

## Introduction to Church History

### The Great Councils

These are:

- The Council of Nicea (325)
- The Council of Constantinople (381)
- The Council of Ephesus (431)
- The Council of Chalcedon (451)

These are all termed *General Councils*, or *Ecumenical Councils*, as they were attended by bishops from across the Christian world (East and West), rather than just one region or empire. Their decisions continue to be honoured by Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church. The Church of England's position on the authority of General Councils can be found in Article 28 (of the 39 Articles), however the Church of England agrees with the Creed of the Council of Nicea (as modified by the Council of Constantinople) as 'thoroughly to be received and believed: for [it] may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture' (Article 3)

### Arius

Arius (256 – 336) was a presbyter in Alexandria. The Church in Alexandria, after the Diocletian persecution, was split between rigorist (Meletans) and less-rigorist factions. Arius was writer of song lyrics and his doctrine was mainly contained in a work called the *Thallia*. The influence of Origen remained strong in the city, particularly *Logos* theology – Jesus is the Logos, made flesh, for our salvation. Arius based his theology upon the Logos theology to make a key distinction between Jesus and the Father: the Father *created the Logos* albeit before the Logos then went on to create other things. The implication of this is that *there was a time when there was only the Father*, and when *the Logos did not exist*. This was the core distinction Arius wanted to make between the Son and the Father, but essentially this meant that Jesus, though Son of God, is not 'God' in the sense that the Father is. (This is broadly the same view as later sects, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses)

## Son-Father Relationship in other thinkers

### Monarchianism

'Monarchianism' means 'single source of Godhead' in the Greek Monarchianist writers/teachers (mainly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD) aimed to safeguard the unity of God, and to avoid bi-theism or tri-theism in various ways. It took two forms:

- **Dynamic Monarchianism** (key teachers: Artemon, Theodotus, Paul of Samosata) – Jesus was God only in the sense that the God the Father’s power or influence rested on the Jesus. This is sometimes also called **Adoptionism**.
- **Modalist Monarchianism** (key teachers: Sabellius, Noetus, Praxeas) God takes various forms or modes in the Christian gospel – God can act as Father, as Son or as Holy Spirit, but since there are not three gods, the distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is only apparent in God’s mode of operation – there is no real distinction and not really ‘three’. This was to become known as **Sabellianism** after Sabellius

Writers such as **Tertullian** had battled against these teachers in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century

The followers of Origen had no problem ‘seeing off’ Monarchianism with their Logos theories – which keep a distinction between Father and Son. The problem is that it can lead to **subordinationism** – in which the Son/Logos is somehow inferior, or created, by the Father and hence not God in the same sense. This is exactly what Arius did.

## The Empire and the Church – an issue of Unity

Constantine, like all emperors, wanted his empire to be united in order to be strong, however it became clear early on after his accession that his ‘preferred’ faith – Christianity – was riven with disagreements over doctrine and church practice. Bishops, in particular, were prone to get involved with the intrigues and politics of power, which could sometimes lead to violence and lynching if not by them, then on the part of their followers. Once persecution had ceased, these problems rose to the surface.

It was therefore in Constantine’s interest to use his power and influence to help solve disputes in the Church. Although the Church had held councils since Acts 15, the idea of a single central council, bringing bishops together to solve a dispute, is the idea of Constantine and reflected his hope that Christianity would unite, not divide his Empire. The role of the Emperor, in calling together a council, remained a feature for centuries (It’s a bit like the emperor ‘knocking heads together’).

## The Council of Nicea (325)

This was called by Constantine in order to get an agreed statement about the relationship between Son and Father: was the Son created, or not? Was the Son equal to the Father, and if so, in what way? In what way were the Son and Father different?

Over 300 bishops attended, mainly from the Eastern Church (which had been most affected by Arianism at that time) but also from the West. The approach taken by the Council was to approve a version of the *Creed* (originally a statement of faith in the Baptism service) which dealt with the issue at stake.

The text agreed was 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 with the Father, **(GREEK: homoousios tou patrou)** through whom all things came into being,

things in heaven and things on earth,  
Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down,

and became incarnate  
and became man,  
and suffered,  
and rose again on the third day,  
and ascended to the heavens,  
and will come to judge the living and dead,

And in the Holy Spirit

But as for those who say, There was when He was not  
and, Before being born He was not,  
and that He came into existence out of nothing,  
or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created,  
or is subject to alteration or change

- these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

This was a total defeat for Arius and his supporters. However, the creed had to use an **unscriptural** phrase, **homousious**, to describe the uniting divine principle which made both Son and Father God. This made a number of bishops unhappy and caused support for the Creed to wane after the death of Constantine (in 333).

