Justo Gonzalez

The Story of Christianity, Volume 1

Chapter 17

17
The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea

> And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as the only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.
>
> CREED OF NICEA

From its very beginnings, Christianity had been involved in theological controversies. In Paul's time, the burning issue was the relationship between Jewish and Gentile converts. Then came the crucial debates over Gnostic speculation. In the third century, when Cyprian was bishop of Carthage, the main point at issue was the restoration of the lapsed. All of these controversies were significant, and often bitter. But in those early centuries the only way to win such a debate was through solid argument and holiness of life. The civil authorities paid scant attention to theological controversies within the church, and therefore the parties in conflict were not usually tempted to appeal to those authorities in order to cut short the debate, or to win a point that had been lost in a theological argument.

After the conversion of Constantine, things changed. Now it was possible to invoke the authority of the state to settle a theological question. The empire had a vested interest in the unity of the church, which Constantine hoped would become the "cement of the empire." Thus, the state soon began to use its power to force theological agreement upon Christians. Many of the dissident views that were thus crushed may indeed have threatened the very core of the Christian message. Had it not been for imperial intervention, the issues would probably have been settled, as in

earlier times, through long debate, and a consensus would eventually have been reached. But there were many rulers who did not wish to see such prolonged and indecisive controversies in the church, and who therefore simply decided, on imperial authority, who was right and who should be silenced. As a result, many of those involved in controversy, rather than seeking to convince their opponents or the rest of the church, sought to convince the emperors. Eventually, theological debate was eclipsed by political intrigue.

The beginning of this process may be seen already in the Arian controversy, which began as a local conflict between a bishop and a priest, grew to the point that Constantine felt obliged to intervene, and resulted in political maneuvering by which each party sought to destroy the other. At first sight, it is not a very edifying story. But upon closer scrutiny what is surprising is not that theological debate became entangled in political intrigues, but rather that in the midst of such unfavorable circumstances the church still found the strength and the wisdom to reject those views that threatened the core of the Christian message.

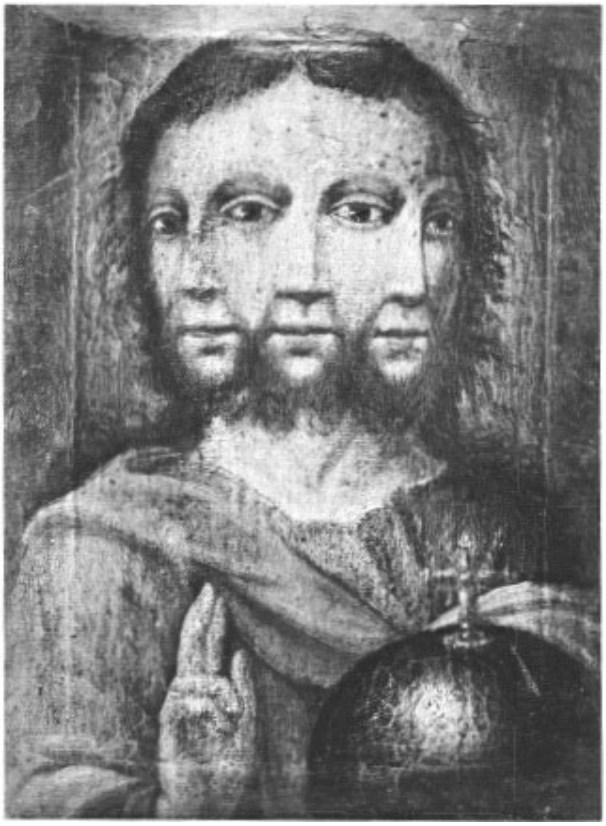
THE OUTBREAK OF THE CONTROVERSY

The roots of the Arian controversy are to be found in theological developments that took place long before the time of Constantine. Indeed, the controversy was a direct result of the manner in which Christians came to think of the nature of God, thanks to the work of Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others. When the first Christians set out to preach their message throughout the empire, they were taken for ignorant atheists, for they had no visible gods. In response, some learned Christians appealed to the authority of those whom antiquity considered eminently wise: the classical philosophers. The best pagan philosophers had taught that above the entire cosmos there was a supreme being, and some had even declared that the pagan gods were human creations. Appealing to such respected authorities, Christians argued that they believed in the supreme being of the philosophers, and that this was what they meant when they spoke of God. Such an argument was very convincing, and there is no doubt that it contributed to the acceptance of Christianity among the intelligentsia.

