

suggested, however, that he was permitted to vote with the bishops nor that he used any form of force to obtain an outcome.

It may be that the eloquence and glory of the Emperor had sway with some, however it should be remembered that he did eventually (years after the Council) support the Arian party. A few years after the Council of Nicea, Arius discovered a new way to interpret the word "homoousius" that agreed with his doctrines. He then asked to be readmitted to communion, but the Church refused. Arius then appealed to the Emperor. Emperor Constantine's favorite sister, Constantia, on her deathbed, implored Constantine to support Arius and he did so. A date was set for the forcing of the Church to readmit Arius, but while he was waiting for Constantine to arrive Arius stopped to relieve himself and his bowels burst and he died. (See Arians of the 4th Century, Chapter III, Section II by John Henry Newman)

It is hard to imagine how a man who had supposedly argued with eloquence for the Nicene Creed and who supposedly formulated the key phrase and explained it would simply abandon it for a mere submission to the words and not the meaning of the Creed. It is also hard to imagine how the account of Eusebius can be reconciled to the Emperor's apparent failure to grasp the issue apparent in his letter. It is also hard to imagine how a man who had been such a humble servant of the Church at Nicea would attempt to force the Church to accept his decisions at this later date. It seems reasonable on these grounds to suppose that Eusebius of Caesarea wrote a less than

accurate account designed to give credit and flattery to the emperor.

Nor was Constantine the last emperor to side with the Arians. Athanasius writes concerning this in "The Monks' History of Arian Impiety' (AD 358) saying, "When did a decision of the Church receive its authority from the emperor?" and "never did the fathers seek the consent of the emperor for them [councilar decrees of the Church], nor did the emperor busy himself in the Church." He goes on to say that the heretics banded with the emperor. (See Faith of the Early Fathers, Volume I, by William Jurgens).

The Church was willing to accept the help of an emperor, to listen to what he had to say, but not to accept the rule of an emperor in matters of faith. However one describes the role of Constantine at the Council of Nicea, it must be remembered that the Creed of Nicea expressed what the great majority of bishops at the council found to be traditional, Biblical, and orthodox of the Christian faith, a faith in which they believed so firmly that they were willing to die for it.

**The Evangelization Station**  
23260 Joaquin Gully Rd Unit 6,  
Twain Harte, California 95383, USA  
Telephone: 209-728-5598  
E-mail: [evangelization@earthlink.net](mailto:evangelization@earthlink.net)  
[www.evangelizationstation.com](http://www.evangelizationstation.com)

Pamphlet 081

## The Council of Nicea

When Constantine defeated Emperor Licinius in 323 AD he ended the persecutions against the Christian church. Shortly afterwards Christians faced a trouble from within: the Arian controversy began and threatened to divide the church. The problem began in Alexandria, it started as a debate between the bishop Alexander and the presbyter (pastor, or priest) Arius. Arius proposed that if the Father begat the Son, the latter must have had a beginning, that there was a time when he was not, and that his substance was from nothing like the rest of creation. The Council of Nicea, a gathering similar to the one described in Acts 15:4-22, condemned the beliefs of Arius and wrote the first version of the now famous creed proclaiming that the Son was "one in being with the Father" by use of the Greek word "homoousius."

### How Controversial was the Arian Controversy?

There were some three hundred bishops gathered at the Council of Nicea from all around the world. Eusebius lists many of them and their country of origin in his writings. It should be remembered that many of those present had, because of the recent persecutions, suffered and had faced threat of death for their faith. These were not wishy-washy men. It might also be remarked, that they were extremely sensitive to details of doctrine. As evidence of this, the second major concern of the Council of Nicea was to address the hotly debated question of what the proper day was to celebrate the resurrection.

The bishops of the Council stopped their ears on hearing the words of Arius and immediately rejected his teaching as distant and alien from the belief of the Church. They tore to pieces a letter of Eusebius of Nicomedia containing Arius' teaching, as well as an Arian confession of faith (see the appendix on the Council of Nicea in Baker Book House's, "Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History").

Originally seventeen of those bishops gathered at the council were unwilling to sign the Creed penned by the Council, and all but three of these were convinced to sign by the end. It is thus apparent that the Arians were a distinct minority among the bishops. Initially there was some resistance to the Nicene Creed, not because of what it said but because of how it said it. Many objected to the use of the word "homoousias" in an official document because it was not used in Scripture, despite their agreement with the meaning it conveyed.

The Council interrogated Arius using Scripture, only to find that he had a new way of interpreting every verse they brought before him. Finally, they used the argument that Arius' view had to be wrong because it was new. Athanasius says, "But concerning matters of faith, they [the bishops assembled at Nicea] did not write: 'It has been decided,' but 'Thus the Catholic Church believes.' And thereupon confessed how they believed. This they did to show that their judgement was not of more recent origin, but was in fact of Apostolic times..." (Volume 1, Faith of the Early Fathers, p338). In this regard also, Athanasius asks rhetorically, "... how many fathers [in other words, the writings of the

early Christians] can you cite for your phrases?" (Ibid, p325)

It must be concluded, then, that the controversy was between a great majority who held the belief that the doctrine expressed by the Nicene Creed was ancient and Apostolic, and a minority who believed that Arius' new interpretation of the faith was correct .

### **The Word Homoousious**

The Nicene Creed introduced the word "homoousious" or "consubstantial" meaning "of one substance." This word was not invented at the Council. Eusebius writes that some of the "most learned and distinguished of the ancient bishops had made use of consubstantial in treating of the divinity of the Father and the Son" (See document E in the Appendix, Baker). We do not have the sources that Eusebius must have had regarding the use of this word. Today, the only source is Origen who used the word in what seems the orthodox way (Johannes Quastren, "Patrology," Volume 2, p78). However, this phrase of Eusebius stands as a witness to the existence of wider use.

The bishops assembled at Nicea were careful to explain how they used the word, and what it meant. This is because it had been misused by Paul of Samosta. Regarding this unorthodox usage, St. Hilary and St. Basil say that it was said to be "unfit to describe the relation between the Father and the Son" at a council that met in Antioch (Ibid, p14). Apparently Paul of Samosta applied the word in a manner that implied division of nature, as several coins are from the same metal (Baker, p21).

### **The Role of Constantine**

The controversy greatly agitated Emperor Constantine, and he sent a letter to Arius and Alexander in an attempt to persuade them to lay aside their differences. He wrote, "This contention has not arisen respecting any important command of the law, nor has any new opinion been introduced with regard to the worship of God; but you both entertain the same sentiments, so that you may join in one communion. It is thought to be not only indecorous, but altogether unlawful, that so numerous a people of God should be governed and directed at your pleasure, while you are thus emulously contending with each other, and quarrelling about small and very trifling matters."

It has been suggested that because Constantine referred to the issue as "trifling" that he did not really understand it. Strangely, it is recorded in a letter by Eusebius of Caesarea that the Emperor suggested the key word "homoousious" that appears in the Nicene Creed. He says the Emperor explained the term as well, showing its difference from the heretical usage by Paul of Samosta. It has been speculated that the Emperor made his suggestion at the prompting of Hosius of Cordova, the Emperor's advisor and a man who was persecuted under Maximian.

Constantine did play an important role at the Council. Eusebius of Caesarea reports that he played an key part in calming, convincing, and bringing all to agreement on contested points. The account of Eusebius fairly glows in regard to the Emperor, and he is portrayed as a key figure. It is nowhere