

The Origin and Terminology of The Nicene Creed

By James T. Cloute

[Western Pastoral Conference, Dakota-Montana District, Zeeland, North Dakota, October 4 and 5, 1977]

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I. The Origin of the Nicene Creed

In the year 325 Emperor Constantine the Great convened the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea for the purpose of settling the controversy which had arisen by the teaching of Arius, who denied the true divinity of Christ. The actual course of events which led to the formulation of the creed is bafflingly obscure. Nevertheless there are three illuminating glimpses of the council's activity in regard to its creed from the pens of three personages who were eyewitnesses of, or perhaps even protagonists in, the proceedings. They consist of: (a) A fragmentary reminiscence of Eustathius of Antioch; (b) Some chapters of Athanasius written a generation after the events described; and (c) The famous letter by which Eusebius of Caesarea informed the church of what happened at the council and attempted to justify his own conduct there. All three passages prejudiced in tone, must be used with caution.

The Eustathian fragment would suggest that the Eusebian or Arian party made the first move to get a creed adopted, but that their intentions collapsed. The dramatic chapters of Athanasius indicate that when the fathers came to draw up their own formulary, they wanted it to express the truth in scriptural language. This, however, proved impossible. Whatever turns of phrase were proposed, the Arians managed somehow to twist them so that they chimed in with their own notions. In the end, he says, there was nothing left but to interpolate the precise, utterly unambiguous, but nonscriptural, clauses "from the substance of the Father," and, "of one substance with the Father."

Neither of these passages gives us more than the most fleeting glimpse of the sequence of events culminating in the adoption of the creed, or throws any light on the identity of the text canonized. For information on these points we must turn to Eusebius' apologetic letter. He opens by telling his correspondents that he is going to describe to them exactly what took place in case they should get a misleading impression through gossip and hearsay. He then reproduces a lengthy document which, he says, he read out at one of the sessions. This began with a short preface declaring that the faith which he now believed, and which he was now submitting to the council was the faith in which he had been instructed as a catechumen and had been baptized, and which he himself taught both as priest and as a bishop. There followed what was manifestly a baptismal creed, in all likelihood, that of the Church of Caesarea. This was followed by a theological explanation asserting the continued separate existence of each of the three divine persons. To conclude, he gave assurance of his unswerving attachment to these doctrines in the future as in the past. Eusebius resumed his letter by commenting that the emperor himself was the first to sign his creed and instructed the others to do the same with the single addition of the word "consubstantial ($\delta\mu\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\varsigma$)."

Apparently Constantine added his own interpretation of this word in language designed to counter possible objections in advance. He explained that ὁμοούσιος was not used in the sense of bodily affections. The Son did not derive His existence from the Father by means of division or severance, since an immaterial, intellectual and incorporeal nature could not be subject to any bodily affection. Eusebius brings his letter to a close with a long passage explaining how he insisted on scrutinizing the creed, and refused absolutely to append his signature until a satisfactory explanation had been put upon every clause both of the symbol itself and of the anathemas at the end.

As well as supplying precious hints regarding the origin of the creed of Nicea, the letter is a fundamental author for its text. Athanasius quoted the creed again in his letter to the Emperor Jovian. Other important witnesses to the authentic text are Socrates and Basil. The creed was reproduced by many other Greek authors in the century following the council and numerous Latin versions of it were current.

To reconstruct the rest of the story we must rely on fragmentary reminiscences in other writers. Most of the bishops signed the creed. Arius and his friends chose rather to be sent into exile than to sign this document. Their number was small. Only two sided with Arius. The idea that they subscribed a text in which ὁμόουσιος (of the same substance) was replaced by ὁμοιούσιος (of like substance) is an ingenious fiction invented so as to save their honor.

In fact, they limited their opposition to a refusal to endorse the official condemnation of Arius himself, their argument being that his teaching had been greatly misrepresented in formal accusations.

This creed which Constantine persuaded the three hundred and eighteen bishops to accept is argued by some to be none other than the local creed of Caesarea revised in the light of emperor's instructions. As admonished, they inserted the word ὁμοούσιος (of one substance), and took advantage of the opportunity to make several other changes, all in the same direction. This is the view which was carefully worked out and energetically defended by the English scholars F. J. A. Hort and A. E. Burn, and which A. von Harnack maintained for most of his life.

