

# IT TURNED ON A WORD: HOMOOUSIOS and the COUNCIL OF NICAEA

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In the early fourth century, following what J.N.D. Kelly refers to as “the first great phase of doctrinal development,”<sup>1</sup> the continuing discussion of Trinitarian theology faced a polarizing dispute regarding the pivotal question of the essence of Jesus Christ. This proved to be a decisive moment in Christian history, for in it the deity of Christ and the doctrine of salvation hung in the balance. “In the Nicene age minds crashed against each other,” Philip Schaff writes, “and fought the decisive battles for and against the doctrines of the true deity of Christ, with which the divinity of Christianity stands or falls.”<sup>2</sup> Divinity, ultimately, would stand through the adoption of the creed which emerged from the Council of Nicaea...and it turned on a word. This paper will look at the three viewpoints regarding the essence of Christ from the fourth century, the resulting introduction of *homoousios* as orthodox doctrine through the ratification of the Nicene Creed, and theological reflection on the implications of the creed for Christians today.

The roots of the controversy of Christ’s essence are found emerging from the philosophical and theological climate of the fourth century. Origen, who spoke of the Trinity as somewhat of an hierarchy - the Father being the greatest of the three, the Spirit the least, and the Son and Spirit generated eternally by the Father - and taught a separateness of essence between Father and Son and subordination of the Son as secondary God beneath the Father, served as a starting point for what would become known as the Arian heresy.<sup>3</sup> The father of this heresy was Arius, a presbyter of the church district of Baucalis in Alexandria, whose claim was that the Word of God (*Logos*) was not coeternal with God, instead created by God before anything was created and, therefore, a creature of the Father’s will.

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<sup>1</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 223.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311-600*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 618.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Hill, *Zondervan Handbook to the History of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 80.

This controversy had been brewing for over a decade and hit its boiling point when Arius was deposed and excommunicated in 321 by a council of Egyptian and Libyan bishops in Alexandria following multiple theological clashes with Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and Arius' accusations of Sabellianism (or modalism - the view of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as modes or aspects of One God as perceived by the believer) toward Alexander. This excommunication proved ineffective as Arius continued to hold religious gatherings and, after being driven from Alexandria, continued to push his doctrine in Palestine and Nicomedia.<sup>4</sup> Alexander issued circulated letters against Arians (those who ascribed to Arius' teaching) further inciting this theological battle. The Roman Emperor, Constantine, who decriminalized Christianity in 313 with the Edict of Milan, convened the Council at Nicaea in part to bring Christian unity around the relation of Christ to God.<sup>5</sup> Up to this point in history, no "official" position existed within the church. Therefore, orthodoxy was to be created surrounding the essence of the Son and Spirit at Nicaea.

The Council of Nicaea would bring together three viewpoints on the deity and essence of Christ. On the Arian side, Arius held to the view of One God who alone is ingenerate, eternal, without beginning, true, possessing immortality, wise, good, sovereign, and judge of all. And since He is "unique, transcendent and individual, the being or essence of the Godhead cannot be shared or communicated."<sup>6</sup> To do so, argued Arius, would mean God is divisible and changeable. To have any other being participate in His essence would result in a duality of divinity. Anything else would have to come into existence through an act of creation on His part. The Son is a creature, created from nothing by God, and owing his being to the Father's will. In the Arian view, begotten or 'to beget' is understood as 'to make' or 'to create.'<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the Son is a creature who had a beginning, born outside of time before creation and of a different essence (*heteroousios*). The Arian view of Christ's essence was summed up through a simple motto: "There was when He was not."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, from this perspective the Son as a creature does not have access to the Wisdom which belongs to the

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, 620.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 619-621.

<sup>6</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, 227.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Maxwell, "The Nicene Creed in the church." *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 1 (2015 2015): 13-22. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 29, 2016), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 161.

Father since they do not share the same essence. By participation in grace the Son is called God by name only and similarly, by grace, He is exalted to the designation of Son. “The net result of this teaching,” writes J.N.D. Kelly, “was to reduce the Son to a demigod; if He infinitely transcended all other creatures, He Himself was no more than a creature in relation to the Father.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other side stood Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and his chief spokesman, Athanasius, who accused the Arians of the destruction of the doctrine of salvation, maintaining that “if the Son is a creature, man remains still separated, as before, from God; no creature can redeem other creatures, and unite them with God.”<sup>10</sup> On the question of essence of the Son, the orthodox view was firm. The same essence (*homoousios*) of the Father is of eternity and through generation is in the Son. “Generation and creation are therefore entirely different ideas. Generation is an immanent, necessary, and perpetual process in the essence of God himself, the Father’s eternal communication of essence or self to the Son; creation, on the contrary, is an outwardly directed, free, single act of the will of God, bringing forth a different and temporal substance out of nothing.”<sup>11</sup> For the orthodox bishops, at stake was the nature, the very *essence*, of Jesus. “To sunder Jesus from christology,” writes John Breck, “or to propose a ‘christology’ that posits a Christ who is other than the eternal divine Son, is to preach ‘another Gospel’ which neither Paul nor any other apostolic witness would acknowledge or proclaim.”<sup>12</sup>

In the middle stood the Semi-Arians, or Eusebians, who were merely guilty of evading the matter from a diplomatic stance. Represented initially by Eusebius of Caesarea and later by Cyril of Jerusalem, the Semi-Arians attempted to leave room by not taking a hard-line stance in either direction, arguing that “Christ is not a creature, but co-eternal with the Father, though not of the same, but only of *like* essence, and subordinate to him.”<sup>13</sup> This stance of *like* essence (*homoiousios*) satisfied neither the orthodox party or the Arians.

