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Nicene Council: A Crucial Process in The Formation of Christian Doctrine

Agus Widodo[a,1]
[a] *Faculty of Theology, Universitas Sanata Darma, Indonesia*

[1] Corresponding Email: aguswidodo@usd.ac.id
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Abstract

In 2025, the Church commemorates the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, convened in 325. While the council is best known for formulating the Nicene Creed, the version commonly recited today was later refined at the Council of Constantinople and adapted for liturgical use. Beyond the Creed, the council also issued 20 canons addressing various aspects of ecclesiastical discipline. The Fathers of Nicaea did not create the Creed from scratch; rather, they articulated it based on the faith they had received, understood, and handed down to future generations. The same principle applied to the canons, which were rooted in inherited traditions rather than entirely new prescriptions. Thus, the Council of Nicaea should be seen as a crucial moment in shaping Christian doctrine – particularly concerning Christology and the Trinity – while also laying the foundation for ecclesiastical discipline. As an ongoing process, neither its doctrinal nor disciplinary outcomes were static or final; instead, they remained part of the Church's living tradition, requiring continuous reception, interpretation, and adaptation over time. However, to ensure focus and depth, this discussion will specifically examine the Nicene Creed, exploring its biblical foundations, its early development in the teachings of the Church Fathers, and its enduring authority and reception in later periods.

Keywords

Nicene Council, Christian doctrine, biblical foundation, creed, Church Fathers.

INTRODUCTION

What was discussed and produced at the Council of Nicaea in 325? Many of us often focus only on the confession of faith formulated in the Creed. This is because, in the Synodal Letter, Fathers of the Council stated that "the great and holy Synod, which was assembled at Nicaea [...] has considered matters which concern the faith of the Church."[1] The Creed itself was found in several document, such as in the *Acts of the*

[1] Gelasius, *Historia Concilii Nicæni* II, 33; Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I, 6; Theodoretus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I, 9.

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Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon,[2] in the *Epistle of Eusebius of Cæsarea to his own Church*,[3] in the *Epistle of St. Athanasius Ad Jovianum Imperatorem*,[4] in the *Ecclesiastical Histories of Theodoret and Socrates*,[5] and elsewhere.[6] Although the wording of the Creed in these documents varies, the differences are insignificant. Each document affirms faith in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. The final section contains an anathema explicitly directed at Arius and his followers.

Based on the Synodal Letter, we also know that the Council of Nicaea discussed and made decisions regarding Meletius, the Bishop of Lycopolis in Egypt.[7] He opposed the Church's policy on readmitting those who had lapsed during the persecution under Emperor Diocletian, considering it too lenient. He began ordaining bishops and priests without the approval of legitimate ecclesiastical authorities, particularly the Patriarch of Alexandria. The Council of Nicaea, while recognizing the ordinations performed by Meletius, restricted his authority and revoked most of his powers, including his right to ordain clergy. Meanwhile, his followers, including the clergy he had ordained, were ordered to submit to the bishops officially recognized by the Church.

Beyond defining the creed decision regarding Meletius, the Council of Nicaea also established twenty canons concerning various aspects of ecclesiastical discipline. The original meaning of the Greek word *κανών* - "a straight rod" or "line" - informs all its religious applications.[8] Paul uses it to refer to a prescribed sphere of apostolic work (2 Cor. 10:13, 15) or a guiding principle for Christian life (Gal. 6:16). It signifies the element of definiteness within Christianity and the order of the Christian Church. At

[2] Richard Price and Thomas Graumann, *The Council of Ephesus of 431: Documents and Proceedings* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 164, 231, 447; Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 12.

[3] Archibald Robertson, *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1892), 75.

[4] Robertson, 568.

[5] Blomfield Jackson, *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters of Theodoret* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1906), 50; A. C. Zenos, *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1891), 10.

[6] Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1900), 3.

[7] Pervical, 53.

[8] William Bright, *Notes on the Canons of the First Four General Councils* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882), 2.

the Council of Nicaea, *canon* referred to standing disciplinary rules, as recognized by Christian writers of that period. Socrates, for instance, states that "The bishops who were convened at the council of Nicæa, [...] enrolled certain other ecclesiastical regulations which they are accustomed to term canons".[9] Julius of Rome refers to one of its decrees as a "canon",[10] and Athanasius frequently applies the term "Canon of the Church" to "the ancient rule".[11]

