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A Rebuttal to Heresy:

Analyzing the Efficacy of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea's Response to Arianism

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In May of 325 AD, Roman emperor Constantine (d. 337) took unprecedented action in the Christian church. He convened an ecumenical council by bringing together bishops from all across the Roman Empire.¹ The name of this groundbreaking assembly is the First Council of Nicaea.² Constantine was the first man to assemble a council intending to have all churches in the Roman empire be represented.³ This begs the question of why he needed such a comprehensive body to meet together. The purpose of this paper is to measure the impact the Council of Nicaea had on the Christian Church, particularly in the context of the Arianism issue. To achieve this objective, this paper will examine the details and structure of the first ecumenical church council, the specifics of Arianism, and how the council dealt with Arianism.

The exact number of bishops present at the council remains a debate. While Constantine extended invitations to all 1,800 bishops within the Roman Empire, a smaller number attended.⁴

¹ Mark Allan Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, Leicester, 1997), 48.

² R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 152.

³ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 152.

⁴ Rev. Mickey Gollahon, *Moses, the Ten Commandments & the Council of Nicaea.*, 2018, 23.

Ernest Honigmann estimates that there were 194-203 church fathers present at the council.⁵ Another popular calculation has been 318 bishops, as Roger Olson and Robert Grant contend.⁶ Grant reveals that while the early witnesses testify 250-300 bishops in attendance, the 318 number was considered sacred as it translates to Greek as TIH. The first part of the word, Tau, represents the cross, while the second half, IH, represents the first two letters of Jesus' name.⁷ Additionally, A.H.M. Jones contends that the 318 number is popular because it is a parallel to the 318 servants of Abraham.⁸

Even though Constantine intended all churches in the empire to be represented, he had trouble appealing to the bishops in the Western Roman Empire. Jones holds that the western bishops were indifferent to the issues Nicaea planned to focus on and that they might not have even comprehended some of the issues at stake. While the bishop of Rome was not in attendance for health issues, he sent two of his men to represent him at the council. Only one bishop came that represented Italy as a whole country: Marcus of Calabria. More surprisingly, there were no bishops at the council who represented either Britain or Spain. While Hosius of Corduba, a Spanish bishop, was at the Council, his formal role was not representing the church in Spain. Yet, it was to serve as Constantine's advisor at the council.⁹

With this information, how was the Council of Nicaea considered ecumenical if several prominent European countries did not even have a single bishop represent them? The ecumenical label was given to Nicaea as there were several bishops in attendance who represented areas

⁵ Ernest Honigmann, "The Original Lists of the Members of the Council of Nicaea, the Robber-Synod and the Council of Chalcedon," *Byzantion* 16, no. 1 (1942): 20–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44168551>.

⁶ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 152–5; Robert M. Grant, "Religion and Politics at the Council at Nicaea," *The Journal of Religion* 55, no. 1 (1975): 1–12, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1202069?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents

⁷ Grant, "Religion and Politics."

⁸ A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Toronto: University Of Toronto Press, 2001), 130.

⁹ Ibid.

outside the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire. There were two bishops from Crimea, one from Persia, and two from the Kingdom of Armenia.¹⁰

Even though representation from the western half was lacking, the Eastern Roman Empire made up for the west's general abstaining from attending the council. Over 100 bishops represented portions of Asia Minor. There were nineteen bishops from Egypt and eleven bishops representing the Greek-speaking areas of Europe. The eastern half was also represented by several renowned theologians and scholars, including Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, Alexander of Alexandria, and Eustathius of Antioch. Additionally, Olson contends that Nicaea should be considered ecumenical because all bishops in apostolic succession were invited by Constantine. He did not force each bishop to attend, but he did offer incentives like paying for their travel and providing protection on the journey.¹¹ With his effort to have them attend, it was out of Constantine's control that some bishops chose not to come. Moreover, the fact that some chose not to attend should not disqualify Nicaea from holding ecumenical status because the nature of invitations is that not everyone will attend.

