

The Nicene Creed (AD 325)

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I begin with a prayer prayed in my own church, the Church of England, on November 1, All Saints Day. O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son, Christ, our Lord. Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I pray this particular prayer to begin this lecture because when I pray this prayer, I often think of the great Athanasius or Athanasius (pronounced differently), as we call him in the West, the young man who went to the Council of Nicea in 325 with his bishop, the bishop of Alexandria, and then later, because he was the great defender of the faith of the Council of Nicea under various emperors and in various adverse conditions, he suffered for his commitment to that faith which was expressed in the Nicene Creed. So he is one of those whom we shall be coming to, and he's one for whom I have a great affection. May I commend to you, if you've not already read it, because it helps you understand the development of theology at this time, *Athanasius on the Incarnation, De Incarnatione—On the Incarnation*, one of the great books of the early church and Britain in relation took this controversy, this debate, which surrounds the definition of the dogma of the *homoousios* at the Council of Nicea.

What I want to do today in this lecture is to begin by summarizing the Arian theology. In the last lecture I read to you from the writings of Arius, as well as the description of his teaching from his bishop, Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, but perhaps your mind, like mine, when you get all this information, tends to be unable to bring it together quickly, and therefore what I want to do using the help of J. N. D. Kelly is to bring to you now a succinct summary of the teaching that we call Arianism so that we can immediately then proceed to the Nicene Creed.

So here we begin. The keystone, as we may call it, of the system of Arius and his colleagues was the conviction of the absolute, and we need to underline and emphasize this, the absolute transcendence and perfection of the Godhead, and when he said *God*, he meant God the Father. God the Father was absolutely one, a monad. There could be no other God in the proper sense of the word *God* beside God who is named God the Father. “We acknowledge one God,” you’ll remember he said, “who is alone unbegotten, alone eternal, alone without beginning, alone true. This one God, this monad God, was unengendered, uncreated from everlasting to everlasting. Himself without source, He alone was the source and origin of whatever else existed.” So that’s the first point to bear in mind: the absoluteness of the one God.

Having said that, the inescapable development from that is what we may call the drastic subordination of the Son or the Logos or the Word. God desired (this is God the monad, God the Father) to create the world, and for this purpose, God needed, God employed an agent or an instrument, to use technical terms. This was necessary because, as it was generally taught among the Arians in their theology, that the created order could not bear the weight of the direct action of the uncreated, the increate, and eternal God. Hence, God the Father, the one and only God, brought into existence His Logos, His Word for the purpose of creating the world, so that the Word was created by the one God for a particular purpose, and the Word was a creature. He was the first begotten of all creation, the Pauline text being here used within the system of Arianism, and like all other creatures after Him, He was created out of nothing.

So the Word, the Logos, was created out of nothing by the one Father and thus, being created, He had a beginning, even though as was said, He came into existence before the times and before the ages. And so we get from Arius certain phrases and clauses and sentences which seek to express this, and I believe that some of these were put into what we would in modern days call choruses, and if you want to propagate sound teaching, use choruses. If you want to propagate unsound teaching, use choruses, and Arius obviously knew how to communicate, and he put some of his expressions into what we would call chorus form. Here are some of the kinds of things that he got people saying and chanting: “Before He was begotten or created or defined or established, He, the Word, was not.” Another one: “There was when He was not.” So that was the kind of thing that was said, and that was the way in which it was popularized, so you can see that there

is in Arianism this tremendous gap between God the Father and the one who is called the Son or the Word. The Son, the Word, is a creature, howbeit the highest of creatures. And in this way, the Arian Trinity is three persons certainly, but three persons who are utterly distinct beings and different beings who do not share in any way whatsoever the same substance, the same essence, the same being as each other. The Father alone is the increate, the uncreated one, the Son is created and is a creature, and the Spirit also is created and is a creature, so while you do have a Trinity, it is a very definite Trinity or triad of subordination, but the Father alone in this Trinity is God. That is in quick summary what Arianism was all about. It was, as I said, an accommodation of biblical faith to Greek philosophy, in this case, technically speaking to middle Platonism.

When the Council of Nicea was called, it was called by the emperor Constantine, Constantine the Great, and it was called not because he was particularly committed to what was to become the orthodox position, but rather because he wanted unity in the church and he wanted the pastors of the church, the bishops of the church to come together and to heal their division and to confess that which they could all stand by and teach. So they assembled at Nicea, which was then a town in what is modern Turkey. In fact, I believe that the railway station at the other side of the sea from the great city of Constantinople, the railway station in the town now of Nicea is the place where the Council of Nicea met, called by the emperor Constantine in the year 325. After much deliberation and discussion, the council drafted and then required all the bishops present to sign this confession, this creed.

