

# Introduction

This essay will examine the Council of Nicea within its historical context and comment on its uniqueness and importance. In conclusion, it will examine its legacy and relevance to the church of today.

## The Council and Its Decisions

The Council of Nicea occurred at a critical point in the history of the world<sup>1</sup>. The Roman Empire was struggling to maintain both its political and spiritual identity. Christians, whom had for so long been persecuted by the empire, suddenly found themselves in a position of great power and privilege. Apparently, the emperor himself was now part of the faith and it was the start of a new golden age. The great optimism and promise is expressed by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea and a historical witness:

“After all tyranny had been purged away, the empire was justly reserved, firm and without rival to Constantine and his sons...exhibiting...their own love of religion and God, with their piety and gratitude to Him.”<sup>2</sup>

However, there were a number of problems that had arisen in the Church that were theological, doctrinal and practical. On the theological front, the greatest challenge to the church was to do with the relationship of the Son to the Father and whether the Son was in any way subservient to the Father<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Christianity: The First Two Thousand Years*, Edwards, D.L., Cassell, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, p419, Trans. Rev C.F. Crusé, A.M., London: Henry G. Bohn, 1958

<sup>3</sup> *The History of the Christian Church – To the Separation of East and West*, p190, Rev. A. R. Whitham M.A., Rivingtons, Covent Garden, 1957.

Although there had always been philosophical and dialectical challenges to the person of Christ, a new form of attack, known as the Antiochene school was based on literal readings of scripture and logically deduced conclusions that, although flawed, required great philosophical and analytical skill to refute<sup>4</sup>. The particular form of this dealt with at Nicea was known as *Arianism* after the heretiarch, Arius.

On the practical and doctrinal front, there was the sometimes related tension between communities of Christians as to who the “real” Christians and even how the festivals of the faith should be conducted. These are called the Meletian schism and the Paschal Controversy respectively<sup>5</sup>.

These tensions were having a disruptive political effect, the theological and doctrinal ones even accompanied with intrigue, feuding and violence. ‘One Church and One Empire’ was an idea that Constantine quickly developed and the emperor was keen to resolve the problems. His first attempt was a letter sent where he appealed to the Arius and the bishop that censured him, Alexander.<sup>6</sup> This failed and he convened the Council of Nicea.

Although there had previously been Councils, this one was unique for a number of reasons:

1. It was called by the emperor.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p190

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp192, 200.

<sup>6</sup> *History of the Christian church from the earliest times to the death of the pope Leo The Great AD 461*, p299, F.J. Joakes Johnson M.A., 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Cambridge, 1902.

Constantine was keen to establish the Holy Roman Empire that represented a union of the civil and ecclesiastical governments. This was a distinctly un-Western idea that had traditionally separated the spiritual and temporal<sup>7</sup>.

2. The emperor had the power to compel attendance.
3. All parts of the Church, East and West were represented.

It was the first general council of the church<sup>8</sup> and as such the first council to be seen as universally authoritative in its decisions. The term *oecumenical* is sometimes applied to it<sup>9</sup>.

The role played by the emperor is of special interest and provides the foundation to the establishment of the Papacy by his patronage to Silvester, the bishop of Rome<sup>10</sup>. On leaving Rome in 326, one year after the Council, Constantine gave sovereignty over Italy and the West to the pope of Rome and that could be seen to mark the start of the modern Papacy<sup>11</sup>.

Remarkably, the bishops had petitioned the emperor before his opening address with complaints about one another which only aided the position he quickly adopted following the Council as the final arbiter of the Church within the empire. In his opening address, as reported by Eusebius of Caesarea, the following words are found, ‘You are the bishops of those within the church, but I would...be the bishop of those without as appointed by God.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p314

<sup>8</sup> Whitham, op cit., p192

<sup>9</sup> Joakes Johnson, op cit., p300

<sup>10</sup> Joakes Johnson, op cit., p316

<sup>11</sup> Joakes Johnson, op cit., p318

<sup>12</sup> *Vita Const*, IV 24, Eusebius, cited in Joakes Johnson, op cit., p314.

Around 318 bishops were in attendance on June 19, 325 as reported by eye witnesses Eusebius of Caesarea and Athanasius of Alexandria<sup>13,14</sup>. The bishops could be classified as belonging to one of three distinct groups:

1. Arians: represented by Arius himself and the key supporters being Eusebius of Nicomedia and the bishops of Nicea and Chalcedon. These numbered about 30.
2. Anti-Arians: this group was headed by Athanasius whom was sent by the bishop of Alexandria. This also numbered about 30 and provided the intellectual refutation of Arianism.
3. “Conservatives”. These were headed by Eusebius of Caesarea and are characterised as semi-Arian in their thinking but refusing to admit to the logical conclusion of their theological position and admit the extreme representation of Arius<sup>15</sup>.

Much of the struggle for the next century would result from the theological weakness of the Eusebian position. An effective alliance with the Arians against Athanasius meant a constant wrestling for the theological heart of the church in spite of the eventual decisions of the Council<sup>16</sup>.