Constantine called the bishops to Nicaea to bring unity to the church and, among other matters, bring resolution to the debate surrounding the essence of Jesus. Presiding over the council, his opening remarks called the bishops to “put

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<sup>9</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, 230.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Schaff, 649.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 658-659.

<sup>12</sup> John Breck. "The relevance of Nicene Christology." *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1987 1987): 41-64. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 29, 2016), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Schaff, 650.

away all causes of strife, and loose all the knots of discord by the laws of peace.”<sup>14</sup> At the outset of the proceedings, the Arians put forward a creed which was “rejected with tumultuous disapproval and torn into pieces.”<sup>15</sup> Its signers, save but two Egyptian bishops, immediately abandoned the Arian cause. Eusebius presented an ancient Palestinian confession which held similarities to the eventually adopted Nicene Creed, but lacked any position on the essence of the Son or Holy Spirit which the Arians were willing to adopt, but the orthodox camp saw this as troubling. In the eyes of Athanasius, the Palestinian confession left the capability for evasion. Athanasius “saw them nodding and winking to each other when the orthodox proposed expressions which they had thought of a way of escaping from the force of.”<sup>16</sup> It became clear an extra-biblical phrase would need to be used to create a firm footing regarding Christ’s essence. The origin of the introduction of *homoousios* at the Council of Nicaea remains in question by scholars as some, including Justo Gonzalez, contend it was a suggested addition by Constantine.<sup>17</sup> However, this term had been used in earlier writings by Origen,<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus,<sup>19</sup> and in similar construct (*una substantia*) by Tertullian.<sup>20</sup> Instead, as Philip Schaff contends, Constantine “gave his voice for the disputed word”<sup>21</sup> and a new creed utilizing *homoousios* was then presented and ratified with language specific to the essence of Jesus “...begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father.” Arius, along with the two Egyptian bishops who also would not sign, was banished to Illyria, his books burned and his followers branded as enemies of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

The significance of the Council of Nicaea remains pivotal in the life of the Christian, first and foremost, as the doctrine of salvation hinges on Jesus Christ being “undivided in essence and co-equal in power and glory...truly and properly God and truly and properly man.”<sup>23</sup> To be otherwise, Jesus offers no atonement for the sin of mankind and is simply a misguided teacher who succumbed to a horrific end. If Christ is *not* of the same essence but only of *like* essence or exalted

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Schaff, 626.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 628.

<sup>16</sup> Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Pier Franco Beatrice, "The word 'homoousios' from Hellenism to Christianity." *Church History* 71, no. 2 (June 2002): 243-272. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 12, 2016), 250.

<sup>19</sup> Percival, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Beatrice, 246-247.

<sup>21</sup> Schaff, 628.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 629-630.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Sandall, *The History of The Salvation Army, Volume 1*, (New York: The Salvation Army, 1979), 288.

designation, the life of Christ, his work, his death, his resurrection are of historic note, but not salvific in nature. Alexander and Athanasius knew this was at stake, and with it the meaning and purpose of the church. As Luke Timothy Johnson concludes, “If the significance of Jesus is simply his words and deeds in first-century Palestine (to the extent that we can know them), the very existence of the church is a mistake. If Jesus is not the powerful risen Lord through whom we approach God, the entire life of the church is a lie.”<sup>24</sup> And salvation found in Jesus a lie along with it.

At the heart of the Nicene Creed is to answer the question, *What does it mean to be Christian?* With the creed recited in unity we anchor our faith to the boundaries of orthodoxy, including our view of the essence of Christ, in a clear, bold, communal profession of our community’s faith or, in other words, what it means to call yourself “Christian.” Our conventional responses to this question, as stated by Johnson, have typically led toward two extremes. Either we focus on unyielding boundaries (single issue agendas, litmus tests, moral Christianity, and exclusionary sectarianism) or a lack of boundaries (openness to our changing culture, full acceptance where inclusion trumps boundaries, individual liberty at the expense of communal integrity).<sup>25</sup> Both of these extremes present a system where the individual Christian determines the norms and the church becomes “a club that one can join on one’s own terms.”<sup>26</sup>

But “when we confess our faith in the words of the creed, we are articulating...the doctrinal content of our theology,”<sup>27</sup> affirming together what it is we believe, focusing our attention on that which is essential to the Christian faith, and serving as our statement of unity as a Christian community, all while calling us to a belief and faith beyond what we know and feel. “The significance of the Creed, in other words, lies in its capacity to reveal and to proclaim - and thereby to reactualize within the confessing community - not only ‘what God does’ within human history, but also ‘who God is’ in his innermost being. For what God does in granting salvation to the world is to communicate his own personal, divine life to those who receive him in faith.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 300-301.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>27</sup> Maxwell, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Breck, 51.

In the fourth century, a gathering of over three hundred bishops summoned by Constantine wrestled with words to determine the essence of the Word. With the turn of a word, the resulting Nicene Creed reminds us of how Emmanuel, *God with us*, came to dwell among his people, take upon himself the wages of the sin that enslave us, and conquer death once and for all, a work that only God himself could do. In the recitation of that word, we speak a creed designed to “preserve purity in the church and to release joy in corporate worship”<sup>29</sup> which has traveled with us for centuries and across the globe. Saints before and saints yet to come have spoken and will speak this word. And as we continue to speak that word, we are connected to a faith larger than ourselves, anchored in the Gospel, which has been restated and affirmed throughout the ages. In that word, we speak of One God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and of His essence, the *same essence*, thanks to Constantine and our Nicene fathers.

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<sup>29</sup> Barry W. Liesch, *People in the Presence of God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 106.

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