I'll make one comment about it before I start. You will notice when I read it to you, and the text of it is found in its original form in *The Creeds*, the book by J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, and there's also a translation, a full translation, in his *Early Christian Doctrines*. You will notice that it starts, "We believe." If you're familiar with churches which you may call liturgical churches where they recite the creed, you will have met the creed beginning with "I believe." That's how it has been ever since the fifth century, when the Creed of Nicea, which became the Creed of Constantinople, was taken into the Divine Liturgy, into the Sunday Eucharistic service. It functioned as a baptismal creed, and therefore it was not "we believe," but it was "I believe." Each and every member of the church was confessing before God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit what he or she believed, which was the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church

and, therefore, it was in the “I” form, each and every member together saying what they believed. But because the council was not a liturgy, not a service of worship, but a council of bishops who were speaking with one voice to the church, the form of the creed there is “We believe.”

So with that explanation, let me read it to you slowly. Remember that this is the Creed of the Council of Nicea, and if you know it by heart, as many of you will do, the creed as it comes through the Council of Constantinople, you will notice differences.

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.” That’s the first paragraph, brief and to the point. The second paragraph is the longest one, and why it is so is obvious in the light of the Arian controversy. “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth. Who because of as men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.” End of second paragraph. You can see there that there is a very definite attempt to say what is true concerning Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to say it in the light of this teaching of Arianism, which was very much as I said disseminated in the church and in the empire at that time.

And the third paragraph is very brief, simply “We believe in the Holy Spirit.” There will be an extension to this in the later creed as it’s developed by the Council of Constantinople, but this at this stage since the controversy was of the relation of the Son to the Father, there is no development in the creed at this stage of the person of the Holy Spirit and the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and to the Son.

Now the creed doesn’t end there. To it are appended certain anathemas, and as I read these to you, you will recall what you heard from me and what you have read concerning the teaching of Arius and his colleagues. So here then are the appended anathemas. The basis of the anathemas is very scriptural. You’ll remember in the letter of the apostle Paul to the churches of Galatia, he says that “if anyone comes to you preaching any other gospel than the one that he has declared unto you, let him be

accursed. Let him be under God's curse." In the Latin, *Anathema sit*.

Here we go then, the anathemas. "But as for those who say, 'there was when he was not,' and 'before being born he was not,' and 'that He came into existence out of nothing,' or who assert that the Son of God is from a different *hypostasis* or substance or is created or is subject to alteration or to church, these the Catholic Church anathematizes." I guess you can recall there some of the things you read and I said which are repeated in those anathemas.

What we must do is to reflect upon this creed and to see, or at least begin to see, what is being said here. This creed wasn't created out of nothing. Obviously what the bishops there assembled did was to take a basic baptismal creed and to add to it those phrases and clauses that were deemed necessary to rebut the Arian false teaching. So what I want to do is to pick up on what we may call the anti-Arian interpolations made by the bishops in this creed and to make brief comment on them.

The first of these interpolations is the clause that reads, "That is, from the substance of the Father," which was inserted, you will recall, immediately after the words "begotten from the Father, only begotten," and was clearly intended in the place that it is given here to give a more precise interpretation to the words "begotten from the Father." So what we have here is a deliberate counterblast to the principle tenet of Arianism, that is, that the Son had been created out of nothing and had no communion or community of being with the Father. The implication which this carried with it is that He shed, that is, the Son shed, the essence, the divine essence of the Father to the full, and as we shall say, this particular thought is driven home later by the all-important phrase, the much discussed and famous phrase of this creed, the *homoousios*, but to that in a moment. So that's the first one then—"That is, from the substance from the Father."

The second one, the second anti-Arian clause added, is "True God from true God." You will recall that one of the much repeated statements of Arius was of the absolute uniqueness of the divine Father that "He and He alone is God. He and He alone is true God." And once you take such a position, you can quote biblical verses and bend them to that interpretation. For example, he quoted Arius from John 17:3, "This is life eternal that they should know thee, the Father, the only true God." And so what the bishops are here doing is to say that He, the Son, is Himself true God and that

He comes from true God. They use this very expression “true God” and use it in such a way that it contains the opposite meaning to the meaning put into it by Arius. So that’s the second anti-Arian clause, “True God from true God.”