A final reason why the Council of Nicaea should be labelled ecumenical is because it was not just bishops in attendance, so the total attendance number is greater than the 318 estimation. Reverend Mickey Gollahon highlights how each bishop was allowed to bring a maximum of two priests and three deacons to join him at the Council, so theoretically, the total number of attendants could have exceeded 1,800, the original number of invitations Constantine extended.¹²

Now that the question of attendance has been addressed, the next question to analyze is why Constantine chose the specific location of Nicaea for the ecumenical council. In his book

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 157.

¹² Gollahon, *Council of Nicaea*, 23.

titled *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, R. P. C. Hanson reveals that the original venue for the council was supposed to be in the city of Ancyra, or modern-day Turkey's capital Ankara.¹³

Pulling details from the Syriac version of the Letter of Constantine, Hanson offers three possible justifications for the location switch.¹⁴ He first contends that it was easier for the Italian bishops to make the journey to Nicaea, given that it is closer to the Aegean Sea than Ancyra is. The bishops could make the voyage through the Aegean Sea, cross into the Sea of Marmara, travel sixteen kilometers by land from the right edge of the sea to the left edge of Lake Iznik, and after thirty-two kilometers eastward on the water, they would arrive in Nicaea. Journeying to Ancyra, however, would require the bishops to travel nearly four hundred additional kilometers on land.

Not only was the switch to Nicaea more convenient for the participating bishops, it was also advantageous for Constantine. Being stationed in Nicomedia, or current day Izmit, Constantine only had to travel approximately sixty-seven kilometers to arrive at Nicaea. Mark Noll, in his book *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, adds that convening at Nicaea would have Constantine closer to his military base than if the council met in Ancyra.¹⁵ Looking under the surface, however, if location of the two cities was the defining criterion for relocation, why did Constantine decide not to host the council at his home base of Nicomedia?

Having the council meet in Nicomedia would obviously benefit Constantine since he would not need to make any sort of commute. Additionally, Nicomedia touches the Sea of

¹³ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 152.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Noll, *Turning Points*, 51.

Marmara, so the bishops from Italy and other western European countries would not have to travel extensively on the ground. They could sail from the Mediterranean Sea to the Aegean Sea into the Sea of Marmara. Hanson tells us that the third reason why Nicaea was chosen was because the city was known for its purified air.¹⁶ Grant states that the general climate, not just the air, was milder in Nicaea than in Ancyra.¹⁷

Interestingly, despite Constantine's Letter explaining the rationale behind the location switch from Ancyra to Nicaea, the letter did not say why Constantine originally wanted the council to meet in Ancyra. Hanson speculates that the council might not initially have been associated with Constantine and had planned to meet in Ancyra. Eventually, however, Constantine took over the planning for the council's details. Another theory that Hanson highlights is that Constantine had planned the council from the start, but he had not originally planned to be present at the meeting. Upon further deliberation, he realized that he needed to be in charge of the council, and with that realization, relocated the council's assembly point to ease his travel time.

Constantine wanted to assume management of the council because he greatly feared division in the church. Constantine believed that "any division within the Church was an offence to the Supreme Power and might bring down His wrath on the empire and on himself [Constantine]."¹⁸ The Council of Nicaea was not the first instance where Constantine sought to intervene in the proceedings of the Church. After his conversion to Christianity in 312, he believed that the Christian Church could be helpful for his reign in the long run, but he needed it to be constantly unified.¹⁹ Thus, he decided to help foster unity within the church by intervening

¹⁶ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 152.

¹⁷ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 4.

¹⁸ Jones, *Constantine*, 132.

¹⁹ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 1.

in their conflicts.²⁰ At the time of his epiphany, the Church in North Africa was increasingly divided. Constantine decided to send over funds to support the more reliable clerics in the area. He even subsidized two western church councils, one in Rome and one in Arles.²¹ Unfortunately for the emperor, he learned the hard way that funding does not automatically produce unity.