These scholars were well aware that the differences between the creeds of Caesarea and Nicea were rather more numerous and far-reaching than Constantine's encouragement. According to Hort, the clauses "first-begotten of all creation" and "before all ages," which appear in the creed of Caesarea but not in that of Nicea were possibly dropped because of the danger that they might play into the hands of the heretics, who like to appeal to the former as suggesting that Christ was a creature, and who could interpret the latter as implying that "there was when He was not." The title "Son" was substituted in the creed of Nicea for λόγος in that of Caesarea because its Biblical associations seemed to warrant it, and because λόγος had been discredited by the Arian misuse of it. Hort also insisted that other creeds made their contributions to the Nicene Creed. He noticed that the insertions and modifications in the second article correspond fairly exactly to the phraseology of the extant Syrian and Palestinian creeds.

As anyone can discover by comparing the two creeds on their own, they differ much more radically than Hort and his were prepared to believe. It is not just a question of the manipulation of a few technical slogans. If the two symbols were placed side by side, it is easily apparent which clauses in the Nicene Creed are specifically anti-Arian slogans. The sentence "that is, from the substance of the Father" is one of them. The clauses "begotten not made" and "of one substance with the Father" fall equally into the same category. So it is true of the words "true God from true God," which assert the fullness of the Son's deity. Actually what we have in the Nicene Creed is a creed broadly resembling the creed of Caesarea but also diverging from it in a number of particulars, small and important. For example, in the first article, the Nicene Creed has "Maker of *all things* visible and invisible" the Greek πάντων as against Caesarea's τὸν τῶν ἀπάντων. In the, Third article Nicea reads "and in *the* Holy Spirit," while Caesarea offers "and in *one* Holy Spirit." Admittedly these are insignificant differences, but their very insignificance makes them all the more impressive. Why would the people have bothered to make such changes, especially in the change in the third article from a superior to a much inferior form? In the first example, Nicea is in line with second creed of Epiphanius, while in its omission of "one" from the third article it agrees with his first creed.

It is in the structure of the second article that Nicea, stripped of the anti-Arian sentences, reveals itself most strikingly as alien to Caesarea. Caesarea separates “only-begotten Son” and “begotten from the Father,” and places the latter towards the end of the first half of the article. The creed of Nicea joins them together and pushes them forward to the very beginning. There is nothing in Nicea to correspond to the theologically colorless “life from life” of Caesarea. It should also be observed that Caesarea’s δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐγένετο τὰ πάντα through whom all things came into being) reappears in Nicea as δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο. The following lines abound similar, to all seeming pointless, changes and additions, such as the insertion of “things in heaven and things in earth,” the insertion of “because of us men and,” and the insertion of “came down,” the omission of a couple of “and’s” as well as of “in glory,” and the changes of “to the Father” to “to the heavens,” and of the participle ἥξοντα (will come) to ἐρχόμενον. The net result is the definite assimilation of the creed of Nicea to the Jerusalem-Antioch type of creed, and Harnack even argued that these alterations could be regarded as “undogmatic concessions” made by the drafting committee to the powerful leaders of those areas. If that were the case it seems odd that the concessions were so insignificant.

The effect of the above considerations is inevitable to cast grave doubts on the Hort-Harnack hypothesis that the creed of Nicea was the result of the recasting of the creed of Caesarea. They compel the question whether in fact that hypothesis is necessitated by the testimony of Eusebius’ letter. A point of decisive importance to be noted at the outset is that Eusebius himself nowhere claims in his letter that the creed of Nicea was, or was intended to be, the result of a revision of the creed of his native church. The key sentence comes at the very beginning, where he announces that he is going to quote, first, “the statement about my beliefs which I submitted,” and then the second “writing” which the bishops had produced “after making additions to my words.” This could not have been simply the creed of Caesarea. Eusebius’ description must refer to the whole exposition which follows in his letter, and which included, as well as the creed, both his personal declaration that he had been brought up in this faith and had himself loyally taught it, and the theological elucidation appended to the creed. If this is so, then “my word” cannot be taken as being equivalent to the Caesarean creed. They cannot refer to any text as such, but must refer to the general theological position expressed in the whole passage. The emphasis is then on the inherited faith of the Church, taught by the bishops preceding him and ultimately derived from the Lord Himself, not on the Caesarean creed considered as a document. It is this traditional teaching to which the bishops listened so respectfully and which the emperor himself so generously applauded, commanding that it should be incorporated in a formal profession containing word ὁμοούσιος. There is no suggestion that either Eusebius or Constantine expected the final document to be the actual Caesarean creed with the Nicene key-word inserted. What Eusebius implies was that it would give expression to the doctrine which he had professed to the satisfaction of the council, the only fresh feature being the introduction of ὁμοούσιος.

