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THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY

The Fourth Century – Part III

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I. CHRISTOLOGICAL DEBATE

As we saw a few weeks ago, one of the biggest issues facing the Church on the theological front, was **Christology: the study and the terms we use to understand the nature of Christ**. Tertullian wrestled with Calixtus of Rome on this issue in the 3rd Century. Ignatius and the Apostles were already defending Jesus' coming in the flesh against Gnostic attacks in the first century. Irenaeus fought with Marcion over it in the 2nd. But the debate was never officially resolved because there existed no supreme head of the church or supreme authority that could be appealed to and which could subsequently resolve it. Suddenly, however, the church was confronted with a new situation: the all powerful Emperor who controlled the entire Roman world for the first time in decades and who was moving his capitol closer to the midlands of Christianity, was favorable toward Christianity. Not only that, but Constantine had a vested interest in unity in the church. He saw Christianity as the new cement of the Empire. The temptation was too much to pass up: why not involve him? Why not appeal to his authority? Why not present the theological issues involved to him and ask for his help in resolving the tensions which were becoming increasingly raucus throughout the Empire, even to the extent of **riots and street battles in Syria and Egypt?** Constantine, who was keen on unity, indeed, insisted upon it, chose a solution which was to become a model for the church for centuries to come: he called a Council of the church, inviting bishops from around the world to attend and to vote on a theological resolution to the problem. That council met in the **Greek city of Nicaea in 325 A.D.**, a city called Iznik today. It is located in northern Turkey near the sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus. We call that council, the **Council of Nicaea**, and though many canons were adopted by the bishops who attended it, the Council is most widely known for the Statement of Faith it developed concerning Christ that we call today the **Nicene Creed**. Before we get to it however, let's review the Christological debate itself. It is a debate that both preceded the Council, and, unfortunately, continued for some time afterwards.

THE QUESTIONS: The problem was this: how do you reconcile a Christ whose body and nature suffered like ours with a Father whose essence is eternal and incorruptible?

- ⤴ **Did God suffer on the cross?** Or a lesser being?
- ⤴ Was Christ perhaps, **created at some time by the Father for the purpose of our Salvation, say at the beginning of Creation, so that He has not always been? Or has he always existed? Compare: Colossians 1:15.**
- ⤴ **If He always existed, was our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in his being, different in substance or essence from God the Father and Creator? Or was his divine essence identical to the Father's?**
- ⤴ **If his essence is the same as the Father's, is he on an equal footing with the Father? In which case, is there one God or are there Two?**
- ⤴ **If He's always been, and is of the same essence as the Father, what about his**

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fleshly body and human nature? Were those simply an appearance? If not, how were those joined to his Divine nature? And if the Divine nature was fully abiding in Christ's flesh, why did He suffer and why did He say at times that He didn't know the times and the seasons of his own return, but only His Father knew?

♣ **Which brings us full circle again: was he of a lesser nature and essence than God the Father, a created Lord perhaps, who was simply a kind of bridge between the ineffable God and us?**

These questions and others like them would engage the Church for many years, only finally resolved by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and even then, they continued to be debated.

A piece of background that is important to know here is that many Christians in the Greek speaking world had come to think of God the Father and Creator in very Greek philosophical terms: that is, as **immutable, impassible, unchanging, and very unlike us humans**, so different in fact, that when the Scriptures say God spoke or walked with Adam in the Garden, it was taken in an allegorical way—indeed everything even vaguely anthropomorphic was taken allegorically, since God was far beyond speech or feelings. Those who taught this were largely Greek Egyptian theologians. But the beauty of the Gospel is that we can actually have a relationship with God in which he talks to us and loves us. So how do you reconcile this with a Platonic, immutable unfeeling God? To resolve the problem, **Justin, Clement, Origen** and others elaborated on the notion of the Logos in the Prologue of John, the Logos being the Word or Reason of God who is capable of direct communication with us. That Logos or Word, they taught, was the bridge between the immutable, impassible, unfeeling God, and us, and was of course, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ had feelings, suffered, spoke to us and communicated with us and was himself a bridge back to the Father who neither felt, nor suffered, nor spoke, but was supreme over all. But this brought up a question: **was this Logos co-eternal with the Supreme Being, or a late comer? Someone who was created?**

As is often the case in disputes of this kind, there were eloquent leaders who led the charge on both sides of the debate. The two principle protagonists in this controversy were both Alexandrian clerics, both members of the Church in Egypt. Their names were **Arius and Athanasius**, though, as we shall see, there were other powerfully eloquent theologians who sided with the Orthodox cause and whose names are worth mentioning, and still others like **Eusebius** the church historian and bishop of Caesarea himself, who were simply confused by the debate and took different sides at different times. But for now lets talk about Arius and Athanasius.

