

Did Nicea Resolve the Arian Controversy?

PA 317 – St. Athanasius and the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4th Century
Dr. John Behr
Fall 1998

In the 4th century, various controversies arose concerning the nature or the divinity of the Logos that became incarnate as Jesus Christ. Even prior to the fourth century, there were many other Christological debates involving such heretics (to name but a few) as the Ebionites who denied any divine aspect to Christ and said that He was a mere man¹ to the Docetics who claimed that Christ was only a Spirit who appeared as flesh.² Later on, in more "orthodox" Christological discussions, it was argued that Christ was the Logos made flesh, i.e. Jesus was of two substances (divinity and flesh) in a *communicato idiomatum*. One of the many questions that arose was how did the Logos, the Word of God, relate to God the Father?

One of the near universal trends in Christology of this time was a subordination of the Logos to the Father. Out of this debate rose the great heresy of Arius. As elaborated below, Arius taught a unique Christology centered on a subordinate Logos. In response to his teachings, the Council of Nicea met in 325 A.D. to deal with this new heresy. The question then arises, "Did the Council of Nicea resolve the Arian controversy?" It will be the intention of this author to focus on the teachings of Arius, his counterpart Alexander of Alexandria, and the outcome of the Council of Nicea to address this question.

Arius was a Libyan priest who lived in Alexandria.³ In the year 318 A.D. controversy arose

¹J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper, San Francisco, 1978), pg. 139.

²ibid, pgs. 141-2.

³RPC Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988), pg. 3.

concerning his teachings. In order to maintain the absolute monarchy of the Father, as was a theological concern of that time, Arius taught that

...the Son, having been begotten timelessly by the Father, and created and established before the aeons, was not before He was begotten, but, begotten timelessly before all else, was alone given existence by the Father. For He is not eternal or co-eternal or co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does He have being together with the Father, as some people speak of things being in relationship, thus introducing two ingenerate principles.⁴

Arius also stated that

"He is from that which is not. We speak in this way because He is neither a part of God nor from some substrate."⁵

Thus, in his attempt to maintain the "...absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God, the unoriginate source of all reality..."⁶ and also to allow for an enfleshed deity that can suffer, Arius and his followers taught four major propositions⁷: (1) The Son is a creature formed by the Father out of nothing. (2) since the Son is a creature, he had to have a beginning, i.e. there was a time when he was not, (3) the Son does not fully know or comprehend the Father who created him since "The Father is alien in being to the Son..."⁸ and (4) the Son is able to experience change, to suffer, and is even capable of sin. In other words, the Son is a created, lesser deity, and therefore worships God

⁴Arius, *Letter to Bishop Alexander*, section 4.

⁵Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, section 5.

⁶J.N.D. Kelly, pg 227

⁷ibid, pgs. 227-9.

⁸Arius, *Thaleia*, as quoted in Aloys Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition; Volume 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1975), pg. 224.

the Father as his creator just as other created beings do.⁹

One of the main critics of Arius's teachings was Alexander of Alexandria. He countered the Arian theology by writing that

"...the Father exists for ever in the presence of the Son, which is why he is called 'Father'. In the eternal presence of the Son with him, the Father exists perfectly, needing no supplement in goodness, having begotten the only-begotten Son not in time nor after an interval nor from non-existence."¹⁰

Alexander further states in his *Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica* that

They [the Arians] denounced every pious apostolic doctrine; they organized in a Jewish manner a work group contending against Christ. They deny the divinity of our Saviour, and proclaim Him equal to all. Singling out every expression to His economy for salvation and of His humiliation for our sake, they attempt from them to bring together the proclamation of their own impiety, and from the beginning they turn away from expressions of His divinity and form words of His indescribable glory with the Father.¹¹

Alexander makes it plain in his writings also that the Son is not ingenerate as is the Father, but that the Son has an unbeginning birth from the Father.¹² Alexander speaks often of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father and his terminology demonstrates that Alexander's theology is indebted to Origen and his neo-platonic leanings.¹³ Alexander also states that the Son is of a similar essence to the Father, unchanging in his nature, and that he knows the Father perfectly¹⁴. Thus,

⁹R.P.C. Hanson, pg. 14-15.

¹⁰Urk. III No. 14.26 (23) quoted in Hanson, pg. 141.

¹¹Bishop Alexander of Alexandria writes to Alexander of Thessalonica, section 4.

¹²RPC Hanson, pg. 142.

¹³ibid, pg. 143-4.

¹⁴RPC Hanson, pg. 140.

Alexander of Alexandria is arguing for a divine, eternally begotten Logos which can fully reveal the Father.

The council of Nicea was called by the Emperor Constantine¹⁵ to bring an end (hopefully) to the battle that was raging between the Arians and the non-Arians that had not been quenched by the Council in Antioch earlier in 325 A.D.¹⁶ The Nicean council met from May to July of 325 A.D. and was attended by anywhere from 270 to 318 bishops, depending on the source. Very few Western bishops attended this council so it was in nature a very Eastern council. Many pro-Arian bishops (at least 17) were present and even Arius himself was there, but only as an observer.