But this was also a dangerous argument. It was possible that Christians, in their eagerness to show the kinship between their faith and classical philosophy, would come to the conviction that the best way to speak of God was not in the manner of the prophets and other biblical writers, but rather

in the manner of Plato, Plotinus, and the rest. Since those philosophers conceived of perfection as immutable, impassible, and fixed, many Christians came to the conclusion that such was the God of scripture.

Two means were found to bring together what the Bible says about God and the classical notion of the supreme being as impassible and fixed: allegorical interpretation of scriptural passages, and the doctrine of the Logos. Allegorical interpretation was fairly simple to apply. Wherever scripture says something "unworthy" of God—that is, something that is not worthy of the perfection of the supreme being of the philosophers—such words are not to be taken literally. Thus, for instance, if the Bible says that God walked in the garden, or that God spoke, one is to remember that an immutable being does not really walk or speak. Intellectually, this satisfied many minds. But emotionally it left much to be desired, for the life of the church was based on the faith that it was possible to have a direct relationship with a personal God, and the supreme being of the philosophers was in no way personal.



Medieval art sometimes depicted the Trinity as a single body with three faces.

There was another way to resolve the conflict between the philosophical idea of a supreme being and the witness of scripture. This was the doctrine of the Logos, as developed by Justin, Clement, Origen, and others. According to this view, although it is true that the supreme being—the "Father"—is immutable, impassible, and so on, there is also a Logos, Word, or Reason of God, and this is personal, capable of direct relationships with the world and with humans. Thus, according to Justin, when the Bible says that God spoke to Moses, what it means is that the Logos of God spoke to him.

Due to the influence of Origen and his disciples, these views had become widespread in the Eastern wing of the church—that is, that portion of the church that spoke Greek rather than Latin. The generally accepted view was that, between the immutable One and the mutable world, there was the Word, or Logos, of God. It was within this context that the Arian controversy took place.

The controversy itself began in Alexandria, when Licinius was still ruling in the East, and Constantine in the West. The bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, clashed over several issues with Arius, who was one of the most prestigious and popular presbyters of the city. Although the points debated were many, the main issue at stake was whether the Logos, the Word of God, was coeternal with God. The phrase that eventually became the Arian motto, "there was when He was not," aptly focuses on the point at issue. Alexander held that the Word existed eternally with the Father; Arius argued that the Word was not coeternal with the Father. Although this may seem a very fine point, what was ultimately at stake was the divinity of the Word. Arius claimed that, strictly speaking, the Word was not God, but the first of all creatures. It is important to understand at this point that Arius did not deny that the Word existed before the incarnation. On the preexistence of the Word, all were in agreement. What Arius said was that, before anything else was made, the Word had been created by God. Alexander argued that the Word was divine, and therefore could not be created, but rather was coeternal with the Father. In other words, if asked to draw a line between God and creation, Arius would draw that line to include the Word in creation, while Alexander would draw it in a manner that would place all of God's creation on one side and the eternal Word on the other.

Each of the two parties had, besides a list of favorite proof-texts from the Bible, logical reasons that seemed to make the opponents' position untenable. Arius, on the one hand, argued that what Alexander proposed

was a denial of Christian monotheism—for, according to the bishop of Alexandria, there were two who were divine, and thus there were two gods. Alexander retorted that Arius's position denied the divinity of the Word, and therefore also the divinity of Jesus. From its very beginning, the church had worshiped Jesus Christ, and Arius's proposal would now force it either to cease such worship, or to declare that it was worshiping a creature. Alexander concluded that, since both alternatives were unacceptable, Arius was proven wrong.

Although these were the issues debated in the course of the controversy, quite possibly at the heart of the matter was also the question of how it is that Christ saves. For Alexander, and particularly for those who subsequently defended his views—especially Athanasius—Christ has achieved our salvation because in him God has entered human history and opened the way for our return to him. Apparently Arius and his followers felt that Christ's role as Savior was imperiled by such a view, for Jesus had opened the way for salvation by his obedience to God, and such obedience would be meaningless if he himself was divine, and not a creature.

