

## CHURCH HISTORY (6): Nicene (3)

The early church called seven ecumenical (universal) Councils. The first and second occurred in the fourth century. The first was in Nicea in 325 and resulted in the Nicene Creed, whereas the second was in Constantinople in 381 and resulted in an enlarged Nicene Creed.

### I. The Arian Controversy

1. *The events that led up to Nicea.* "Arius (280-336), a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt, argued that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, was no more than a created being, though He was the greatest of God's creatures—an archangel" (Lawson).<sup>1</sup> "As early as 318, Arius, had started teaching that the Father alone was God. The Logos or Son, was a created being – formed out of nothing by the Father before the universe was made. There was once a time when the Son had not existed. According to Arius, the Son was the first and greatest of all that God had created. He was closer to God than all others, and the rest of creation related to God through the Son (e.g. God had created everything else through Christ)" (Needham).<sup>2</sup>

God Himself then, in His own nature, is ineffable by all men. Equal or like Himself He alone has none, or one in glory. And ingenerate we call Him, because of Him who is generate by nature. We praise Him as without beginning because of Him who has a beginning. And adore Him as everlasting, because of Him who in time has come to be. The unbegun made the Son a beginning of things originated; and advanced Him as a Son to Himself by adoption. He has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence. For He is not equal, no, nor one in essence with Him.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Arius, and his followers, resurrected and conflated a number of earlier heresies, while adding their own twist. "The dominant idea in the views of Arius is the monotheistic principle of the Monarchians. There is One unbegotten God" (Seeberg).<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, the error of the Arians was threefold: first, they denied the Son's eternal generation. Athanasius summarized Arius as follows: "Before the Son began to be, or was either created or founded, he was not. The Son has a beginning but God is without beginning. God was not always Father, but there was a time when God was alone, and was not yet Father, and afterward he became Father. The Son was not always."<sup>5</sup> Second, they denied the Son's divinity. "The *Logos* is, therefore, a creature of the Father, created by Him as the medium in the creation of the world. Accordingly, he is not God in the full sense of the word, but through this enjoyment of the divine favor he receives the names, God and Son of God, as do also others" (Seeberg).<sup>6</sup> Third, they denied the Trinity. "The Arian controversy relates primarily to the deity of Christ, but in its course it touches also the deity of the Holy Ghost, and embraces therefore the whole mystery of the Holy Trinity and the incarnation of God, which is the very center of the Christian revelation" (Schaff).<sup>7</sup>

"The first to oppose Arius was the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander. Against the Arians, Alexander urged the claims of the 'apostolic doctrines of the church,' i.e., of the Apostles' Creed, as a vindication of his defense of the eternal divinity of the Son, together with that of the Holy Ghost" (Seeberg).<sup>8</sup> This led to two local Councils in Egypt (320) wherein Arius and his followers were condemned. "Arius was

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 124

<sup>2</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:219

<sup>3</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Arius), 4:457

<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:202

<sup>5</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 4:457

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:203

<sup>7</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:618

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:205

compelled to leave Alexandria. But the agitation was thus only increased, as a synod in Bithynia enlisted in his cause. As the agitation continued to grow and threatened to spread through the entire East, Constantine summoned a general council of the church to meet at Nicea" (Seeberg).<sup>9</sup> "Constantine felt that it was his duty as a Christian emperor to restore unity to his Empire's divided Church. He therefore summoned the first ecumenical Council of bishops from all over the Eastern Empire, and a few from the West, to settle the dispute. The Council met at Nicaea in north-west Asia Minor, in 325" (Needham).<sup>10</sup>

Three groups of people attended the Council (over 300 bishops with additional elders and deacons). (1) The Arians (led by Eusebius of Nicomedia). This was the smallest group who presented their statement of faith first. "This was rejected with indignation, and even the followers of Arius, with the exception of two, did not dare to adhere to it" (Seeberg).<sup>11</sup> (2) The moderates (led by Eusebius of Caesarea). Eusebius presented, what Seeberg calls, an "Origenistic confession (it borrowed language from Origen)." "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, the first-born of all creation, begotten of the Father before all the ages."<sup>12</sup> This statement, largely using Scriptural language, was embraced by all (though the Arians interpreted it differently). "The orthodox could find their views expressed in it as well as the Arians" (Seeberg).<sup>13</sup> (3) The orthodox (led by Alexander and Athanasius). "This group added the phrases, "the only begotten of the nature of the Father," and "begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father." "This formula became the confession of the council. Besides Arius, only five persons refused to sign it. These were banished by the emperor" (Seeberg).<sup>14</sup> The Creed ended with an anathema: "And those who say there was a time when he was not; and he was made out of nothing, or out of another substance or thing, or the Son of God is created, or changeable, or alterable – they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church."