Additionally, the Council made a significant decision regarding the celebration of Easter. Previously, the Western and Eastern Churches observed Easter at different times, as the Eastern Church followed the Jewish calendar, allowing the date to fall on any day of the week, while the Western Church celebrated it on the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox. To resolve this discrepancy, the Council decreed that the entire Church, both East and West, should celebrate this most sacred Easter feast at the same time.[12] This decision was not only recorded in the Synodal Letter but was also written by Emperor Constantine in a letter to those who had not attended the Council, ensuring its uniform observance.[13] However, the differences in Easter celebrations did not disappear immediately after the Council of Nicaea, as variations in the methods of calculating and determining the date persisted.[14]

Based on the key discussions and decisions made at the Council of Nicaea, it can be said that, while the council produced a Creed that remains a foundational statement of faith, it was fundamentally part of an ongoing process. Both the Creed and the ecclesiastical disciplinary canons formulated during the council were not entirely new but rather the result of a continuing development in faith and discipline. Similarly, as part of this process, the council's decisions did not immediately resolve all doctrinal or disciplinary issues, nor were they universally accepted without further debate. This paper, for the sake of focus and due to time constraints, will examine only the significance of the Council of Nicaea as a key moment in the development of Christian doctrine.

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[9] Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I, 13 (Zenos, 19).

[10] Athanaius, *Apologia contra Arianos II,* 25 (Robertson, 113).

[11] Athanaius, *Apologia contra Arianos V,* 69 (Robertson, 136)

[12] Pervical, 54.

[13] Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* III.18–20, in Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 128–130.

[14] Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils from the Original Documents to the Close of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894), 328.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA AS A PROCESS OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE FORMATION

The confession of faith in Jesus Christ originates from the apostolic confession of Christ. One example is Peter's confession in Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15; Mark 8:27). John Behr, in his three-volume work *The Formation of Christian Theology*, discovered that Peter's confession contains "both the heart of the Christian faith and the starting point of Christian theology," as stated by Andrew Louth in his introduction to the first volume.[15]

Fundamental information about Christ's identity is indeed found in Scripture, particularly the New Testament, which is why our faith is said to be "according to the Scriptures." However, Scripture is not a biography of Christ. While it is the primary source of Christian faith, our knowledge of Christ and our response to His question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15), cannot be explained solely based on biblical texts. In fact, many aspects of faith are left open by Scripture. Therefore, the question of Christ's identity is further clarified through the interpretation of certain biblical texts, "by understanding the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ."[16]

From the first to the fourth century, that is, from Peter's confession to the Council of Nicaea, the Church underwent a long process in formulating the confession and doctrine of faith in Christ. At the Council of Nicaea, Jesus Christ was believed to be,

> Lord [...], the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten (γεννηθέντα), not made, being of one substance (ὁμοούσιον, *consubstantialem*) with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead.

Additionally, the final part of the Creed affirms that He is eternal with the Father, not created either from nothing or from another hypostasis (*hypostases*) or

[15] Andrew Louth, "Foreword" to John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), xi.

[16] John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 1.

essence (*ousia*), unchanging, and untransformed.[17] Therefore, Arius and his followers, who believed and taught that,

> [T]here was a time when the Son of God was not (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν), or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion - all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.

THE NICENE CREED AND ITS BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Nicene Creed is firmly grounded in biblical teachings, with each of its statements reflecting core scriptural doctrines. It affirms the divinity of Christ (John 1:1; Col 1:15-17), the oneness of God (Deut 6:4), the incarnation of the Word (Phil 2:6-8), and the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:3-4). Rooted in these biblical sources, the Creed serves not only as a doctrinal declaration but also as a safeguard against heretical interpretations, ensuring a precise articulation of Christian faith. Regarding the Christological doctrine at the heart of this discussion, the following table provides a helpful overview of the biblical texts underlying the Nicene statement of faith:

The Creed	Biblical Texts[18]
Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God	Mark 1,1: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" John 3,6: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son"
The only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father	John 1,14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."
God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God	Heb 1,3: "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature."
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father	John 10,30: "I and the Father are one."

[17] Jannel N. Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," *Angelicum* 94, no. 2 (2017): 255-286.

[18] The Scripture text is quoted from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth	Col 1,15-16: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him."
for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man	Phil 2,6-7: "Christ Jesus, [...] though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."
He suffered and the third day he rose again	Luke 24,46: "It is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead."
ascended into heaven	Mark 16,19: "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God."
He shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead	2Tim 4,1: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom."