A city gate in Nicea, now in ruins.

The conflict became public when Alexander, claiming that such was his authority and his responsibility as a bishop, condemned Arius's teachings and removed him from all posts in the church in Alexandria. Arius did not accept this judgment, but rather appealed both to the people of Alexandria and to a number of prominent bishops throughout the Eastern portion of the empire who had been his fellow students in Antioch. Soon there were

popular demonstrations in Alexandria, with people marching in the streets chanting Arius's theological refrains. The bishops to whom Arius had appealed—who called themselves *fellow Lucianists* in honor of their common teacher in Antioch—wrote letters declaring that the deposed presbyter was correct, and that it was Alexander who was teaching false doctrine. Thus, the local disagreement in Alexandria threatened to divide the entire Eastern church.

Such was the state of affairs when Constantine, who had just defeated Licinius, decided to intervene. His first step was to send Bishop Hosius of Cordoba, his advisor in ecclesiastical matters, to try to reconcile the two parties. When Hosius reported that the dissension could not be resolved by mere amicable entreaties, Constantine decided to take a step that he had been considering for some time: he would call a great assembly or council of Christian bishops from all parts of the empire. Besides dealing with a number of issues that required the establishment of standard policies, this great council—to meet in Nicea, a city within easy reach of Constantinople—would resolve the controversy that had broken out in Alexandria.

THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

It was the year 325 when the bishops gathered in Nicea for what would later be known as the First Ecumenical—that is, universal—Council. The exact number of bishops present is not known—the figure given in ancient chronicles (318) is doubted by some scholars, since it coincides with the number of those circumcised in Abraham's time—but there were approximately three hundred, mostly from the Greek-speaking East, but also some from the West. In order to see that event in the perspective of those who were there, it is necessary to remember that several of those attending the great assembly had recently been imprisoned, tortured, or exiled, and that some bore on their bodies the physical marks of their faithfulness. And now, a few years after such trials, these very bishops were invited to gather at Nicea, and the emperor covered their expenses to do so. Many of those present knew of each other via hearsay or through correspondence. But now, for the first time in the history of Christianity, they had before their eyes physical evidence of the universality of the church. In his *Life of Constantine,* Eusebius of Caesarea, who was present, describes the scene:

> There were gathered the most distinguished ministers of God, from the many churches in Europe, Libya [i.e., Africa] and Asia. A single

> house of prayer, as if enlarged by God, sheltered Syrians and Cilicians, Phoenicians and Arabs, delegates from Palestine and from Egypt, Thebans and Libyans, together with those from Mesopotamia. There was also a Persian bishop, and a Scythian was not lacking. Pontus, Galatia, Pamphylia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Phrygia sent their most outstanding bishops, jointly with those from the remotest areas of Thrace, Macedonia, Achaia, and Epirus. Even from Spain, there was a man of great fame [Hosius of Cordoba] who sat as a member of the great assembly. The bishop of the Imperial City [Rome] could not attend due to his advanced age; but he was represented by his presbyters. Constantine is the first ruler of all time to have gathered such a garland in the bond of peace, and to have presented it to his Savior as an offering of gratitude for the victories he had won over all his enemies.[25]

In this euphoric atmosphere, the bishops discussed the many legislative matters that had to be resolved with the end of persecution. They approved standard procedures for the readmission of the lapsed and for the election and ordination of presbyters and bishops, and for establishing the order of precedence of the various episcopal sees. They also decreed that bishops, presbyters, and deacons could not move from one city to another—a rule soon to be ignored.

Although Constantine was not yet baptized, he presided over the great council of bishops.

But the most difficult issue that the council had to face was the Arian controversy. On this score, there were several different groups whose positions and concerns had to be taken into account.

There was first of all a small number of convinced Arians, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia. (This bishop, who played a central role throughout the early years of the controversy, is not to be confused with the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, who was also present at the council.) Since Arius was not a bishop, he was not allowed to sit in the council, and it was Eusebius of Nicomedia who spoke for him and for the position that he represented. This small group was convinced that what Arius taught was so patently correct that all that was needed was a clear exposition of the logic of the argument, and the assembly would vindicate Arius and rebuke Alexander for having condemned his teachings.