From the substance of the Father, true God from true God, and third, the expression “Begotten not made.” This was placed here for obvious reasons. It was placed here to insist that the Son is not made out of nothing; that the Son is not there in existence due to an act of will by the Father, but that He is there, and here we remember what Origen of Alexandria taught, “He is there because He is eternally begotten.” The Word, the Son, is not a creature. He has not been made. He is begotten.

And then the fourth, and it is the most important expression added to this creed, are the words “of one substance with the Father.” *Homoousion to patri*—of one essence, of one being, of one substance with the Father. It is here in this expression that the full weight of the orthodox reply to Arianism was concentrated. The Son is consubstantial. This could be interpreted in various ways and was so interpreted in various ways, but one thing it did make clear, whatever particular philosophical gloss you put upon it, it did assert the full deity, the true and full deity of the Son. The Son—it taught, it implied, it emphasized, it underlined—the Son, said the creed, “shared the one and the very being [or the very essence or the very Godhead] of the Father.”

And so it is in this particular expression and this one particular word *homoousios* that you could say, in a sense, that the whole of Christianity is contained. In fact, that has been argued and I think that it is a very right and true argument that herein in this one word, one word in the Greek *homoousios*, is contained the vital truth of the whole Christian religion and that if you begin from this truth, that the Son is of one essence, one being, one Godhead, one substance with the Father, then you are into true and vital Christian faith and Christian understanding. But we shall be coming back to the *homoousios* again and again because it is, as I said, at the very center of all theological reflection concerning who is God, understood in a Christian way.

But now we must turn to the anathemas which come as an appendix to the creed and here they are phrases which are singled out for condemnation because they were typical Arian catch words or slogans and most of them have been repeated again and again by Arius himself in his book that I referred to earlier, *The*

Failure. The first one then, the first proposition, which is attacked is “There was when He was not.” This particular proposition summed up the Arian denial, flat denial, of the Son’s eternity and instead asserted the fact that He came after the Father that He was created. So that is set aside; that is anathematized, and the second one, “Before He was begotten, He was not.” This is really not much more than another way, we may say, of expressing the thought contained in the first, but it is an expression which you may recall from an earlier lecture when I read from Arius, he had used it in his letter to Bishop Alexander.

The third anathema, “He came into existence out of nothing.” That needs no explanation by me. These in a sense are all parallel types of statements from the Arians, but since they were so much in popular usage, the major ones in popular usage were collected and put together and obviously their meanings overlap and are sometimes near identical. So the third one, “He came into existence out of nothing,” and then we get in the fourth one, the words which are going to be very important in Christological discussion, and so I want to take them up now to introduce you to these words because, as I say, unless we’ve got some clarity on them, we will get ourselves confused later.

You will remember that one of the anathemas is against those who assert that the Son of God is from a different *hypostasis* or substance. Now these two words, *hypostasis* and *substance*, are important not primarily because of their usage here but because of the later development of their meaning. You’ll notice in this condemnation, in this anathema here, they are used as synonyms. That is, each of them refers to the Godhead or the essence or the being of the Father, and those who say that the Son of God is from a different *hypostasis* or substance or, as I said, being, than that of the Father, are anathematized. So the two terms here, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, or *hypostasis* and *substance*, are employed as equivalents, but as we’re going to see, their separate meanings and the development of their separate meanings occurred between this council and a synod which met in Alexandria in 362. After 362, and then this became part of the classical way, the orthodox way of speaking, after 362 the meaning assigned to *hypostasis* in regard to the Trinity was the meaning of person, but not person in a modern sense after the development of psychology in the last few centuries, but person in a much earlier sense. Its role, its purpose, *hypostasis*, was to stress the individuality of each of the three modes or forms in which the divine essence existed. So *hypostasis* in Greek was the same as a *persona* or person in

Latin, but we must not read into this in the patristic period the whole concept of personality, which has been developed in the West and the whole area of psychological examination of person through personality which has come with the development with modern psychology. Rather, as I said, the role was to stress the individuality of each of the three modes or forms in which the divine essence existed.

The other word, “substance,” or in Greek, *ousia*, this was reserved, as the tradition of theological reflection developed, for the very being of the Godhead for what we may call the divine essence for the Godness, which is God, for the substantia, for the substance which is God Himself. In the period that we’re dealing with here, 325, the etymology of *hypostasis*, from a verb meaning “to lie under,” had made it susceptible to the meaning and made it to be used with the meaning of *substratum*, and so he therein approximated to the meaning of *ousia*. But later on, as I said, because of careful reflection and because the church, not following the way of Middle Platonism or other philosophical system, but the church developed its own specific language in order to express this specifically Christian Mystery (this is Mystery with a capital M), the Mystery of the God who is a Trinity in unity and a unity in Trinity.