Turning back to Nicaea, Constantine noticed that the Council of Antioch of 325 had just finished convening. Hanson notes that this observation possibly prompted Constantine to try and exert himself into the proceedings at Nicaea. The reason why is because Constantine saw dangerous sparks of division developing at Antioch. While it had less influence than Nicaea, since Antioch was not an ecumenical council, the council heavily condemned Arius and his doctrine of Arianism. Antioch's stance followed the precedent set by the Council of Alexandria in 321, where Bishop Alexander excommunicated Arius for his heretical beliefs.²²

C.G. Bateman holds that prior to convening Nicaea, Constantine wrote a letter to both Alexander and Arius, requesting them to cease their quarreling.²³ He informs Alexander and Arius that their fighting has led to them being denied communion. Constantine even guilt-trips Alexander and Arius by comparing them, both in the Christian Church, to philosophers in an attempt to stop their fighting. In his letter, recorded by Robert L. Fern, the Emperor states to Alexander and Arius:

In order to remind you of your duty by an example of an inferior kind, I may say: you are well aware that even the philosophers themselves are united under one sect. Yet they often differ from each other on some parts of their theories: but although they may differ on the very highest branches of science, in order to maintain the unity of their body, they still agree to coalesce. Now, if this is done amongst them, how much more equitable will

²⁰ Ibid, 2.

²¹ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ C.G. Bateman, "Nicaea and Sovereignty: Constantine's Council of Nicaea as an Important Crossroad in the Development of European State Sovereignty" (2009), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1759006, 33-34.

it be for you, who have been constituted ministers of the Most High God, to become unanimous with one another in such a religious profession.²⁴

By calling philosophers an “inferior kind,” Constantine hoped that his comparison of the Church to philosophers would send a “you’re better than them” statement and motivate Alexander and Arius to quit their contentious debates. Bateman tells us, however, that Constantine’s letter had a negligible effect on the debates; in fact, the vitriol of the dispute between Arius and Alexander only increased.²⁵

Seeing that his initial approach failed, Constantine realized that the Arianism debate was getting out of control. He desperately wanted to rein in and eventually put out the division, and so he sought to convene the ecumenical Council of Nicaea in order that they may thoroughly address Arianism. While Constantine sought to resolve the division for practical reasons, he also found division in the church to be a significant moral problem, seeing it to be an offense to God.²⁶

Constantine’s problem was not necessarily with Arianism itself, as Jones contends that Constantine found the substance of the Arianism debate to be unnecessary.²⁷ From that premise, we can infer that Constantine did not hold too strong of an opinion in support of Arianism or against it. If he did feel strongly about one side, he would see the debate as important and necessary to have. James R. White agrees with this analysis when he holds, “he was no theologian, nor did he really care . . . what basis would be used to forge the unity he desired.”²⁸

²⁴ Robert L Ferm, *Readings in the History of Christian Thought* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart And Winston Inc, 1966), 130.

²⁵ Bateman, “Nicaea and Sovereignty,” 33.

²⁶ Jones, *Constantine*, 132.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ James R. White, “What Really Happened at Nicea?” accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.equip.org/PDF/DN206.pdf>, 3.

Since he took objection to the division that Arianism was causing, however, Constantine had no choice but to also oppose Arianism since Arius was the individual disrupting the status quo in the church. In a letter where he explains why he convened the Council of Nicaea, his reasoning to assemble the council was that:

My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition . . . of settled uniformity [that is, to clarify doctrine for the sake of the church]; and, second, to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world, then suffering under the power of grievous disease [that is, to end religious strife for the sake of the empire].²⁹

Constantine's solution to the division was to introduce a creed that all in attendance could accept as orthodoxy. Those at Nicaea would need to accept it to renew their church membership, but the creed would not "preclude differences of opinions on its interpretation or on points not covered by it [the creed]."³⁰ While the Council of Nicaea addressed approximately twenty decrees, which included the details of Easter and the Meletian Schism, this paper will not address those issues. Instead, this paper will just focus on the issue of Arianism, given that it was also the top priority for the council.³¹

Before examining how Nicaea dealt with Arianism, it is necessary to first know who Arius was and how he came to be a notable figure in the history of Christianity. Hanson tells us that Peter, bishop of Alexandria, conferred to Arius his deaconship.³² Arius was also made a priest by Achillas, who succeeded Peter in 312 and was bishop of Alexandria until 313.³³ In 318 AD, however, Arius started preaching beliefs contrary to what Achillas' successor, Alexander,

²⁹ Noll, *Turning Points*, 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 152–53.

³² Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*

held.³⁴ While Alexander strongly disagreed with Arius' beliefs, Arius initially believed that the bishop had advocated for the same stance on Jesus's nature.³⁵ The miscommunication was eventually resolved when Alexander confronted Arius on his biblical interpretations. Alexander did not initially take an intense approach; Olson notes that the bishop had a calm demeanor and did not enjoy conflicts.³⁶ Thus, he first tried to counter Arius' dissenting beliefs by using more moderate methods of conflict resolution, like sermons and correspondences, but those methods were ineffective.

Feeling stuck in an unproductive debate, Alexander eventually resorted to a *carte blanche* solution.³⁷ In 318 AD Alexander formed the Council of Alexandria, which consisted of approximately 100 bishops from Egypt and Libya, to have them judge Arius' views in relation to the church's doctrine. Specifically, Alexander accused Arius of teaching that the Logos has the ability to fall like Satan and for supporting Paul of Samosata's adoptionist viewpoint.³⁸ Paul's view "suggest[s] that Jesus was a mere human being, who, because of his righteous life, was at some point 'adopted' as God's son."³⁹ This not only denies the deistic nature of Christ, but it also rejects the Trinity. While Arius went farther than Paul by holding that the Logos is a heavenly figure, Alexander did not see that Arius's additional acknowledgement could vindicate his baseline support of Paul's adoptionism viewpoint. Ultimately, Alexander wanted the council to find Arius guilty of heresy and excommunicate him.⁴⁰

³⁴ White, *What Really Happened at Nicea?*, 1-2.

³⁵ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 2.

³⁶ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 145.

³⁷ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 2.

³⁸ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 145.

³⁹ Earl Lavender, "Adoptionism," *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, February 7, 2012, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah05004>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The convening of Alexander's council did not come without opposition. Prior to the synod convening, Arius was able to take advantage of public opinion and sway them to his side. Arius had a charismatic personality and used it to call out the steep opposition he was facing from the church establishment.⁴¹ His challenge of the status quo energized his base to the point where they held a protest and marched past Alexander's house.⁴² During the protests, Arius' followers carried signs and shouted slogans such as "[t]here was when the Son was not," alluding to Arius's belief that Christ was below God because He was begotten by God.

Olson also highlights how Arius's beliefs became more popular due to the composition of popular songs in the day. Using music and his personality to build populist excitement, Arius was able to build a mass following even though his followers may not have fully understood the substance of his arguments. Ultimately, the public opinion Arius shaped was to no avail as the Council of Alexandria ruled him a heretic and excommunicated him.⁴³

Despite the council's decision, Arius refused to back down. He relocated to Palestine to search for fellow theologians who would agree with his beliefs. He found several bishops, and more importantly, found a council of Palestinian bishops that ruled in favor of him, permitting him to hold church meetings.⁴⁴ The council, however, issued to him a caveat. While they ruled that Arius was not a heretic, they strongly encouraged Arius and his followers to restore relations with Alexander and submit to the bishop Alexander's views.⁴⁵ Arius decided to overlook the council's entreaty and began to spread his teachings throughout Palestine.

⁴¹ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 144.

⁴² Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 145.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 2.

⁴⁵ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 130.