THE EMBRYO OF THE NICENE FAITH IN EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The statements of faith about Jesus Christ in Scripture were not only used by the early Church Fathers as the foundation and criterion of true faith but were also elaborated into more comprehensive formulations. Ignatius of Antioch, for instance, in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, after offering his greetings, immediately proceeds to express the key elements of this faith:

> He is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, but Son of God by the Divine will and power. He was truly born of a virgin and baptized by John, that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him. He was truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch—of which fruit are we, that is, of His most blessed passion. That He might set up an ensign unto all

> the ages through His resurrection, for His saints and faithful people, whether among Jews or among Gentiles, in one body of His Church.[19]

This passage recounts key Gospel events, culminating in the Passion and Resurrection, this passage encapsulates the essential elements of faith in Jesus Christ, which would later be formalized in creeds. Resonating with Isaiah (5:26; 49:22; 62:10) and Ephesians (2:16), it portrays the Cross of Christ as the standard that gathers and solidifies the faithful, who, by being metaphorically affixed to it, become the unified body of his Church, the fruit of his suffering. It also reflects Christ's dual lineage—both from David and from God—a concept found in Paul (e.g., Rom 1:3-4). Particularly striking is Ignatius's emphatic identification of Christ as God, employing the articular "God" (ὁ θεός) in a dramatic manner. This stylistic choice, characteristic of Ignatius, suggests his possible familiarity with the Gospel of John. However, as in John, this use of the articular "God" for Jesus rests on the understanding that he is the Son of the one true God, his Father.[20]

In his *Letter to the Ephesians*, Ignatius likewise reflects on Christ's dual lineage, as presented by Paul, exploring His divine and human aspects in a manner that may be shaped by the Johannine inclination to maintain the unity of opposites without resolving their inherent tension. In fact, he states,

> There is one only physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true Life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.[21]

Based on this text, we see two contrasts within the one Person of Christ. The first contrast likely derives from Romans 1:3-4, as does the fifth—born of Mary (i.e., descended from David) yet from God (cf. *Smyrn.* 1). The second contrast would later become a source of significant theological debate. In subsequent usage, *generate* (*γεννητός*) came to signify the Son's distinctiveness from the Father, who alone is *ingenerate* (*ἀγέννητος*). Consequently, the latter term could no longer be used to refer to Christ's eternity.

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[19] Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 1, in J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1907; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 156.

[20] Behr, 83-84.

[21] Ignatius of Antiochia, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* 7 (Lightfoot and Harmer, 139).

Faith in Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by the authors of Scripture and later established as the criterion of truth by Ignatius of Antioch, had already been challenged from the beginning by those who did not believe. Therefore, Justin Martyr emerged as a defender of the Christian faith through his *Apologies*. He affirmed that Scripture—not only the writings later called the New Testament but also the books of the Prophets—had prophesied about Christ as the Son of God, born of a virgin, crucified, dead, risen, and ascended into heaven.

> In the books of the Prophets, indeed, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming to us born of a virgin, reaching manhood, curing every disease and ailment, raising the dead to life, being hated, unrecognized, and crucified, dying, rising from the dead, ascending into Heaven, and being called and actually being the Son of God.[22]

Faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God—born of a virgin, crucified, dead, risen, and ascended into heaven—was consistently defended and upheld by Justin in many places throughout his *Apology*. For example, he also affirmed that,

> Jesus Christ, who is the first-begotten of God the Father, was not born as the result of sexual relations, and that He was crucified, died, arose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven.[23]

> Jesus Christ, after His crucifixion and death, arose from the dead and, after ascending into Heaven, ruled there.[24]

> [T]he Word of God is His Son, [...] What has been written has been here set down to prove that Jesus Christ is the Son of God [...] but now, at the will of God, after becoming man for mankind, He bore all the torments which the demons prompted the rabid Jews to wreak upon Him.[25]

[22] Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 31, in Thomas B. Falls, *Saint Justin Martyr: The First Apology, the Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, the Monarchy or the Rule of God* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 67.

[23] Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 21 (Falls, 56).

[24] Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 42 (Falls, 79).

[25] Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 63 (Falls, 102).

Justin Martyr's teaching about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, indeed underwent a shift in perspective toward subordinationism, positioning Christ as a second God.[26] Irenaeus later developed Justin's idea further in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, after returning to the New Testament and the teachings of Ignatius of Antioch, which emphasized Christ's central role in God's revelation of salvation.[27] He stressed Christ's role as the one who reveals the Father. His characteristic position, to suppose that the Son was distinct from the Father, as Justin had done, is that "the Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son the visible of the Father."[28]

Additionally, to counter the teachings of Ptolemaeus, a prominent figure of Valentinian Gnosticism, Irenaeus, drawing from the Prologue of John, affirmed the truth of the faith that,

> John proclaims one almighty God and one Only Begotten, Jesus Christ, through whom he says all things were made. He affirms that this very one is the Son of God, the Only Begotten, the creator of all things, the true Light that enlightens every man, the creator of the world, the one who came into his kingdom, that this very one became flesh and dwelt among us.[29]

The Christological teachings of Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus can be seen as a process that preceded and prepared the way for the Nicene Creed. They firmly adhered to Scripture and upheld as truth that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, through whom God the Father created all things. He was born of a virgin, crucified, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. When others taught differently from this truth, they opposed them.