In direct opposition to the Arian party, there was another small group of bishops who were convinced that Arianism threatened the very core of the Christian faith, and that therefore it was necessary to condemn it in no uncertain terms. The leader of this group was, not surprisingly, Alexander of Alexandria. Among his followers was a young man who, being only a deacon, could not sit in the council, but who would eventually become famous as the champion of Nicene orthodoxy: Athanasius of Alexandria.

Most of the bishops from the Latin-speaking West had only a secondary interest in the debate, which appeared to them as a controversy among Eastern followers of Origen. For them, it was sufficient to declare that in God there were, as Tertullian had said long before, "three persons and one substance."

Another small group—probably numbering no more than three or four—held positions approaching *patripassianism*, that is, that the Father and the Son are the same, and that therefore the Father suffered the passion. These bishops agreed that Arianism was wrong, but their own doctrines were also rejected later in the course of the controversy, as the church began to clarify what it meant by trinitarian doctrine.

In truth, the vast majority of those present did not belong to any of these groups. They bemoaned the outbreak of a controversy that threatened to divide the church at a time when persecution had finally come to an end and new opportunities and challenges needed to be met. It seems that at the

beginning of the sessions these bishops hoped to achieve a compromise that would make it possible to move on to other matters. A typical example of this attitude was that of Eusebius of Caesarea, the learned historian whose erudition gained him great respect among his fellow bishops.

According to the reports of those present, what changed matters was the exposition that Eusebius of Nicomedia made of his own views—which were also those of Arius. When the bishops heard his explanation, their reaction was the opposite of what Eusebius of Nicomedia had expected. The assertion that the Word or Son was no more than a creature, no matter how high a creature, provoked angry reactions from many of the bishops: "You lie!" "Blasphemy!" "Heresy!" Eusebius was shouted down, and we are told that the pages of his written speech were snatched from his hand, torn to shreds, and trampled underfoot.

The mood of the majority had now changed. Earlier they hoped to deal with the issues at stake through negotiation and compromise, without condemning any doctrine. Now they were convinced that they had to reject Arianism in the clearest way possible.

At first the assembly sought to do this through a series of passages of scripture. But it soon became evident that by limiting itself to biblical texts the council would find it very difficult to express its rejection of Arianism in unmistakable terms. It was then decided to agree on a creed that would express the faith of the church in such a way that Arianism was clearly excluded. The exact process they followed is not entirely clear. Eusebius of Caesarea, for reasons that scholars still debate, proposed the creed of his own church. Constantine suggested that the word *homoousios*—to which we shall return—be included in the creed. (Did Constantine know enough about the discussion to come up with this word, or was it suggested to him by his ecclesiastical advisor Hosius of Cordoba, as some suspect?) Eventually, the assembly agreed on a formula that was based on the creed of Caesarea, but with a number of additions that clearly rejected Arianism:

> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation

> descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.
>
> And in the Holy Spirit.
>
> But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance [hypostasis] or essence [ousia], or that He is created, or mutable, these the Catholic church anathematizes.[26]

This formula, with a number of additions later, and without the anathemas of the last paragraph, provided the basis for what is now called the Nicene Creed, which is the most universally accepted Christian creed. (The Apostles' Creed, being Roman in origin, is known and used only in churches of Western origin—which include the Roman Catholic Church and those stemming from the Protestant Reformation. The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, is acknowledged both by these Western churches and by those of the East, including Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and the like.)

When one reads the formula as approved by the bishops at Nicea, it is clear that their main concern was to reject any notion that the Son or Word —Logos—was a creature, or a being less divine than the Father. This may be seen first of all in affirmations such as: "God of God, light of light, true God of true God." It is also the reason why the creed declares that the Son is "begotten, not made." Note that the Creed began by declaring that the Father is "maker of all things visible and invisible." Thus, in declaring that the Son is "begotten, not made," he is being excluded from those things "visible and invisible" made by the Father. Furthermore, in the last paragraph, those are condemned who declare that the Son "came from that which is not"—that is, out of nothing, like the rest of creation. Also, in the text of the creed itself, we are told that the Son was begotten "from the substance of the Father."

