvement in church affairs any semblance of separation of church and state came to an end. In a real sense the church’s independence to hammer out church doctrines among the bishops and other churchmen was impinged upon by the state. Nicaea paved the way for the church to become a political entity, quite a departure from its original purpose of spreading the Word. How the state’s involvement in the life of the church may have impacted its effectiveness is a subject for further study.
Bibliography