Another Church Father whose teachings were often considered controversial was Origen. Some scholars even regard him as a "teacher" of Arius and his heretical doctrine concerning Jesus Christ.[30] This perception likely arises from the fact that

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[26] Later, the Council of Nicaea corrected Justin Martyr's subordinationist view by emphasizing that the Son is of one substance with the Father, true God from true God.

[27] Behr, 106.

[28] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV.6.6, in Giorgio Maschio, *Ireneo di Leone: Contro le eresie e gli altri scritti* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1981), 315.

[29] Ireneaus, *Adversus Haeresis* I, 9, 2 (Maschio, 69).

[30] Among the Church Fathers and early Christian writers who argued that Origen's theological ideas contributed to Arianism were Marcellus of Ancyra, Epiphanius of Salamis, and Jerome. John Henry Newman also assessed that Origen's subordinationist Christology paved the way for Arianism. Cf. John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891).

Arius's starting point was the Origenian Trinitarian doctrine, which regarded the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct hypostases, subordinate to one another yet sharing in the same divine nature. He pushed this subordinationism to an extreme, likely in response to Sabellianism and certain overly materialistic interpretations of the Son's generation from the Father.[31]

Nevertheless, many also argue that Origen's teachings laid the groundwork for the Christological ideas of Alexander, Athanasius, and the Nicene Creed.[32] Scholars such as Bas, Anatolios, and McGuckin even assert that Origen's Christology aligns with the Nicene Creed and represents a crucial stage in the development of Christological doctrine.[33] This is evident, for instance, in his *De Principiis*,

> The holy Apostles, in preaching the faith of Christ, delivered with utmost clarity to all believers [...] certain points that they believed to be necessary [...] The particular points, which are clearly handed down by the preaching of the apostles are as follows: First, that 'there is one God, who created and arranged all things'. [...] Then, again, that Jesus Christ himself, who came, was born of the Father before all creatures. After ministering to the Father in the foundation of all things, for by him were all things were made, in the last times, emptying himself, he became human and was incarnate; being God, when he made human he remained what he was, God. He assumed a body like to our own, differing in this respect only, that it was born of virgin and of the Holy Spirit.[34]

Likewise, while affirming that the only begotten Son of God is the Wisdom of the Father and has existed with Him from eternity, Origen taught that,

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[31] Manlio Simonetti, "Arius – Arianism," in Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 236.

[32] Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); John Anthony McGuckin, *Origen of Alexandria: Master Theologian of the Early Church* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Dragoş Andreï Giulea, "Origen's Christology in Pre-Nicene Setting: The Logos as the Noetic Form of God," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 92, no. 3 (2016): 407-437.

[33] Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 52, 83; Bilal Bas, "Orthodoxy of Origen of Alexandria's Trinitarian Doctrine: Is His Theology Arian or Nicene?," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 37, no. 2 (2009): 108; **McGuckin,** *Origen of Alexandria*, 37.

[34] Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface 3–4, in John Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12–15.

> It is rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is his Wisdom subsisting substantially (*substantialiter subsistentem*). [...] Therefore, we acknowledge that God is always the Father of his only-begotten Son, who was indeed born of him, and derives from him what he is, but without, however, any beginning, not that which may be distinguished by period of time. [...] Wisdom is thus believed to be begotten beyond the limits of any beginning that we can speak of or understand.[35]

Thus, Origen affirmed that Jesus Christ, as the Wisdom of God, since He proceeds from God, is generated from the very substance of God.[36]

EUSEBIUS' BAPTISMAL CREED AND THE NICENE FORMULATION

As seen in the exploration of how Scripture proclaims Christ, followed by the efforts of the pre-Nicene Church Fathers—Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen—to defend and uphold the biblical faith in Jesus Christ, the consistent process leading up to the Council of Nicaea becomes increasingly evident. Moreover, it appears that Christological doctrine, both from Scripture and the Church Fathers, was still fragmented and scattered across their various works. Meanwhile, at the Council of Nicaea, the doctrine was formulated in such a way that it appeared more comprehensive and elaborate. However, it is worth noting that before the Council of Nicaea, Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea, already had a creed that he commonly used in baptisms. While the exact date of its composition remains uncertain, it is likely that Eusebius presented what is believed to be the Baptismal Confession of the Church at Caesarea during the Council of Nicaea.[37] In any event, with amendments, Eusebius' creed served as the foundation for the Nicene Creed.[38] Below is a comparison between the two:

[35] Origenes, *On First Principles* I, 2, 2 (Behr, 40-43).