He was not satisfied with just winning over Palestine; he also sought to win the approval of Eusebius of Nicomedia. Arius was again successful in having his doctrine accepted, as Eusebius of Nicomedia convened a council to meet in Bithynia, where they acquitted Arius on his heresy charge.⁴⁶ Interestingly, Grant holds that Arius first went to Palestine, and upon acceptance from their council, ventured into Nicomedia to seek additional approval.⁴⁷ Hanson holds the opposite timeline: Arius first went to Nicomedia, then Palestine.⁴⁸

In a letter sent to his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia, Arius complained about the seemingly unjust treatment he received when the Council of Alexandria excommunicated him for heresy. In the letter, which was recorded by Hanson, Arius first spends time degrading his opponents' views but then clarifies his own doctrine on text. He states:

That the Son is not unbegotten [*dyévvntos*] nor in any way a part of an Unbegotten, nor derived from some [alien] substratum [*ὑποκειμένου τινος*], but that he exists by will and counsel before times and before ages, full of truth, and grace, God. Only-begotten, unaltering [*avalkoiotos*]. And before he was begotten, or created or determined or established, he did not exist. For he was not unbegotten [or unoriginated].⁴⁹

Thus, the three main points of Arianism is first, that Christ was a created being. Second, He was not eternal. Lastly, He was not of the same essence as God the Father.⁵⁰ From those points, it is predictable that Arius believed Christ was inferior to God the Father. Arius believed in the absolute transcendence of God, stating that, “[w]e acknowledge one God, Who is alone ingenerate, alone eternal, alone without beginning, alone true, alone possessing immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign, alone judge of all[.]”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Grant, “Religion and Politics,” 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁸ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 130.

⁴⁹ Arius' statement was recorded by Hanson on page 6 of *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*. The bracketed portions were inserted by Hanson to add clarity to the Arius' text.

⁵⁰ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order* (Ross House Books, 1998), 11.

⁵¹ Noll, *Turning Points*, 52.

Arius believed that even though Christ is to be revered, Jesus was created by God, whereas God is ingenerate.⁵² Having believed this, Arius came to the conclusion that Jesus was not at the same level as God the Father since God created Jesus. He contended that since Jesus was created, He could not be of the same substance as God. Hanson notes that, “Arianism in its characteristic form always assumed that revelation and redemption on the part of God necessitated a reduction or lowering so that they had to be undertaken by a being who, though divine, was less than fully divine.”⁵³

Further, Hanson draws from the homilies of Asterius, an early supporter of Arius.⁵⁴ Asterius argues that a mediating figure between God and man was necessary for creation to happen. He continues that it was not that God was not capable of creating the Earth directly, but that mankind was unable to endure His direct hand. Asterius deemed that Jesus was the mediating figure between God and man, and because He was the mediator, He could not have been at the same level as God the Father.

Demophilus, an Arian bishop of Constantinople, disagreed in part with Asterius. The bishop agreed that the mediating figure was necessary, but for a different reason than Asterius. Demophilus believed that it was not possible for God to create the Earth directly because of His holy, divine nature.⁵⁵ In his view, God would either have to make everything perfect so they could be worthy of being in the direct presence of Him lest everything would be annihilated upon contact with God. Demophilus acknowledged the imperfect reality of the world, so he came to the conclusion that since annihilation did not occur, Jesus bridged the gap between God and His

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 100.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 101.

creation. Because the Earth could be in contact with Jesus, Demophilus concluded that Jesus was not equal to God.

In addition to using logical premises, Arius and his followers highlighted specific verses in the Bible to justify their arguments for Christ's inferiority. Specifically, the Arians used verses to argue that not only was Jesus inferior to God in regard to His physical body but also in regard to the divine Word.⁵⁶ Some examples they cite is Jesus showing fear and sorrow at the Garden of Gethsemane (Mat. 26:36-46), Jesus asking God has forsaken Him (Mat. 27:46), and Jesus learning at the Temple in Luke 2:52. While the Arians cited Luke 2:52 to make the argument that because He could learn, Jesus was imperfect on Earth, it is important to keep in mind that Jesus was 100 percent God and 100 percent man when He walked the Earth. Further, Jesus was just twelve years old when He was taken to the Temple in Luke 2. It is natural for 12-year-olds to learn given that their brains are not fully developed yet. When remembering that Christ was also 100 percent man, we cannot say that because 12-year-old Jesus learned at the temple, He is inferior to God.