Of those who rejected **homoousios**, there were a set of various reasons why:

- a) Those who were really supporters of Arius and did not believe the Son was divine in the same way that the Father was;
- b) Those who were unhappy that an unscriptural term was used in the Creed;
- c) Those who felt it was too close to **Sabellianism** (modalism) and was capable of supporting a confusion between Son and Father. These lent their support to a *compromise* phrase, **homoiousios** – of *similar* substance to the Father. These included a number of bishops who were at the original Council of Nicea.

But if **ousia** is that which ‘makes something what it is’, by saying Christ was ‘similar’ to the Father isn’t the same thing. There was a confusion implicit in the Creed of Nicea as to whether **ousia** was referring to ‘godness’ or ‘fatherness’.

## After Nicea: the Struggle for Homoousios

This was both a political and a theological struggle. Politically, after the death of Constantine, the lack of convinced support for Nicea's *homoousios* became more open. Many bishops favoured the compromise *homoiousios*, whereas others started to side more with Arius and accused the supporters of Nicea as being Sabellians. Rule of the Empire had been divided between Constantine's sons: Constantius ruled the Eastern part of the Empire, the Balkans were given to **Constans** and the rest of the West were ruled by a third brother, **Constantine II**. The Nicene position was supported throughout the Latin-speaking Western church, whereas Arians and supporters of 'homoiousios' gained the upper hand in the East. The primary supporter of **homoousios** in the East was **Athanasius of Alexandria**, but he was exiled by Constantine for falling out with a neighbouring bishop. He returned to Alexandria just before Constantine died, only to be exiled again, this time to Rome in the West, where his influence was felt strongly and he was well-received.

In the meantime, Constantine had waged war against his brother Constans and had lost, so the Western Empire was solely ruled by Constans, who remained a supporter of the **homoousios** of Nicea. Constantius initially vacillated and was primarily interested in church unity than the niceties of doctrine. With time, however, he needed the political support of Arians and semi-Arian bishops, so his policy increasingly became anti-Nicene.

Athanasius eventually took up the See of Alexandria again in 346 and for ten years ensured that Egypt, at least, was cleared of Arian influence. However, war broke out between East and West and Constantius successfully won control of the whole Empire. He tried to get the Western church to reject Nicea, which it obstinately refused to do.

## Julian the Apostate (361 – 363)

His policy never included persecution, although he did actively encourage the restoration and rebuilding of pagan temples. In regard to Christianity, his policy was to stop trying to control the Church, to release from exile all the competing factions (either orthodox, Arian or homoiousian) in the hope that Christianity would 'eat itself'. It didn't. In a chastened situation, they managed to avoid a split and the hand of the orthodox was gradually strengthened without the interference of **homoiousian** emperors.

Besides the influence of Athanasius, the main supporter of Nicea in the East, his position was gradually strengthened by the writings of three brilliant scholars: **Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 390)**, **Basil of Caesarea (329 – 379)** and **Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 395)**. Together, these three are known as the **Cappadocian Fathers**.

Basil argued for the **divinity of the Holy Spirit** within the Trinity against the so-called *Pneumatomachi* (Greek for 'fighters against the Spirit'). These were Arians who were trying to fight a rear-guard action by denying the divinity of the Spirit (and so making nonsense of a Trinity where two persons were divine but the third was not). Basil and G of Nazianzus were good friends and effective debaters against Arianism. Basil and G of Nyssa were brothers.

G of Nyssa greatly helped define how the three persons of the Godhead can be distinct yet be one God. The distinction lies in the roles and relationships with respect to each other and their work, although they remain united in will and therefore any action of one is the action of the Three (and therefore the One).

## Council of Constantinople 381

Called by Emperor Theodosius I (ruled 339 – 395), who was a supporter of Nicea. The council of Constantinople marks the final triumph of Nicene faith and also incorporates additional developments, especially that of the Cappadocian fathers. Like Nicea, it produced a creed (which most people today refer to – inaccurately – as the Nicene Creed):

We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only begotten Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten not made,  
of one substance with the Father, (**Greek: Homoousios**)  
through Whom all things came into existence,  
Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from the heavens,  
and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became man,  
and was crucified for us under Pontus Pilate,  
and suffered and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures  
and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father,  
and will come again with glory to judge living and dead,  
of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver,  
Who proceeds from the Father,  
Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified,  
Who spoke through the prophets;

And in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church  
We confess one baptism to the remission of sins;  
we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

It is instructive to go through the text of the above creed and identify what has been changed (added, mainly) from that of Nicea and to identify the sources of these changes.

## The Great Christological Controversies

Once Constantinople had clarified that the Son is **homoousios** with the Father, a second debate came to the fore based on **the relationship between the Son of God and the Man Jesus**. In some ways, this reflected the classic tension in the Greek mindset between the qualities of **divinity** and the qualities of **creation**. Although Gnosticism and early docetism was in the past, there was still a tension in classic philosophy (and theology) between uniting God's being with the created order. The controversy also reflected **two approaches to biblical hermeneutics**: the **allegorical** approach

(associated with the Catechetical school of **Alexandria – with its hero, Origen**) and a more **literal** approach (associated with the Church of **Antioch** – which retained an essentially **Rabbinic** approach to biblical exegesis).