If the commonly accepted theory of the relationship of the Caesarean creed and the creed of Nicea is rejected, the question of the background of the Nicene Creed must be tackled afresh. The most obvious is to inquire what is this basic creed which, as we have studied stands revealed when the Nicene insertions are stripped off. What remains is not just a mutilated torso, but a complete and independent formulary. The Nicene alterations can be restricted to: (a) The clause “that is, from the substance of the Father,” and (b) The longer passage “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.” There is now no need to suppose that λόγος once stood where the Nicene fathers wrote “Son,” or that “Life from life” and “before all ages” were for some reason struck out, or that other modifications were introduced for subtle motives such as those suggested by Hort and Harnack. It was long ago observed that the creed of Nicea bore a striking resemblance to certain points of creeds of the Syro-Palestinian type. H. Lietzmann followed up this hint, and argued that the creed underlying Nicea, into which the Nicene tags were interpolated, must have been one belonging to the Jerusalem family. The creeds to which its kinship is most marked are the first of the two quoted by Epiphanius and the one used by Cyril of Jerusalem in his catechetical lectures. The actual creed which the drafting committee used, thought Lietzmann, has not survived, and it is now impossible to guess the church to which it belonged.

We are left then with the meagre conclusion that the Nicene Creed consists of some local baptismal creed, of Syro-Palestinian provenance, into which the Nicene keywords were somewhat awkwardly interpolated. To go beyond this and attempt to identify the underlying formula would be unprofitable at this time. The drafting committee was probably left a fairly free hand, subject to the result of its labors proving satisfactory to the body of the council, and we have no means of guessing what lines they worked upon. There was a tradition, recalled many years later by Basil, but in itself quite unobjectionable, that the leading spirit responsible for actually writing the creed was a Cappadocian priest called Hermogenes, a stalwart opponent of Arius who was destined to become bishop of Caesarea. Even if we accept it as reliable, however, it must remain an open question whether his achievement was confined merely to proposing the specifically anti-Arian clauses, or whether he also suggested the local formula into which they were inserted. In any case, we may surmise that he and his colleagues were much more concerned to bolt the door firmly against Arianism than worried about the rival claims of different credal tests.

II. The Terminology of the Nicene Creed

In the first part of this paper we directed our attention to the literary origin of the creed. The theological significance of the creed and the motives, doctrinal or otherwise, which lay behind the characteristic terminology in which it was expressed, will be the focus of our attention in this portion of the paper. The principal aim of those who manufactured the creed was to call a halt, once and for all, to the Arian heresy.

The outbreak of the Arian debate is probably to be placed somewhere in 318. The key-note was the conviction of the absolute transcendence and perfection of the Godhead. God (and it was God the Father whom he had in mind) was absolutely one. This God was unengendered, uncreated, from everlasting to everlasting: Himself without source, He was the source and origin of whatever else existed. The being, substance, essence of the unique God was absolutely incommunicable. For God to communicate His essence or substance to another being would imply that He was divisible and subject to change. Moreover, if another being were to share the divine nature in any valid sense, there would be a plurality of divine Beings, whereas God was by definition unique. Thus everything existed must have come into existence by an act of creation on His part, and must have been called into being out of nothing.

The inescapable corollary of this was the drastic subordination of the Son or Word. God desired to create the world, and for this purpose He employed an agent or instrument. First of all the Word was a creature as the Arians were forever reiterating, whom the Father had brought into existence by His decree. True, He was a perfect creature, and was not to be compared with the other creatures, but the Arians insisted that He was to be ranged among other derivative and dependent things. He was “the first-begotten of all creation,” He was included among creation. Like all other creatures, He had been created out of nothing. The Arians insisted that He in no way participated in the essence of the Godhead.

Secondly, as a creature the Word must have a beginning, only the Father being without beginning. “Before He was begotten or created or defined or established, He was not.” Having been created by God, He was necessarily posterior to God. They protested against the orthodox cry, “God from everlasting, the Son from everlasting; the Father and the Son together always,” and rejected the thought that the Son could eternally coexist with the Father. Thirdly, it followed from this that the Son could have no real knowledge of His Father. Being finite, He could not comprehend the infinite God. The point was rammed home by Arius on many occasions. A fourth consequence was that the Son was liable to change and sin. Arius, in some of his own writings seems to have declared the Word remained immutable and morally impeccable, but he more than once let it out that it was by His own resolute act of will that He retained His moral perfection.

The Word, in Arius’ eyes, was not the authentic but the adoptive Son of the Father: “He is called Son or Power of grace.” He had been promoted to that position because the Father had foreseen the meritorious and perfect life He would, by His own free acts of will, lead. The net result was that the Trinity was described in speciously Origenistic language, as consisting of three persons. But the three persons were utterly different

beings, and did not share in any way the same substance or essence as each other. Only the Father was “true God,” the title being ascribed to the other two in an almost figurative sense.