The decisions of the Council and the eventual formulation of the famous Creed are summarised below:

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<sup>13</sup> Joakes Johnson, op cit., p301

<sup>14</sup> Whitham, op cit., p197

<sup>15</sup> Joakes Johnson, op cit., p304

<sup>16</sup> Joakes Johnson, op cit., p334

1. Arius was twice examined and his views unanimously condemned as heresy. The Council approved his deposition by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria<sup>17</sup>.
2. Eusebius presented a basic statement of faith from his own baptismal creed. This was carefully modified clause by clause to deal with the challenge of Arianism.

Most significantly, it introduced the word *homoousion* (ὁμοουσιος) which although unscriptural, was used specifically to prevent any room for Arianism. It means “of one substance”. The Father and the Son were in this relationship.

The use of this word was controversial because of the previous usage by the heretical Sabellians<sup>18</sup> and it took some time to gain acceptance. It is noteworthy that although Athanasius provided the theological assault against Arianism<sup>19</sup> by his strong grasp of the logical and dialectical confusion and deliberate misrepresentations of scripture<sup>20</sup>, he does not use the word himself in later writings<sup>21</sup> other than to mention it in passing as a decision of the Council.

3. Other expressions were introduced to safeguard the personal pre-existence and eternity of the Son such as the direct substitution of Son from the Eusebian creed with λογος (the Word).

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<sup>17</sup> Whitham, op cit., p198

<sup>18</sup> Whitham, op cit., p198; Joakes Johnson op cit p308.

<sup>19</sup> Whitham, op cit., p195.

<sup>20</sup> Athanasius, quoted in Joakes Johnson, p298.

<sup>21</sup> For a summary, see Stevenson, J., *Creed, Councils and Controversies*, SPCK, London, 1966.

4. Special attention was given to the Incarnation: *He came down, He was made Man*.
5. The phrase present in the Eusebian creed ‘first begotten of all creation’ was omitted because of its Arian undertones.
6. “Anathematisms” were added to specifically refute Arian or Sabellian errors regarding the substance or nature of the Son<sup>22</sup>.

This was a statement explicitly disavowing “those whom would think otherwise”. Eusebius initially objected to these but after a consultation with the emperor was willing to sign.

7. Twenty canons of general church discipline were passed.
8. The question of clerical marriage was raised. It was confirmed that men should not marry after admission to the priesthood but should not be required to separate if married. Interestingly, it was a celibate named Paphnutius that pleaded the case of the married clergy against those whom desired a stricter rule<sup>23</sup>.

## The Legacy of the Council

The resulting creed has been described as ‘foundation stones...they establish patterns of doctrinal statements...that is still valid for today’<sup>24</sup>. The most aggressive advocates of the Creeds (others were to follow Nicea) would see

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<sup>22</sup> Whitham, op cit., p199.

<sup>23</sup> Whitham, op cit., p201

<sup>24</sup> *The Faith We Confess*, pxi, Jan Milâc Lochman, J & J Clark Edinburgh, 1985.

them as a benchmark to distinguish the “true” from the “false” and to establish some universal statement of faith<sup>25</sup>.

However, it can be argued that the weakness of the Creed is not so much in what it says but that it really became a form of words that if you were just prepared to say you accepted it, you could gain entry into the church whether or not you really believed it. Constantine and his sons certainly used it in this way.

Little intellectual rigour is required which was precisely what Athanasius was seeking to avoid. He wanted a strong and robust theology that could withstand the Arian and similar attacks. Athanasius won the battle but eventually lost the war because of the compromise of Eusebius.

Eusebius has been characterised as the type of the broad, liberal, educated churchman that reflects the state of most Christians that although wanting to consider themselves orthodox, are logically inconsistent and unsure of their theology<sup>26</sup>. Such a position may lead them to alliances with the politically astute and heretics that have their own agenda and the Christians end up morally bankrupt and objects of ridicule. Arius was readmitted by Constantine and Athanasius was eventually exiled and readmitted on three occasions owing to an alliance between the Arians and Eusebians<sup>27</sup>.

They are wedded to the union of Church and State and represent an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable requirements of both that will always lead to a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p203

<sup>26</sup> Joakes Jackson, op. cit, p327

<sup>27</sup> Whitham, op cit., p207; Joakes Johnson, op cit., p320

watering down of radical theology and compromise for the sake of political expediency<sup>28</sup>. This lack of rigorous and thorough theology leaves the Church open to all types of philosophical errors and attacks. The sad but inevitable legacy of the State siding with one group of Christians and being used to kill other Christians emerged at this time. The establishment of the Papacy and the soon to come de-Judaised Augustinian theology<sup>29</sup> was to usher in an unprecedented time of intellectual and spiritual darkness and a Constantinian (read Roman Catholic) church characterised by a lust for power<sup>30</sup>.

The ultimate lesson perhaps is that a simple intellectual assent to a Creed, no matter how sound, is not enough to provide a robust Christianity.

Word Count: 1568.

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<sup>28</sup> Joakes Johnson, p324ff

<sup>29</sup> *History of Western Philosophy*, p324ff, Russel, B, Routledge, 1961. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Lochman, op cit., p204