II. ARIUS: AD 250 or 256– 336

Not a lot is known about Arius except that he was a highly popular preacher in Alexandria, a presbyter or elder or priest educated in Antioch who became embroiled in a debate with his Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. Arius' teaching about Jesus can be summed up in these words: **“There was when He was not.”** He taught that the **Word or Logos or Son of God** was not co-eternal with the Father, but that **He was created** at some point. He was created before anything else was created, very early on, before the world was made or the angels, but he was created nonetheless. For Arius the Logos did not partake of the same *eternal-divine* nature (*homoousias*, from the Greek, *homo—the same—and ousia—substance or being*) as

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God. He argued that to speak of a Logos and the Father who were both divine, was to deny monotheism and ask for belief in two gods rather than one. He argued that the Son of God was only of a *like or similar substance*—homoiousias--and that there was a time when he was not, in other words, that he was created. Bishop Alexander became concerned about his teaching and called a council of the bishops of Alexandria. They discussed Arius' teaching, condemned it and removed him from office. But Arius had allies. He appealed to bishops he'd gone to school with in Antioch to write letters, and preached his position to the people of Alexandria, and soon there were demonstrations on his behalf in the streets of the city. The controversy became so great that it threatened to divide the entire Eastern Church, and of course, Constantine saw it as a threat to the unity of the Empire. So he called a Council of bishops to decide the matter, and promised to support whatever decision was made.

III. CLASS DEBATE

As you read the following positions, please ask yourselves what evidence there is that the Son is less than fully equal with the Father in Scripture (Arian)? What evidence is there that He is fully equal to the Father; co-eternal and of the same “substance” (Orthodox).

Arian Position

John 1:14, 18 and 3:16. The term “**monogenes**” in Greek which is used of the *Logos*, or Word in these passages in John means “only *begotten*” from “*mono*” (only), and “*gennaō*” to beget, father, procreate.” . Therefore, the Divine Son was “begotten” or given birth at some moment in time before the creation of the world, and therefore there was a time when he was not. He is therefore a created being. He is therefore not equal to the God. He is a creature.

“If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was (a time) when the Son was not.” (Socrates Scholasticus quoting Arius.)

Colosians 1:15. The Son is referred to here as the “**firstborn (*prototokos*) over all creation.**” Therefore, he was “born” and there was a time when he was not.

Most importantly, the scriptures affirm from the beginning that there is only one God (**Exodus 6:4; Isaiah 45:21; 46:9**). If the Son is God in the same sense that God is God, there are two Gods, not one, and the scriptures are mistaken and unreliable guides.

Orthodox Position

John 1:14, 18 and 3:16. Much of the debate turned upon a Greek word often translated, “only begotten” (monogenes). It is evident from experience and scripture that the term “**monogenes**” though sometimes translated “only begotten”, does not have as its *only or primary* meaning the idea of “begetting” or “causing to come into being” as though there were a point in time when the person generated was not. Why not? Because Christ Jesus is NOT the only child to whom God's Spirit has given birth. Believers in Jesus are also “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-8) and become God's children (John 1:12) at a point in time. How then, could the Son of God be God's *only begotten*? There must be another meaning to the term besides simply coming into being at a point in time by an act of the Spirit. There is, and it is alluded to

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in Hebrews 11:17, a passage referring to the relationship between Abraham and Isaac. In that passage Isaac is referred to as being “his (Abraham's) only begotten”. Isaac, however, was not Abraham's only son. Ishmael was also Abraham's son, and he was born before Isaac. Therefore, the act of begetting a son must not be the primary meaning of the term. The answer comes in the idea of Isaac's uniqueness. Isaac was born from above, chosen, set apart, unique. And so it is with the term “begotten” or “**monogenes**” with relation to the Son of God. He was unique. The Word was in a unique relationship to the Father from all eternity. This is why the NIV translates the term: “**The One and Only**”. This is also etymologically correct as another different word with the root, *gennao*, would have been used if the emphasis were to be placed on the idea of giving birth itself.