Another passage Arius used to argue for Jesus' inferiority was Mark 10:18. In response to a man asking Him a question and prefacing the question with "good teacher," Jesus replied by asking the man, "[w]hy do you call me good?" Jesus continued His line of thought by stating, "[n]o one is good—except God alone." Arius contended that this verse was Jesus making a distinction between Him and God. More specifically, Jesus makes a distinction that places Him below God in terms of goodness. Above all these aforementioned passages, however, Arius specifically focused on Mark 13:32, where it holds that no one will know the day and hour of Christ's return except for the Father. Since Arius saw that Jesus Himself did not know the time

⁵⁶ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 106.

of His return, he argued that Jesus had less knowledge than God and was consequently inferior to the Father.

How did the Council of Nicaea address this pressing issue? It is made clear that even though the council was assembled to address a heated theological issue, Constantine was the center of the proceedings, literally and figuratively. Grant highlights how the bishops sat on the sides of the imperial palace's main hall, while Emperor Constantine sat in the middle of the hall.⁵⁷ According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine's biographer who wrote an eyewitness account of the proceedings, Constantine placed himself on an elevated throne in the meeting hall.⁵⁸ Not only did he set up his seating to glorify himself, his appearance added to his self-glorification as he was adorned with a full purple imperial robe. Predictably, there were several bishops who took issue with Constantine's grandiose, imperial behavior. When they tried to protest, however, Constantine's bodyguards moved quickly to suppress the dissension.⁵⁹

After taking his seat, Constantine started the council's affairs with brief remarks in Latin. He focused specifically on denouncing the infighting in the church, calling it a greater tragedy than actual war.⁶⁰ Additionally, he encouraged the attendants to resolve the division if they were to win God's favor and the emperor's gratitude. It is interesting to observe that, once again, Constantine did not really care that Arius believed something untrue about Christ, but what he took objection to was the fact that Arius' beliefs sparked controversy.

Constantine not only presented himself as more important than the other bishops, but he also gave himself the deciding power when managing the discourse in the proceedings. The rules of procedure at the council were speculated to have been inspired by the Roman senate, with

⁵⁷ Jones, *Constantine*, 131.

⁵⁸ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 152.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Jones, *Constantine*, 132.

Constantine as the presiding officer.⁶¹ While He would bring forth a specific issue and ask bishops individually about their thoughts, he would ultimately intervene in the theological debates. In addition to voicing his support or disapproval for a specific view, Constantine was the one who decided which of the motions proposed would be advanced forward in the process of writing up a canon.

Looking at the Arianism debate, the council was divided into three factions, with the first group being the Arian camp.⁶² Arius, while not in attendance, was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea. The 28 members of this faction represented the viewpoint that Christ was of a different substance than the Father, that is, that He is a creature.⁶³ The Greek term for this viewpoint is *heteroousios*.

On the other hand, the orthodox faction was led by Hosius of Cordova and Alexander of Alexandria. They held the view that Christ was of the same substance as the Father; He has eternally shared in the one essence that is God and in full deity.⁶⁴ This viewpoint was represented by the Greek term *homoousios*.

The last group, led by Eusebius of Caesarea, disagreed with the two aforementioned groups. While the Eusebian camp disagreed with the Arian camp, they also had their reservation with the term *homoousios* introduced by the orthodox group. While the Eusebian group agreed that Jesus was 100 percent God, they were skeptical of *homoousios* because the term had been used by the modalist Sabellius. He peddled the heresy that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were not three distinct persons but were three modes of One God. As a solution, the Eusebian group proposed the middle ground premise that the Son was of a similar substance as the Father. They

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² White, "What Really Happened at Nicea?" 2.