Such in outline was the Arian Theological position. With its main features before us we can begin to appreciate the full import of the special clauses in the Nicene creed, at least insofar as they sought to refute Arianism. We may pass over “only-begotten” (μονογενῆ), although much ink has been expended in the discussion of it, because it was accepted by all parties in the Arian quarrel and no special dogmatic significance was read into it. Let us look, however, at the first of the anti-Arian interpolations—the clause “that is, from the substance of the Father” (τοῦτ’ ἔστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς), which was inserted immediately after the words “begotten from the Father, only-begotten,” and was clearly intended to give a more precise interpretation to “begotten from the Father.” Here is a deliberately formulated counter-blast to the principle doctrine of Arianism, that the Son had been created of nothing and had no community of being with the Father. The Arians had always been willing to acquiesce in the description, so long as they were at liberty to interpret it in a sense consistent with their theory of the Son’s origin by a creative decree of the Godhead. The added clause excludes any such interpretation. The Son was generated out of the Father’s very substance of being. He shared the divine essence in full. This thought was driven home in the all-important phrase “of the same substance as the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ), which was inserted a couple of lines further down.

It would appear that a more Biblical expression would better mark the impropriety of the suggestion that the Son was created out of nothing. Such an expression as “from God,” which the Savior Himself used of His own Person (Jn 8:42), would perhaps seem appropriate, but the Arians cheerfully noted that St. Paul has said that all things were “from God.” They were forced to go outside the vocabulary of the Bible to make their point clear beyond any risk of misunderstanding. Moreover the idea that this phrase conveyed was exactly what the Arians had strenuously and persistently denied.

The next anti-Arian clause is “true God from true God” (Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ). It has already been stated that the absolute uniqueness of the divine Father was one of the staple Arian articles. To bring out His uniqueness, the heretics pressed the Savior’s words Jn 17:3, “This is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God,” into their service, trying to squeeze out of them every drop of meaning. This added clause had the effect of laying it down that the Son was truly God in whatever sense the Father was God. When pressed, the Arians were prepared to concede that the Son was “true God,” for that He was God in a certain sense they readily agreed, and that He was “true” was obvious from the fact that He was a real existent.

The sentence “begotten not made” (γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα) was not one from the implications of which the Arians could escape so easily. They were eager enough to employ such language as “begotten,” but the meaning they put upon it was indistinguishable from “made.” To suggest that He had in any real sense been born implied to the Arians the subjecting the Godhead to a kind of necessity. They liked to stress that his coming into being had depended on an act of the Father’s will. The orthodox reply was to insist on taking the word “begotten” in its full acceptation, and to point out that it was nonsense to talk of God being subject to necessity if His very nature was to beget. They also had recourse to Origen’s well-known teaching of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father. The Godhead had never been without His Word or His Wisdom: So the Father had never been other than the Father, and had never been without His Son. The Son and the Father must therefore have coexisted from all eternity begetting the Son.

It was in the fourth characteristic phrase of the creed, the words “of one substance with the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ), that the full weight of the orthodox reply to Arianism was concentrated. This phrase affirmed the full deity of the Son in language which implied, if it did not explicitly assert, the doctrine of identity of substance between the Son and the Father. The Son shares the very being or essence of the Father. He was therefore fully divine: Whatever belonged to or characterized the Godhead belonged to and characterized Him. Once again the orthodox would have preferred a more scriptural term, but they had discovered that every scriptural title or image that was put forward was immediately twisted by the Arian minority to suit their own purposes. Athanasius was later to argue that, if the word did not appear in Holy Writ,

the meaning it stood for did (εἰ καὶ μὴ οὕτως ἐν ταῖς γράφαις εἰσὶν αἱ λέξεις, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐκ τῶν γράφων διανοίαν ἔξουσι). The divine essence was, of course indivisible, and as such it must be wholly possessed by the Son.

III. Closing Remarks

Such was the symbol proposed and ratified at the first ecumenical council. Not unnaturally it has often been, assumed that a formula published under such auspices must have at once been surrounded with extraordinary notoriety and must have at once secured widespread diffusion and claimed overriding authority. That the theological controversy was by no means settled, and that long decades of debate had still to come, is, of course, recognized. The new formula must have been at once the theological strongpoint fiercely defended by the orthodox and the target of equally violent assaults by their Arianizing opponents.

The Nicene Creed was first and foremost a definition of orthodox faith. It was propounded to smooth over a particular crisis in the Church. No one intended it, in the first instance at any rate, to supersede the existing baptismal confessions. Today, it is well known by all Christians as one of our great confessions. It sets forth a splendid exposition of our faith in the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It seems confusing that such a beautiful confession would have been prompted singularly by a denial of the true Trinity. Yet today it remains one of our most widely used creeds wherein we confess our Christian faith in the Trinity, three persons, yet one indivisible Divine essence.

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