And even if the Son or Logos can be referred to as somehow “begotten”, as “generated” by the Father, it is because **he is always, and for all eternity has been, “proceeding forth from the Father” as the expression of His Being.** The Son is, as our children are of us, an expression of our very beings, of our selves. So it is with the Son of God. The Son who is **the exact expression of God's very being, from all eternity has been coming forth from God's inmost self.** “*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word*” (Hebrews 1:3). This is unique. There is no other child of God in a relationship to the Father of this kind. That is why Jesus told his disciples that he was returning: “To my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17). The Son is in relationship to the Father in a way we will never be, a relationship that is unique and eternal. The “Word” or *Logos* of God is, as “Word” suggests, the expression of God's inner being and thoughts. And as there was never a time when God was without thought and expression, there has never been a time when the Word has not been.

See also:

John 1:1 “And the Word *was* God.” If as the Jehovah's Witnesses, modern day Arians, wish to translate John 1:1 is true, and that “the Word was a god” then, they are doing the very thing that they wish to dismiss: preaching the existence of two gods, not One.

John 8:58 “Before Abraham was I AM.” (cf. Exodus 3:14).

John 14:7-9 “Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father.”

Colossians 1:15 which uses the Greek word, *protokos* of the Son, meaning “firstborn”, is not primarily a reference to “birth” but to “rights”. The firstborn of the family was the head of the family in terms of inheritance. That is why God can refer to Israel as being his firstborn in Exodus 4:22. “Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, an I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.'” So Jesus is the inheritor of all creation. It belongs to him.

IV. THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

In the year 325, some 300 bishops met at the first universal or Ecumenical Council of the Church to discuss the matter. It was a moving event. Bishops had come from everywhere in the Empire and beyond, from Persian, for example. Many bore in their bodies the marks of torture. Many had read the writings of colleagues and heard of their reputations. Now they were seeing each other face to face. They had many matters to resolve including, how to

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accept back the lapsed into the church, how to choose bishops and presbyters, etc. Most felt that the Arian Controversy would be easily resolved with discussion and understanding. But when **Eusebius of Nicomedia**, not to be confused with the church historian of the same name, stood to read the position championed by Arius (who was not present, not being a bishop), and it became clear that he and Arius believed the Son had been created and was not co-eternal with the Father, the assembly was outraged. They began to shout him down. His speech was torn from his hands and ripped to shreds. The debate, you see, had been seen by the Latin West as largely a Greek's obsession with Greek words. They had assumed that everyone believed as Tertullian of Carthage had taught that God was a Triune God, one substance in three persons. When they discovered that Arius and the party who represented him believed the Christ was created and did not share the same substance with the Father they were beside themselves. **The Church had always worshiped the Christ. How could you worship one who was not God?** Were the Scriptures not clear as to his Divinity? They decided, however, that a simple scriptural answer to the question was insufficient, that a Creed that set out their faith in the simplest and strongest form was best. And so, they adopted what today is known as the **Nicene Creed**. Nearly every bishop present, except a handful such as **Eusebius of Nicomedia**, signed it. Bishops who could not agree to it were anathematized. Constantine added his authority to it by banishing bishops who did not agree to it from their sees. This was of great consequence for the future. But the Nicene Creed remains today the most widely adopted Creed in the World being adhered to by the Russian Orthodox, the Catholic Church, Protestant Churches, the Greek Orthodox, the Syriac and Assyrian Churches, the Coptic Church, The Armenian Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Churches, and so on and so forth.

READ THE NICENE CREED

THE NICENE CREED
COUNCIL OF NICEA 325

- 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.

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THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE
NICENE CREED RE-AFFIRMED AND ENLARGED
381 A.D.