[36] Regarding Origen's Christology, see, for example, John C. Solheid, "The Christology of Origen," *Religions* 16, no. 19 (2025): 1–17.

[37] Samuel J. Mikolaski, *Theological Sentences 5.7.37*.

[38] For a deeper understanding of Eusebius of Cæsarea's creed and its relation to the Council of Nicaea, see T. Evan Pollard, "The Creeds of A.D. 325: Antioch, Caesarea, Nicaea," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 13, no. 3 (1960): 266–277, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600005734; D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London: Mowbray, 1960); Wolfram Kinzig, "The Creed of Nicaea," *Ecclesiastical Review* 78, no. 4 (2023): 451–470, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12782.

The Creed of Eusebius	The Creed of Nicaea
We believe in one only God, – Father Almighty, – Creator of things visible and invisible;	We believe in one God, – the Father Almighty, – maker of all things visible and invisible;
and in the Lord Jesus Christ, – for he is the Word of God, – God of God, Light of Light, life of life, – his only Son, the first-born of all creatures, begotten of the Father before all time, – by whom also everything was created, – who became flesh for our redemption, – who lived – and suffered amongst men, – rose again the third day, – returned to the Father, – and will come again one day in his glory to judge the quick and the dead.	and in one Lord Jesus Christ, – the Son of God, *the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father*, – God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, – begotten, *not made*, *being of one substance with the Father*. – By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. – Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] – and was incarnate and was made man. – He suffered – and the third day he rose again, – and ascended into heaven. – And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead.
We believe also in the Holy Ghost.	And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost.
We believe that each of these three is and subsists; the Father truly as Father, the Son truly as Son, the Holy Ghost truly as Holy Ghost; as our Lord also said, when he sent his disciples to preach: Go	And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance

and teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.	or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion—all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.

By comparing the two creeds, it is possible that the Fathers of the Council of Nicaea adopted and modified Eusebius' Creed.[39] The most noticeable modification is the emphasis on the use of the word *ὁμοούσιος* to affirm Christ's consubstantiality with the Father, thereby clarifying the divine nature of Christ and rejecting Arius' teaching. Meanwhile, Eusebius' Creed, being used in the context of baptism, contains no anti-heretical tone. Instead, it emphasizes the unity of the divinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, even though each is a distinct person.[40]

EXCURSUS ON THE WORD *ὁMOOὐSIOΣ*

The use of the term *ὁμοούσιος* in the Nicene Creed is particularly significant, as it does not originate from Scripture. It is likely that this term was drawn from philosophical thought, particularly Aristotelian concepts.[41] Initially, the Fathers of the Council sought to formulate doctrine using only biblical language, as requested by some bishops. However, after multiple attempts, they found this approach insufficient, as the council participants interpreted the biblical terms differently. Recognizing the need for a precise and unambiguous expression, they agreed to adopt a non-biblical term. Thus, *ὁμοούσιος* was chosen to affirm the full divinity of Christ and His consubstantiality with the Father.

Although *ὁμοούσιος* had already been used in Christian theological discussions before the Council of Nicaea, its history was not without controversy.[42] The term was likely rejected by the Council of Antioch and was suspected of supporting Sabellianism. Moreover, it had been associated with the heretic Paul of Samosata, making it less acceptable to many churches in Asia Minor. However, it was also

[39] Pervical, 2.

[40] Graham Keith, "The Formulation of Creeds in the Early Church," *Themelios* 24, no. 1 (October 1998): 13–35.

[41] Hisaki Hashi, "The Ousia of Aristotle and the Idea of Plato in View of Comparative Philosophy," *Biocosmology – Neo-Aristotelism* 5, no. 2 (2015): 174–185.