⁶³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 153.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

hoped that their viewpoint, known in Greek as *homoiousios*, would help stop both the Arian heresy and the risk of *homoousios* being used to support Sabellianism.⁶⁵

The Eusebian faction had every right to be concerned with what they perceived as ambiguity from the Orthodox group. Olson holds that Modalism had not been officially denounced yet and, as a result, was still a threat to orthodox teaching on the Trinity.⁶⁶ In response to the Eusebian group's concern, the orthodox faction, led by Hosius and Alexander, had to explicitly clarify that by their use of *homoousios* was not them succumbing to the modalists and Sabellians. The orthodox faction were instead protecting the full deity of the Persons, specifically the Son.⁶⁷

Looking one step above the specifics of each camp in the Arian debate, there were two overarching groups at the Council of Nicaea that disagreed with Arius.⁶⁸ First, there was the camp who opposed Arianism but had more passion in agreeing with Constantine on the utmost importance of church unity. Given that Constantine wanted to advance an inclusive creed, the "moderate" camp did not have an issue with the creed including Arians so long that unity was upheld. On the other side, there was a camp of ardent anti-Arians who wanted to exclude the heretical group by drawing up a creed that would explicitly denounce Arianism. As for the Arians, Jones contends that a majority of them were willing to back a creed that would accept their beliefs by way of not explicitly opposing the Arian beliefs.⁶⁹

Constantine designated his assistant, Hosius, to start the process of writing out the creed. To build consensus, Hosius had to discuss the details with the different camps of bishops at the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 152.

⁶⁷ White, "What Really Happened at Nicea?" 3.

⁶⁸ Jones, *Constantine*, 133.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

council. When speaking to the Arian camp, they advocated for the creed to be written with only biblical wording.⁷⁰ This raised an alarm for Alexander⁷¹, who was the leader of the opposition to Arianism, as he knew how cunning the Arians were in selecting Scripture passages and twisting them to fit an agenda.

Eventually, when it came time to finish the creed, Constantine assigned a committee of bishops to write the document, and he allowed for wording not found in the Bible if the committee found it appropriate and necessary. A portion of the creed reads as follows:

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, 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 [*homoousios*] with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down 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 . . .⁷²

The emperor mandated that all bishops, including those absent from the council, sign the creed lest they be excommunicated. All bishops in attendance, with the exception of Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea, signed the letter.⁷³ Most of the Arian camp signed it, although some did reluctantly. The hesitation to sign could have come from the fact that the creed clarifies “begotten” by adding “not made.” This distinction helped remove some ground that Arians could use to advance their argument that Christ was made by God and was a creature.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 154.

⁷¹ He was the Bishop of Alexandria and was accompanied at Nicaea by his protege Athanasius.

⁷² The excerpt of the creed was provided by Olson in page 155 of *The Story of Christian Theology*. The bracketed portions are Olson’s additions to the original Nicene Creed.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 156.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

Even though an overwhelming majority of the Arian camp found the creed satisfactory, the two leaders of the Arian faction, Eusebius and Theognis, refused to give in. Constantine was concerned by their disagreement primarily because of his ardent desire for unity, but also because the two Arian theologians held significant influence in the East. Without the backing of the two Arians, Constantine and his group feared that the division in the church would not be resolved.

A greater concern regarding the creed was that it was vulnerable to another heresy: Sabellianism. Justo González notes how the vagueness in the creed's wording could be interpreted as an affirmation of a divine unity.⁷⁵ He makes this observation because he saw that the Nicene Creed did not make a clear enough distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed was not the end goal for Constantine; it was merely the instrument that Constantine used to try and achieve his goal of unity. To be clear, Constantine thought highly of the council's work, stating that, "[f]or the decision of three hundred bishops must be considered no other than the judgment of God . . ." ⁷⁶ Jones, however, reveals that many of the high-ranking bishops actually disapproved of the creed but decided not to attempt reforming it until Constantine's death.⁷⁷

Constantine realized that for true unity in the church, he would have to accept Arius, who was excommunicated by the council. As a result, Constantine reconvened the Council of Nicaea in the fall of 327, and invited Arius to Nicaea on November 27th, 327.⁷⁸ Arius would eventually

⁷⁵ Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought: In One Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 266–67.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Jones, *Constantine*, 145.

be readmitted into the church. Following this reversal, Eusebius and Theognis appealed to the Emperor, calling it fallacious that they stay exiled even though Arius was reconciled. They retracted their old stance at the council's first meeting by affirming *homoousios* and the entire Nicene Creed. Constantine then restored both individuals to the prior positions in the church.⁷⁹ By early 328, almost all the bishops in the Roman Empire realized that the decisions of Nicaea were rendered void.⁸⁰