2. *The events that followed Nicea.* "Arianism was condemned as heresy at the council of Nicea, but afterwards under various forms attained dominance for a time in the church, until at the second ecumenical council it was cast out forever" (Schaff).<sup>15</sup> "The Council of Nicaea seemed to have settled the Arian controversy and restored unity and peace to the Eastern Church. The appearance, however, was deceptive. The Church, especially in the East, was to be torn apart for another fifty years by the Arian dispute" (Needham).<sup>16</sup> "Following the Council in 325, some of the moderates did not like the word *homoousios* simply because it was not a scriptural word. But most did not like it because they feared it would open the door to the hated heresy of Sabellianism—that Father and Son were the same person. So after the Council of Nicea, there was a widespread reaction in the East against the Creed of Nicea. Only one section of the Easter Church stood firmly behind the Creed—Alexandria, which had deposed Arius in the first place" (Needham).<sup>17</sup>

(1) Arius was permitted to return to Alexandria. "Despite the Nicene Council's formulation of the Symbol of Nicaea and its condemnation of Arius and his followers, Arianism continued to find adherents. As time passed, many became sympathetic to Arius and even argued for his pastoral reinstatement. In the end, compromises began to seem expedient. As a means of maintaining peace, Constantine's

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<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:216

<sup>10</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:221

<sup>11</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:216

<sup>12</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 14:3

<sup>13</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:216

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:216

<sup>15</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:618

<sup>16</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:224

<sup>17</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:226

advisors urged him to reinstate Arius. Finally, Constantine caved in and overturned the council's anathema. He ordered Arius to be restored as a presbyter in Alexandria, the home of Athanasius" (Lawson).<sup>18</sup>

(2) The Arians were refuted by Athanasius. "When Alexander died on April 17, 328, the logical choice to succeed him as bishop was his protege, Athanasius (298-373). He succeeded Alexander at the relatively young age of thirty, overseeing the church in Alexandria and all the bishops in Egypt and Libya" (Lawson).<sup>19</sup> "When Constantine equivocated on the Nicene Council's conclusions and reinstated Arius as a presbyter in Alexandria (336), he ordered Athanasius to accept Arius back into this position. But true to his convictions, Athanasius refused. Because of his defiance, Constantine exiled Athanasius to the outer extremity of the Roman Empire in modern Germany" (Lawson).<sup>20</sup> "During these decades, Athanasius was banished no fewer than five times, each banishment and return to Alexandria representing either a change in emperors or a shift in the makeup of the palace ecclesiastical clique that had the emperor's ear. At times Athanasius was so completely out of imperial favor that he felt deserted by all his supporters. During one such hour he uttered his famous defiance, *Athanasius Against the World*. He would stand alone, if need be, against the whole empire" (Shelley).<sup>21</sup> "In his opposition to Arianism, Athanasius (nicknamed 'The Black Dwarf' because of his coloring and height) became the principle defender of orthodoxy in his generation. Because of his unyielding stand, he has been labeled the 'Father of Orthodoxy' and the 'saint of stubbornness.' Scholars have judged that he was the most significant bishop ever to occupy the ancient seat of Alexandria, an influential city for early Christianity, and the greatest theologian of his time" (Lawson).<sup>22</sup>

(3) The Arians were finally rejected at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Two important additions were added to the Creed in 381: the phrase, "begotten of the Father before all the worlds (which was in the original proposal by the moderates)," and an affirmation of the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father. While Arius himself died in 336, it was at the second ecumenical Council in 381, the teaching and followers of Arius were finally condemned. "Thus Arianism and the kindred errors were forever destroyed in the Roman empire, though kindred opinions continually reappear as isolated cases and in other connections" (Schaff).<sup>23</sup>

Arius was opposed first of all by his own bishop Alexander who contended for the true and proper deity of the Son and at the same time maintained the doctrine of an eternal sonship by generation. In course of time, however, his real opponent proved to be the archdeacon of Alexandria, the great Athanasius, who stands out on the pages of history as a strong, inflexible, and unwavering champion of the truth. Seeberg ascribes his great strength to three things, namely, (1) the great stability and genuineness; (2) the sure foundation on which he stood in his firm grasp on the conception of the unity of God, which preserved him from the subordinationism that was so common in his day; and (3) the unerring tact with which he taught men to recognize the nature and significance of the Person of Christ. He felt that to regard Christ as a creature was to deny that faith in Him which brings man into saving union with God.<sup>24</sup>

3. *The theology of the Nicene Creed.* (1) The consubstantiality of the Son. This means, the Son is of the same substance with the Father. This was suggested by the orthodox by the term *homousios* (*homo*

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<sup>18</sup> Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 125