[42] Regarding the use of the term οὐσία in the Christian context, reference can be made to Pier Franco Beatrice, "The Word 'Homoousios' from Hellenism to Christianity," *Church History* 71, no. 2 (2002): 243–272, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700095688.

employed by early Christian theologians such as Saint Irenaeus, Pamphilus the Martyr, and Origen in a manner consistent with Nicene theology. Tertullian used the Latin phrase *unius substantiæ* in two passages of his writings, suggesting that the concept had already gained acceptance among orthodox Christians more than half a century before the Council of Nicaea.[43]

Later, Basil of Caesarea played a crucial role in clarifying the meaning of *homoousios* in the Nicene Creed, particularly in response to ongoing theological disputes in the fourth century.[44] While he upheld the term as an affirmation of Christ's full divinity, he also sought to address concerns that it might imply a division or confusion within the Godhead. In his work *Epistle 9* and *Against Eunomius*, Basil emphasized that *homoousios* should be understood as affirming that the Son shares the same divine essence (*ousia*) as the Father, without implying numerical identity or Sabellian modalism.[45] He distinguished between *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (person), clarifying that while the Father and the Son are of the same essence (*homoousios*), they remain distinct persons (*hypostases*). This theological precision helped bridge the gap between Nicene supporters and those hesitant about the term due to its perceived philosophical ambiguities.

THE AUTHORITY AND RECEPTION OF THE NICENE CREED

If the Council of Nicaea is viewed as an effort to uphold and defend the biblical faith in Jesus Christ against the heresy of Arius and his followers, the earlier Church Fathers had already engaged in similar struggles: Ignatius opposed the heresy of Docetism,[46] Justin defended the faith against the Roman emperor and unbelievers,[47] Irenaeus refuted heresies, particularly the various sects of Gnosticism,[48] and Origen,

[43] Pervical, 2-3.

[44] Philip Kariatlis, "St Basil's Contribution to the Trinitarian Doctrine: A Synthesis of Greek Paideia and the Scriptural Worldview," *Phronema* 25 (2010): 57–83.

[45] For Basil's epistolary works, see Roy J. Deferrari, *Saint Basil: The Letters* (London: William Heinemann; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), 92–101. For *Against Eunomius*, refer to Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *St. Basil of Caesarea: Against Eunomius* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

[46] Travis W. Proctor, "Bodiless Docetists and the Daimonic Jesus: Daimonological Discourse and Anti-Docetic Polemic in Ignatius' Letter to the Smyrnaeans," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 14, no. 1 (2013): 183–203. https://doi.org/10.1515/arege-2012-0012

[47] P. Lorraine Buck, "Justin Martyr's Apologies: Their Number, Destination, and Form," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (2003): 45–59. https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/54.1.45

[48] Giorgio Maschio, *Ireneo di Leone*. Introduzione, 30-34.

besides teaching the foundational principles of Christian doctrine, also wrote an apology against Celsus.[49]

In this long process, from the first century to the early fourth century, it becomes evident that what took place at the Council of Nicaea was a continuation, defense, and affirmation of the faith that had already been acknowledged and taught as truth. Naturally, since it was formulated collectively—whereas previously, individual Church Fathers had expressed it—the Nicene Creed carried greater authority. Though the Council Fathers understood their position to be that of witnesses, recognizing that their sole duty in this regard was to pass on to other faithful men the good entrusted to the Church according to God's command, they believe that in discussing, making decisions, and formulating teachings, they were always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.[50] Even Emperor Constantine affirmed the significance of the Council of Nicaea, stating, *"Quod trecentis sanctis episcopis visum est, non est aliud putandum quam solius Filii Dei sententia."*[51] In other words, at the council, *"The bishops did not see themselves as 'voting about God' but instead as affirming their allegiance to a consensus that had already been established, and, through their unanimity, bearing witness to the unifying presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst,"* as Mark S. Smith put it.[52]

As part of the ongoing process of preserving, defending, and refining doctrine, the Council of Nicaea should not be viewed as the final resolution of all prior theological and Christological debates but rather as a pivotal stage within a longer struggle. Even after Nicaea, controversies persisted. Arius and his followers continued to spread their teachings, and the issue remained unresolved. In fact, the council's decisions sparked further theological divisions regarding the nature of Christ in

[49] Michael Gallagher, "Theos Anthropos Yois: The Argument About Jesus in Origen's 'Contra Celsum'" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1980).

[50] The Church believes that in every council, decisions are always made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For example, in the Council of Jerusalem, the apostles said, "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:18). Cyprian, when writing a letter to Pope Cornelius on behalf of the council he led in the year 252, said, *"Placuit nobis, Sancto Spiritu suggerente,"* (*Epistula* 53, 5). Likewise, regarding the Synod of Arles in the year 415, the bishops said, *"Placuit ergo, præsente Spiritu Sancto et angelis eius."* (Hardouin, *Collect. Concil*. I, 262).

[51] Hardouin, *Collect. Concil.* I, 447, as cited in Karl Joseph von Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894), 2.