- We 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* (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
- by whom all things were made;
- who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the *Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man;
- *he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate*, and suffered, *and was buried*, and the third day he rose again, *according to the Scriptures*, and ascended into heaven, *and sits on the right hand of the Father*;
- from thence he shall come again, *with glory*, to judge the quick and the dead;
- *whose kingdom shall have no end*.
- And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets*.
- *In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

The solution of course in these Creeds was to show that the Son was of the same substance (homoousias or homoousian) as the Father, had never been created but always existed, and was in no way less divine than the Father.

As we read in the article on the term “homoousian” in Wikipedia: “*According to this doctrine, Jesus Christ is the physical manifestation or Logos (the divine word) and consequently possesses all of the inherent, ineffable perfections which religion and philosophy attribute to the Supreme Being. Three distinct and infinite minds or substances, three co-equal and eternal realities, participate in (or share) the same, single Divine Essence (ousia).*”

QUESTION: SO WHY IS ALL THIS IMPORTANT? What difference does it make whether the Son or Logos is not of quite the same “Stuff” as the Father? Why does it matter that He was not created at some time prior to the creation of all other things and beings? Or that there was a time when He was not?

The answer to this is at least three-fold:

1. *Scripture only allows us to worship God. Yet Hebrews 1:6 commands us and the angels to worship the Son. Worship is absolutely central to our faith. As we worship the Son, we are drawn to the Father and filled with the Holy Spirit. In Revelation, God and the Lamb share the same throne and are worshiped together 22:3. The name of God and of the Lamb are on believers foreheads 14:1, etc. Worship was given to Jesus*

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after his resurrection and he accepted it naturally, because it belongs to Him as the second member of the Trinity. If we treat Jesus as less than God, we will not worship Him in our hearts; yet it is through Him only that we come to the Father.

2. *If He is less than the Father in some way, then we must find a way around scripture such as John 8:58 in which Jesus clearly equates Himself with Yahweh of the Old Testament. Many, many other scriptures become a problem in the same way.*
3. *Without the Son being fully equal to the Father, we undercut the amazing beauty of the Incarnation in which God Himself visits our earth, suffers our pain and distress, taking it upon Himself, and fully enters into our condition. We no longer have in God, a God who fully “knows” us from the inside out, but One who simply delegates this to a lesser being He has created to whom he appoints the necessity of suffering whereas He remains above it all. On the contrary, we have a God and Father who has entered into our situation and understands it from the inside out.*

A postscript to this affirmation is the fact that, as time went on, as a consequence of these Confessions, God (the Father) gradually ceased to be viewed as impassible, that is, without feelings, as the Greek philosophical mind had invented him, with the Son being a “lesser” Being who acts as a bridge and intermediary between that unfeeling, impassible, God and us emotional humans. As an expression of God the Father Himself, the Son perfectly mirrors the Father's heart. This Father is of a piece with the Father in the Prodigal Son. If He anointed and sent His Son into the world to save us, it is because He Himself loves us.

End of story? Hardly. We will always have an enemy. And though the nature of conflicts change, our enemy never ceases to assault us. And in this case, he did it, through the newfound powers implicit in the allegiances between the state and the Church.

V. REVERSAL, GREAT LEADERS OF THE CHURCH, AND THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPE

What happened? The deposed bishop of Nicomedia, Eusebius, who had found his speech torn from his hand by the overwhelmingly orthodox council was distantly related to the Emperor and lived in Constantine's summer place of residence. He had himself reintroduced to the emperor, became friends, and won him over. Soon, the tables were turned and both he and Arius were re-instated by State Authority. Then the successor of Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, Bishop Athanasius, a fierce opponent of Arius, found himself forced out of Alexandria by Imperial decree, and soon Orthodox bishops across the empire were fleeing for their lives. When he died, Constantine was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia as an Arian. The sons of Constantine, with one exception, favored Arianism. And everywhere bishops were being forced to sign Arian statements of faith or resign. How Christendom returned to Orthodoxy and the Nicene Creed and returned to Orthodoxy at the **Council of Constantinople in 381**, is a story involving a momentary return of the Empire to Paganism under the Emperor Julian the Apostate, and the writings, sufferings, and perseverance of some of the greatest Trinitarian theologians of all time.