<sup>19</sup> Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 127

<sup>20</sup> Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 127

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 110

<sup>22</sup> Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 125-126

<sup>23</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:640

<sup>24</sup> Louis Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, 85

= same; *ousios* = essence). "What the Council meant by this expression is set forth by Athanasius as follows: "That the Son is not only like to the Father, but that, as His image, He is the same as the Father."<sup>25</sup> It seems the term *homousios* was rather familiar, "used by Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian in at least two places. It would seem that more than a half of century before the meeting of the Council of Nicea, it was a common one among the Orthodox."<sup>26</sup> Contrary to this term, the moderates preferred *homoiousios* (*homoi* = similar; *ousios* = essence). This especially became a source of contention following the Council of Nicea in 325. "This term describes the relation of the Father to the Son by the non-Athanasian, non-Arian party in the church following the Council of Nicea" (Muller).<sup>27</sup> Thus, a debate raged throughout the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. "Some who held to *homoiousios* were fairly orthodox. They felt that it could have an orthodox meaning. But Athanasius said no, it was too slippery. To say Christ the Son is similar to the Father is not to say Christ the Son is equal to the Father. Athanasius insisted the church not abandon *homoousios*" (Calhoun).<sup>28</sup>

(2) The eternal Sonship of the Son. This means, the Son derives this substance eternally from the father. "This is often missed in presentations of Nicea, as if all the council said was that the Son is equal to the Father. But the council said more—way more. The Son is equal to the Father *because* the Son is begotten...of the same essence as the Father" (Barrett).<sup>29</sup> This is underscored in the creed as follows, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being one substance with the Father."

(3) The eternal procession of the Spirit. This means, the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father. The Nicene Creed of 325 merely affirmed the existence of the Spirit ('And we believe in the Holy Ghost'). The Nicene Creed of 381 expanded on this statement: "And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceeds from the Father (the phrase 'and of the Son' was added in the 6<sup>th</sup> century), who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets." This additional statement underscored the equality of the Spirit to the Father and Son, in that He gives life, is worshiped and glorified with the Father and Son, but also "proceeds from the Father." "That statement was intended to say, that the church applies the concept of *homoousios* now to the Spirit as it had already applied that concept to the Son" (Calhoun).<sup>30</sup> Just as the Son is begotten of the Father (thus sharing the same essence), so the Spirit proceeds from the Father (sharing the same essence). The Father, Son, and Spirit are "of one essence, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided."<sup>31</sup>

I believe in one God the Father, the Almighty, being always God the Father; and I believe in God the Word, the only begotten Son of God, that He co-existed with His own Father; that He is the equal Son of the Father, and that He is the Son of God; of the same dignity; that He is always with His Father by His deity, and that He contains all things in His essence; but the Son of God is not contained by any, even as God His Father: and I believe in the Holy Ghost, that He is of the essence of the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is co-eternal with the Father and with the Son.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 14:3-4

<sup>26</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 14:4

<sup>27</sup> Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 152

<sup>28</sup> David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 12:5

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 51

<sup>30</sup> David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 13:5

<sup>31</sup> 2LBC, 2:3

<sup>32</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Athanasius), 4:393

While we have focused on Athanasius' refutation of the Arians, he was far from alone in this endeavor. "As Athanasius approached his old age, he saw emerge around himself a new generation of theologians devoted to the same cause. Most remarkable among these were the Great Cappadocians (a region in southern Asia Minor). These are Basil of Caesarea (330-379), the theologian known as 'The Great'; his brother Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389)" (Gonzalez).<sup>33</sup> These men spoke well of Athanasius, and sought to advance his views on the Trinity, the Son, and the Spirit. But one of the most important advancements of the Cappadocians (esp. Basil), was their views on the Spirit. Thus, all three wrote separate treatises on the Spirit: Basil (375), Gregory of Nazianzus (380), and Gregory of Nyssa (380).

A great contribution of the Cappadocians was to help the church, after it had focused on the person of Christ and His relationship to the Father, begin to think about the Holy Spirit. The Council of Nicea did not say much about the Holy Spirit. It just said, 'We believe in the Holy Spirit.' The focus was on the *homoousios* of the Son and the Father. The Holy Spirit was simply affirmed as an object of faith, but not explored more fully. As we come to the writings of the Cappadocians, particularly the writings of Basil of Caesarea who wrote a book called, *On the Holy Spirit*, we see the church beginning to think of exactly how the Holy Spirit relates to the other two persons of the Godhead. The writings of the Cappadocians help to prepare for the decision of the second ecumenical council in Constantinople in 381 that the Holy Spirit is of the same substance as the Father and the Son.<sup>34</sup>