[52] Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Council, AD 431–451* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

relation to God the Father.[53] First, the *homoousians*, led by Athanasius of Alexandria, upheld that the Son is of the same substance (ὁμοούσιος) as the Father. Second, the *homoiousians*, later called semi-Arians and led by Basil of Ancyra, argued that the Son was only of a similar substance (ὁμοιούσιος) to the Father but not identical. Third, the *homoians*, following Acacius of Caesarea, rejected both *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, maintaining only that the Son was *like* (ὅμοιος) the Father without specifying substance. This position gained favor at the Council of Sirmium (357) under Emperor Constantius II. Fourth, the *anomoeans*, a radical Arian faction led by Aëtius and his disciple Eunomius, asserted that the Son was entirely *unlike* the Father in both substance and essence, giving rise to the Eunomian heresy.

Nevertheless, efforts to establish the Nicene Creed as the Church's official statement of faith and the standard of doctrinal truth continued persistently. Athanasius of Alexandria played a pivotal role in defending the Nicene Creed against Arianism. During the Council of Nicaea, he served as a deacon under Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. Following Alexander's death, Athanasius succeeded him as the Bishop of Alexandria. He authored several significant works opposing Arianism, including *Orations Against the Arians*, in which he argued that Christ is fully divine and of the same essence (*homoousios*) as the Father—a central tenet of the Nicene Creed.[54] Additionally, in *De Decretis* (*A Defense of the Nicene Definition*), Athanasius robustly defends the creed's assertion of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, countering Arian arguments by examining scriptural evidence, particularly from Isaiah and the Gospels, to affirm Christ's eternal divinity.[55]

The First Council of Constantinople (381) fully accepted the Creed of Nicaea, expanding on the nature of the Holy Spirit and other theological points related to the Church, Baptism, and the resurrection of the dead, while omitting the anathema formula. Although the anathema clause was omitted from the Creed, Canon 1 of this council states that,

[53] Kenneth B. Steinhauser, "The Acts of the Council of Aquileia (381 C.E.)," in Richard Valantasis, ed., *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 275–288.

[54] Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, trans. John Henry Newman, in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians* (London: John Henry Parker, 1844).

[55] Athanasius, *A Defense of the Nicene Definition*, trans. John Henry Newman (San Bernardino, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

> The Faith of the Three Hundred and Eighteen Fathers assembled at Nice in Bithynia shall not be set aside, but shall remain firm. And every heresy shall be anathematized, particularly that of the Eunomians or [Anomæans, the Arians or] Eudoxians, and that of the Semi-Arians or Pneumatomachi, and that of the Sabellians, and that of the Marcellians, and that of the Photinians, and that of the Apollinarians.[56]

Thus, although it modified the wording of the Creed by both addition and omission, the Council of Constantinople did not, in fact, create a new expansion of the Nicene Creed but rather adopted a Creed already in use, securing the triumph of Nicene doctrine in the Oriental Churches.[57]

In line with the declaration of the Council of Constantinople, the bishops present at the Council of Ephesus, in the sixth session on July 22, 431, made the following statement regarding the Definition of the Faith at Nicaea,

> The synod of Nicaea produced this creed: We believe …
>
> It seems fitting that all should assent to this holy creed. It is pious and sufficiently helpful for the whole world. But since some pretend to confess and accept it, while at the same time distorting the force of its expressions to their own opinion and so evading the truth, being sons of error and children of destruction, it has proved necessary to add testimonies from the holy and orthodox fathers that can fill out the meaning they have given to the words and their courage in proclaiming it. All those who have a clear and blameless faith will understand, interpret and proclaim it in this way.
>
> When these documents had been read out, the holy synod decreed the following.

[56] Pervical, 172. The additional phrase, "Whose kingdom shall have no end," had actually been inserted into the Nicene Creed years earlier, following the statement "He shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead," as a correction of the heresy of Marcellus of Ancyra. For example, one of the creeds from the Council of Antioch in Encaeniis (341) states: "And he sitteth at the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead, and he remaineth God and King to all eternity," (Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II, 10; Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 5; Athanasius, *De Synodis* C, 22).

[57] William Smith and Henry Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1880), s.v. "Epiphanius," 149.