From this council, the Nicene Creed was drawn up which states

We believe in one God Father Almighty Maker of all things, seen and unseen:
And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only-begotten of the Father, that is on the substance (*ousia*) of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of True God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, both things in heaven and things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead:

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say, "there was a time when he did not exist", and "Before being begotten he did not exist", and that he came into being from non-existence, or who allege that the Son of God is of another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or is alterable or changeable, these the Catholic and Apostolic Church condemns.¹⁷

From the above text, one can distill out four important points relative to the Arian controversy. First, the Son is True God of True God. By stating this, the Niceans are refuting any subordinationism of

¹⁵ibid, pg. 155.

¹⁶ibid, pgs. 150-51.

¹⁷RPC Hanson, pg. 163.

the Son to the Father.¹⁸ Second, the Son is begotten not made. This is in exclusive contrast to the Arian theology that the Son was made from nothingness.¹⁹ Thirdly, that the Son is from the substance of the Father which like the statement before is in direct opposition to the Arian theology of the Son being of a different nature than the Father.²⁰ Lastly, is the use of the non-biblical term *homoousios* which at that time in the controversy had neither a precise meaning nor was it a part of anyone's theology. In fact, *homoousios* was a term that simply aggravated the Arians because it had for them a materialistic sense and thus it was used in the creed to keep the Arian bishops from agreeing to a creed without the *homoousios* clause.²¹

The Arians thought that *homoousios* or "consubstantial" meant that the object being termed *homoousios* was derived from the original in a materialistic fashion. Consider a slice of cheese "derived" from an original block of cheese. One can claim, in Arian thinking, that the slice of cheese is *homoousios* with the block because it was originally part of the block of cheese. Likewise, the Arians considered *homoousios* to mean that the Son was "sliced off" of the Father.²²

The Nicean party did not view *homoousios* in this fashion. In his Letter to his Church concerning the Council at Nicea, Eusebius of Caesarea states,

...only one word, *homoousios*, was added, which he himself [the emperor] interpreted saying that the Son might not be said to be *homoousios* according to the affections of bodies, and is from the Father neither according to division nor according to a cutting off, for the immaterial, intellectual, and incorporeal nature is unable to subsist in some corporeal affection, but it is befitting to think of such things in a divine and

¹⁸Grillmeier, pg. 268.

¹⁹ibid, pg. 267.

²⁰ibid, pg. 267.

²¹RPC Hanson, pgs. 165-170.

²²Hanson, pg. 197.

ineffable manner.²³

Continuing on the same letter, Eusebius states,

"*Homoousios* with the Father" indicates that the Son of God bears no resemblance to originated creatures but that He is alike in every way to the Father who has begotten and that He is not from any other hypostasis and substance but from the Father.²⁴

Thus it appears that Eusebius' interpretation of the Creed is that the Son is derived from the existence of the Father. It appears that it never affirmed the divinity of the Son, but only affirmed that the Son is derived from the Father being neither created *ex nihilo* nor from pre-existent matter. It would not be until several years later, that Athanasius of Alexandria would officially define *homoousios* as meaning "of one essence" or "consubstantial in essence" or "equal in divinity" to the Father by stating that *homoousios* has a derivative meaning. The Son is not *homoousios* to the Father because they were derived from the same pre-existent matter – that would make them brothers. Rather, Athanasius defines the term as meaning that the Son derives His existence from the Father stating "...it is thereby confessed that what is generated from anything, is coessential with that which generated it."²⁵

The creed also anathematizes anyone who states that the Son is of another *hypostasis* or substance than the Father. Here is where the creed becomes a point of confusion. It is here that one sees that the terms *ousia* / *hypostasis* / substance are synonyms. This would prove to be a point of contention and misunderstanding for later generations of Christians from Marcellus of Ancyra to Cyril and Nestorius and on through the council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.

²³Eusebius of Caesarea, *Letter to His Church concerning the Council at Nicea*, section 7.

²⁴*ibid*, section 13.

²⁵Athanasius of Alexandria, *Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, pg. 477.

In conclusion, it appears that in dealing with the situation of the time, the Arian controversy that rocked the Christian East, was only temporarily solved by the council of Nicea. The Arian bishops who refused to sign the Creed were deposed by the council and sent into exile.²⁶ Arius likewise was deposed.²⁷ Nonetheless, despite the fact that a battle had been won at Nicea, the Arian war was not over yet. Arianism would eventually spread into Europe and become the predominant form of Christianity for years to come. Debates over terminologies such as *homoousios* would continue and Neo-Arianism would become a problem that the Christian church would have to deal with and would result in the convening of the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. to again deal with this Neo-Arianism, Homoian Arianism, and other subordinationist issues including that of the Holy Spirit. It is these subsequent battles that would rely on the teachings and theology of Athanasius of Alexandria.

²⁶RPC Hanson, pg. 172.

²⁷ibid, pg. 173.