As the fourth century dawned, the strategic hub of God's activities primarily shifted from North Africa to Asia Minor in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, specifically to the province of Cappadocia in what is modern-day Turkey. At that time, God raised up another group of men, the Cappadocian Fathers, to continue to battle against Arianism and other false teachings. Two core truths of the gospel were under attack in this hour—the humanity and deity of the Son, and the co-equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. The Cappadocian Fathers helped the church define and defend biblical understandings of these key doctrines.<sup>35</sup>

The question of the Spirit's deity, "was in part driven by doxological/liturgical concerns: why were Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all mentioned in the baptismal formula. In other words, this was no abstract and practically irrelevant discussion. It was connected directly to the most basic liturgical actions of the church" (Trueman).<sup>36</sup> Simply put, why was the Spirit being mentioned and worshipped along with the Father and Son in baptism and other liturgical prayers, if the Spirit was anything less than the Father or Son? "The heresy of Arius lowered the dignity of the Holy Ghost as well as that of the Son. He taught that the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are wholly unlike one another both in essence and in glory. Arius himself said: 'There is a triad, not in equal glories; one more glorious than the other in their glories to an infinite degree.'"<sup>37</sup> In contrast to this, Basil shows the full and equal deity of the Spirit is evident throughout Scripture. "It's possible for us to understand the sublimity of His nature and His unapproachable power, by looking at the meaning of His titles, and at the magnitude of His operations, and by His good gifts bestowed on us or rather on all creation."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, says Gregory of Nyssa,

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<sup>33</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 180

<sup>34</sup> David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 13:2

<sup>35</sup> Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 137

<sup>36</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 95

<sup>37</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (from introduction to Basil's, *On the Spirit*, 8:1

<sup>38</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, (Basil of Caesarea), 8:30

"If the Spirit is said to share in the various attributes of God, then He must also share in the Godhead. It is absolutely necessary either to allow to Him co-unity in this also, or not to admit His co-unity in the others. For if He is worthy in the case of those attributes, He is surely not less worthy in this."<sup>39</sup>

But if the Spirit is 'less, according to their phrase (i.e., of the Arians), so that He is excluded from co-unity with the Father and the Son in the attribute of Godhead, neither is He worthy to share in any other of the attributes which belong to God. For the attributes, when rightly understood and mutually compared by that notion which we contemplate in each case, will be found to imply nothing less than the designation of 'God.'<sup>40</sup>

But without doubt, the biggest argument supplied by the Cappadocians, is the fact the Spirit is referred to as "the Spirit of God." That He eternally proceeds (or comes forth) from God. "The Spirit is said to be *the Spirit of God*, not indeed in the sense in which *all things are of God*, but in the sense of proceeding out of God, not by generation, like the Son, but as *the Breath of His mouth*. Thus the close relation is made plain, while the mode of the ineffable existence is safeguarded" (Basil).<sup>41</sup> Just as the Son is "the Son of God," and shares in the very same nature, so too, the Spirit is "the Spirit of God," and shares in the very same nature. Thus, as each person of the Trinity possesses the same essence, they are self-existent, but with reference to their personal mode of existing, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father (and Son).

The language of the orthodox gives no grounds for any deficiency or any subordination in being. The very facts of not being begotten, of being begotten and of proceeding, give them whatever names are applied to them—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively. The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases (subsistences or persons) within the single nature and quality of the Godhead. The Son is not Father; there is *one* Father, yet He is whatever the Father is. The Spirit is not Son because He is from God; there is *one* Only-begotten. Yet whatever the Son is, He is. The three are One in Godhead, and the single whole is three in persons. What, then? Is the Spirit God? Certainly. Is He consubstantial? Yes, if He is God.<sup>42</sup>

The Cappadocian fathers brought about a final union between the Nicene (orthodox) and Origenist (moderates) parties. The Cappadocians achieved this by persuading both sides to use a new theological language. The problem centered on two Greek words, *hypostasis* and *ousia*. Up till then, these two words had meant much the same thing in the Greek language. This caused great theological confusion, because when the Nicenes said that Father and Son had one divine nature or essence, they expressed it by saying that Father and Son have one *hypostasis* and one *ousia*. However, when the Origenists said that Father and Son were two distinct persons, they used exactly the same words, and said that Father and Son were two *hypostasis* or two *ousia*. To get rid of this divisive confusion, the Cappadocians made two proposals: (1) The word *ousia* should from now on refer specifically to the one divine nature or essence, as the Nicenes said: (2) the word *hypostasis* should refer specifically to the two distinct persons of Father and Son, as the Origenists said.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 5:327

<sup>40</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Gregory of Nyssa), 5:327-328

<sup>41</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 8:29

<sup>42</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus), 7:320-321

<sup>43</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:238