Constantine's decision turned out to be a fatal mistake as it opened the door slightly but wide enough for Arianism to attempt a comeback. White tells us that in the 56 years between the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople in 381, Arianism enjoyed several triumphs.⁸¹ Even though he accepted the Nicene Creed in his appeal for reconciliation, Eusebius of Nicomedia was duplicitous in his letter, as he and his followers attempted to override Nicaea multiple times. White tells us that for several decades, Eusebius had momentum, and it looked like they could have succeeded in their objective to overturn Nicaea.⁸² There were also eras where Arians held control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

After Constantine's death, his son Constantius assumed power in the East and heavily supported the cause of Arianism. It was not until the Council of Constantinople's assembly in 381 that Arianism was shut down for good as Constantinople expanded upon the creed introduced at Nicaea.⁸³

With all this information, we turn back to the main question of this paper: how much impact did Nicaea have on the Church in regard to the Arianism issue? While the start of the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Grant, "Religion and Politics," 11.

⁸¹ White, "What Happened at Nicaea?" 4.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 157.

council looked promising, with a determined leader and an overwhelming majority of bishops in the non-Arian camp, the results of Nicaea were underwhelming. The Nicene Creed might have made some progress at dispelling Arianism, but it was a zero-sum result as it left the Church more vulnerable to accusations of Sabellianism. Constantine retracted his legitimate excommunications of Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Theognis of Nicaea, who all proceeded to try and revive Arianism once they were back in the church. Most importantly, the optics of Nicaea were tainted when it looked to the bishops like Constantine had gone back on his word by readmitting the individuals who Nicaea ruled to be heretics.

I posit two theories for why the results of Nicaea failed to live up to expectations. First, Constantine's heart was not in the right place. He did not have the right intentions for solving the Arianism debate, and it was reflected by the finished product of the Nicene Creed and his actions afterward. On multiple occasions, Constantine showed how his main objective in convening Nicaea was not to expose and remove the lie of Arianism. Since he had not converted to Christianity yet, he was indifferent to the theological details of the Arianism dispute. Since it sparked heavy controversy, however, Constantine decided to intervene in the debate. His desire to unify the Christian Church, as mentioned previously, was rooted in his belief that the church could be a beneficial tool to help him in his rule as Emperor. Because his ultimate intention was to unify, it led him to contradict his council's results when he readmitted Arius, Eusebius, and Theognis just three years after the council met. Additionally, his unifying approach led to a more moderate creed that had several holes which were eventually exploited by the Arians.

This leads us into the second possible theory for the underwhelming impact of Nicaea: the Nicene Creed failed to cover all its bases. Only 28 of out the 318 bishops in attendance

considered themselves Arians,⁸⁴ so, by all measures, the non-Arian group had the overwhelming majority. Constantine could have directed Hosius to write up a creed that was harsher and more direct at addressing Arianism. This could have also helped safeguard the creed from accusations of Sabellianism, but ultimately, Constantine decided against that route in order to advance his goal of unity.

In conclusion, while Nicaea helped build a foundation for Constantinople to use in 381, the immediate impact of Nicaea failed to meet expectations. Even looking at the long term impact, the next five decades after Nicaea, Arianism continued to play a role in the Christian Church. Emperor Constantine had the resources to convene a council that could make a commanding impact. Unfortunately, his desire for political power, enhanced by church unity, stifled the Council of Nicaea from truly extinguishing the threat of Arianism.

About the author

Jason Chahyadi currently studies at Patrick Henry College, majoring in American Politics and Policy. While his main areas of academic interest are Political Theory and American Politics, Jason also enjoys learning and writing about Western Civilization. His research in Western Civilization focuses on church history, Dutch relations with Indonesia, and the French Revolution of 1789. In his free time, Jason likes to leisurely drive, work out, read, and play chess.

⁸⁴ White, "What Really Happened at Nicea?" 2.

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