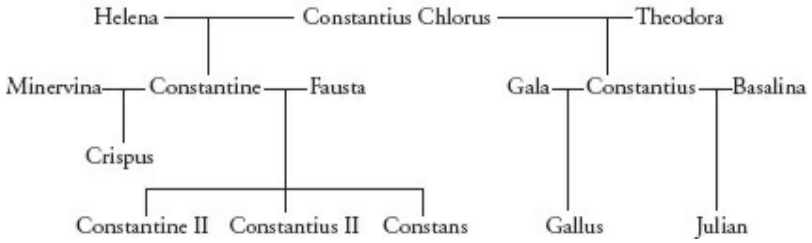
The Council of Nicea as depicted in the Nüremberg Chronicle.

The key word, however, and the one that was the subject of much controversy, is *homoousios* ("of the same substance"). This was intended to convey that the Son is just as divine as the Father. But it also provided the main reason for subsequent resistance to the Nicene Creed, for it seemed to imply that there is no distinction between Father and Son, and thus left the door open for Patripassianism.

The bishops gathered at Nicea hoped that the creed on which they had agreed (together with the clear anathemas appended to it) would put an end to the Arian controversy, and proceeded to sign it. Very few—Eusebius of Nicomedia among them—refused to sign. The assembly declared those who did not heretical, and deposed them. But Constantine added his own sentence to that of the bishops: He banished the deposed bishops from their cities. He probably intended only to avoid further unrest. But this addition of a civil sentence to an ecclesiastical one had serious consequences, for it established a precedent for the intervention of secular authority on behalf of what was considered orthodox doctrine.

In spite of what the bishops had hoped, the Council of Nicea did not end the controversy. Eusebius of Nicomedia was an able politician, and we are even told that he was distantly related to the emperor. His strategy was to court the approval of Constantine, who soon allowed him to return to Nicomedia. Since the emperor's summer residence was in Nicomedia, soon Eusebius was able to present his case once again before Constantine. Eventually, the emperor decided that he had been too harsh on the Arians.

Arius himself was recalled from exile, and Constantine ordered the bishop of Constantinople to restore him to communion. The bishop was debating whether to obey the emperor or his conscience, when Arius died.



The Family of Constantine

Alexander of Alexandria died in 328, and was succeeded by Athanasius, who had been present at the Council of Nicea as a deacon, and who would now become the champion of the Nicene cause. He soon became so identified with that cause that the later history of the Arian controversy is best told by following Athanasius's life. This will be the subject of Chapter 19, and therefore it is not necessary to follow the subsequent course of the controversy in any detail here. Let it suffice to say that Eusebius of Nicomedia and his followers managed to have Athanasius exiled by order of Constantine. By then, most of the Nicene leaders were also banished. When Constantine finally asked for baptism, on his deathbed, he received that sacrament from Eusebius of Nicomedia.

After a brief interregnum, Constantine was succeeded by three of his sons: Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius II. Constantine II ruled over Gaul, Great Britain, Spain, and Morocco. Constantius's territory included most of the East. And Constans was allotted a strip of land between his two brothers, including Italy and North Africa. At first the new situation favored the Nicene party, for the eldest of Constantine's three sons took their side, and recalled Athanasius and the others from exile. But then war broke out between Constantine II and Constans, and this provided an opportunity for Constantius, who ruled the East, to follow his pro-Arian inclinations. Once again Athanasius was exiled, only to return when, after the death of Constantine II, the West was united under Constans, and Constantius was forced to follow a more moderate policy. Eventually, however, Constantius became sole emperor, and it was then that, as Jerome said, "The entire world woke from a deep slumber and discovered that it had become Arian." Once again the Nicene leaders had to leave their cities, and imperial

pressure was such that eventually even the elderly Hosius of Cordoba and Liberius—the bishop of Rome—signed Arian confessions of faith.

Such was the state of affairs when the unexpected death of Constantius changed the course of events. He was succeeded by his cousin Julian, later known by Christian historians as *the Apostate*. Profiting from the endless dissension among Christians, the pagan reaction had come to power.