There are so many people, and I hear it far too often, who simply repeat what they’ve heard from others that what the early church did was to take Greek philosophical terminology and to use Greek philosophical ontology and to make something new a philosophical doctrine out of the biblical daughter concerning the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What I want to say is that certainly the early church used a Greek technique, the technique of careful thinking and thinking which is developed and clear, but the church certainly did not buy into Hellenism and to adopt from Hellenism what we might call Hellenistic philosophy, the Arianism, that was the Hellenistic philosophy dominating and structuring the Christian understanding. What we get in the orthodoxy, the orthodoxy which beings to be expressed in the Council of Nicea, is rather the church utilizing Hellenistic techniques of clarity, using such technique, expressing the faith and, in fact, as I said a few moments ago, expressing the faith by taking Greek words or Latin words and using them in a sense which is defined by the church and not in the sense that they are found in the philosophical systems or in the popular cultural understanding of the Roman Empire.

So those things I think are very important and what this means I will further reflect upon now with you by taking a look at this word *homoousios* or when it is referred to it is often referred to as the *homoousion*. The critical expression, as I've already indicated, in the Creed of Nicaea is the expression "consubstantial with or of one substance with the Father," and we need to begin to think about this expression, and in thinking about it, I believe that we shall come to greater clarity concerning what is classic orthodoxy. But at this stage we need to be aware that the *homoousios* has not yet reached that final clarified development of meaning which it will reach as the patristic age develops.

So let us just follow here the explanation of J. N. D. Kelly in his book on the early creeds. I follow him; he says, "The *homoousios* is [and I guess we all know this] a compound adjective with *ousia* or substance as its principle element." But he goes on to say that "there are a few words in Greek susceptible of so many and so confusing shades of meaning as this basic noun, *ousia*. Its fundamental significance can be at once defined as 'being' or 'essence' or 'reality,' but these words only bring out the cause of the ambiguity, that is, ambiguity when we're looking for precise technical meaning." And so what we learn from the study of the use of *ousia* in the context of the Roman Empire, where Greek was spoken widely, the precise meaning attached to *ousia* varied with the cultural and the philosophical context in which it occurred and with respect to the philosophical allegiance and stance of the speaker or the writer. Here are three of the possible meanings that you could find at that time for the word *ousia*. Now sometimes the word *ousia* was used in a generic sense, as "man" used to be, I may add in the English language, but now those of us who use it are in trouble, but "man" in its normal traditional usage is a generic term. Likewise, *ousia*, it stood for the universal; it stood for the class or type to which a number of individual things belonged. And those of you who know Aristotle's classification will know that he had called this *deutera* or secondary substance—*deutera ousia*.

Sometimes, however, second, the dominant meaning was the individual itself, the individual reality itself; thus, an *ousia* was a particular entity regarded as the subject of qualities, and this is what Aristotle had called *prote ousia*, primary substance. Third, to people of a Stoic cast of thought, and the impact of Stoicism on the mind of the ancient world was a powerful one, third, *ousia* would suggest to them just stuff (S T U F F) or matter, nothing more or less.

Now the question arises as to which of these meanings is intended in the use of the word *homoousios*—which *ousia*? Is it the first, the generic, or the second, the individual, a particular entity regarded as a subject of qualities, the primary substance for Aristotle, or is it the Stoic understanding of stuff? If you turn to J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, and to pages 234 and 235, he says this, “There can be no doubt that as applied to the Godhead, *homoousios* is susceptible of and in the last resort requires the latter meaning.” And to find out what he means by the latter meaning, you have to go back to the previous paragraph where the latter meaning is “It could connote an individual thing as such.” And he goes on, “As later theologians perceived, since the divine nature is immaterial and indivisible, it follows that the persons of the Godhead who share it must have or rather be one identical substance. But the question is whether this idea was prominent in the minds of the Nicene fathers or rather of that group among them whose influence may be presumed to lie behind the Creed. The great majority of scholars have answered unhesitatingly in the affirmative. Indeed the Doctrine of Numerical Identity of Substance has been widely assumed to have been the specific teaching of the Nicene Council.” Then J. N. D. Kelly goes on to make certain comments of his own to suggest that maybe it’s not as clear as that, but I haven’t got time in this lecture to go into that. But I want to leave you with these questions and with these thoughts so that you can perhaps look up the word *ousia* and the word *homoousios* and you can begin to think about them because of their critical place in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.