> It is not permitted to produce or write or compose any other creed except the one which was defined by the holy fathers who were gathered together in the holy Spirit at Nicaea.
>
> Any who dare to compose or bring forth or produce another creed for the benefit of those who wish to turn from Hellenism or Judaism or some other heresy to the knowledge of the truth, if they are bishops or clerics they should be deprived of their respective charges and if they are laymen they are to be anathematised.[58]

Based on this statement, it is clear that the Council of Ephesus affirmed that the Creed established at Nicaea was deemed sufficient for the entire world and must be accepted by all with sincerity. However, since some distorted its meaning for personal interests, the testimony of the holy fathers was necessary to reaffirm its original intent. Therefore, the Council decreed that no other creed could be written or introduced apart from the one ratified at Nicaea. Anyone who attempted to compose or present a new creed would face strict sanctions, including removal from office for clergy and excommunication for laypeople.

Likewise, the Council of Chalcedon (451), in its *Definitio fidei*, affirmed the Nicene Creed as follows:

> We have proclaimed to all the creed of the 318; and we have made our own those fathers who accepted this agreed statement of religion — the 150 who later met in great Constantinople and themselves set their seal to the same creed.
>
> Therefore, whilst we also stand by the decisions and all the formulas relating to the creed from the sacred synod which took place formerly at Ephesus, whose leaders of most holy memory were Celestine of Rome and Cyril of Alexandria we decree that pre-eminence belongs to the exposition of the right and spotless creed of the 318 saintly and blessed fathers who were assembled at Nicaea when Constantine of pious memory was emperor: and that those decrees also remain in force which were issued in Constantinople by the 150 holy fathers in order to destroy the heresies then rife and to confirm this same catholic and apostolic creed.

[58] Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 64–66.

> The creed of the 318 fathers at Nicaea.
>
> And the same of the 150 saintly fathers assembled in Constantinople.
>
> This wise and saving creed, the gift of divine grace, was sufficient for a perfect understanding and establishment of religion. For its teaching about the Father and the Son and the holy Spirit is complete, and it sets out the Lord's becoming human to those who faithfully accept it.[59]

Building on this definition of faith, the Council reaffirmed the Nicene Creed's authority and sufficiency, as established by the 318 fathers at Nicaea and later confirmed by the 150 fathers at Constantinople. It upheld the rulings of earlier councils, particularly Ephesus, emphasizing the Creed as the definitive statement of Christian belief. Recognizing it as a divinely inspired and comprehensive expression of doctrine, the Council maintained that it provided a perfect understanding of the faith, fully articulating the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as the incarnation of Christ.

In conclusion, an examination of the three ecumenical councils following Nicaea reveals that the Council of Nicaea was granted special honor in the mid-fifth-century church councils. At Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), the assembled bishops repeatedly affirmed the Nicene Creed's unparalleled authority and sufficiency, commending the Nicene fathers for their unwavering and unimpeachable faith. Appealing to Nicaea became the primary means of legitimizing theological positions and presenting new orthodoxies as established traditions.[60]

CONCLUSION

The Council of Nicaea stands as a defining moment in the development of Christian doctrine, particularly in clarifying the identity of Jesus Christ and the nature of the Trinity. While its Creed remains the most recognized outcome, the council's influence extended beyond theological statements to include the establishment of ecclesiastical discipline, reinforcing unity within the Church. These decisions were not formulated in isolation but were deeply rooted in apostolic tradition and the theological reflections of early Church Fathers, demonstrating a continuity of faith across generations.

[59] Tanner, 84-84.
[60] Smith, 1.

The adoption of the term *homoousios*—asserting Christ's consubstantiality with the Father—was a pivotal step in defending orthodoxy against Arianism. Though controversial at the time, this doctrinal formulation became essential in shaping Christological debates in the following centuries. The council's decisions did not settle all disputes immediately, as various factions continued to challenge its conclusions, leading to further theological refinements in subsequent councils.

Beyond doctrinal concerns, the Council of Nicaea also played a crucial role in establishing order within the Church, exemplified by its canons addressing disciplinary matters and its resolution of the Easter controversy. These measures reinforced the Church's authority and ensured greater uniformity in Christian practice across different regions. The council's outcomes, therefore, were not merely static decrees but part of an evolving process of doctrinal and ecclesiastical development.

In the centuries that followed, the Nicene Creed gained authoritative recognition, reaffirmed and expanded upon by the Councils of Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. This continuity underscores the council's enduring significance in defining Christian faith and combating theological deviations. The Nicene formulation became a unifying statement, not just for its time, but for the entire Christian tradition, ensuring doctrinal clarity and ecclesiastical cohesion.

Ultimately, the Council of Nicaea exemplifies the dynamic nature of theological discourse within Christianity. While addressing immediate challenges, it also laid the groundwork for continued doctrinal reflection and refinement. As the Church commemorates the 1700th anniversary of this historic event, its legacy remains central to understanding Christian identity and the ongoing task of articulating faith in every generation.

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