The Gospels paint a picture of a very human Jesus: he weeps, he is deeply moved, he suffers and he dies. The Greek philosophy which guided the thought of early Christian writers believed that any God would be:

- Immutable – not subject to being changed
- Impassible – not subject to being moved by feelings and passions
- Immortal – not subject to death or ceasing to exist

The Jesus of the Gospels does not conform to these principles! This was why the initial docetist heresies tended to say that Jesus' humanity was only an appearance.

Once Jesus' **sonship** is truly divine, how could the circle be squared with the philosophical understanding of divinity? The answer was to talk about Jesus having **two natures: a divine nature and a human nature**. The problem was how to explain how this could be possible without either implying two **separate** beings (a divine being and a human being – which is really a denial of the incarnation) or a **confusion** in which a third hybrid being, neither really divine nor really human, resulted.

### **Nestorius (Archbishop of Constantinople, 428 – 431)**

Nestorius trained at Antioch under Theodore of Mopsuestia. As a pupil of Antioch, he would have taken a literal approach to gospel hermeneutics, and emphasised the human aspect to the picture of Jesus which emerged. In the wake of the decision of 381, Nestorius was bound to speak of the Son as divine, but it is clear he sought to preserve the integrity of the human Jesus by speaking in stark terms of the division between the divine Son and the man Jesus. This caused consternation among clergy and bishops and he was accused of heresy. His principal opponent was **Cyril of Alexandria**, who worked actively to get Nestorius condemned. Cyril, besides being metropolitan of a rival see (Alexandria) was an inheritor of the rival scholarship (allegory) of Alexandria.

### ***Theotokos***

This Greek phrase means 'God-bearer' and was ascribed to Mary by many in the Church as an expression of Nicene faith – it is more about Jesus than Mary and expresses confidence in the full divinity of Jesus, born of Mary. Its use even predated Nicea, but after Nicea became increasingly used. However, for Nestorius and his supporters, it blurred a key distinction between the human nature and the divine nature of Christ. Nestorius proposed an alternative, **christotokos**, but this was felt to be weak on the divinity of Christ and didn't command support.

## The Council of Ephesus, 431

Although Nestorius had an opportunity to defend his position at the Council, a majority of the bishops were in disagreement at the end of the debate and condemned Nestorius, affirmed *Theotokos*.

The key term to refer to the Person of Christ was the Greek word **hypostasis**. By condemning Nestorius, and including two Epistles and 12 Anathemas which Cyril of Alexandria sent to Nestorius, the Council, allied itself to Cyril of Alexandria's theology. This clarified that after the Incarnation, there can only be one **hypostasis** (person), not two. Theology has since called this doctrine **the Hypostatic Union**.

We, therefore, confess one Christ and Lord, not as worshipping a man with the Word (lest this expression "with the Word" should suggest to the mind the idea of division), but worshipping him as one and the same, forasmuch as the body of the Word, with which he sits with the Father, is not separated from the Word himself, not as if two sons were sitting with him, but one by the union with the flesh.

If, however, we reject the personal union as impossible or unbecoming, we fall into the error of speaking of two sons, for it will be necessary to distinguish, and to say, that he who was properly man was honoured with the appellation of Son, and that he who is properly the Word of God, has by nature both the name and the reality of Sonship. We must not, therefore, divide the one Lord Jesus Christ into two Sons.

Neither will it at all avail to a sound faith to hold, as some do, an union of persons; for the Scripture has not said that the Word united to himself the person of man, but that he was made flesh. This expression, however, "the Word was made flesh," can mean nothing else but that he partook of flesh and blood like to us; he made our body his own, and came forth man from a woman, not casting off his existence as God, or his generation of God the Father, but even in taking to himself flesh remaining what he was. This the declaration of the correct faith proclaims everywhere.

(Epistle of Cyril to Nestorius, quoted in the Acts of the Council of Ephesus).

However, a group of late-arrivals from the Church of the East did not agree with the result (which had predated their arrival) and went into formal schism with the rest of the Church. This position was rectified about a century later, but there has always been a reputation, which is unfair, that the Church of Persia and East Syria is somehow 'Nestorian'.

The question which theology asks of the Council of Ephesus was 'is this Incarnate Christ human, in the sense that we are human, and divine, in the sense that the Word is divine – or has some change occurred to God the Son (which is impossible), or some change occurred to the human nature Christ took on (which would make it different from our human nature)?' This issue of whether the hypostatic union implies a **change** in either (or both) of the human and divine natures needed to be clarified twenty years later.

## Eutyches and the Council of Chalcedon

With Christianity as the official religion of the Empire, theological disputes were also political. The confusion of politics with theology tends to bring out the worst in Christians, and in this respect the 5<sup>th</sup> century is no different from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Eutyches was an Egyptian monk and ardent supporter of his former bishop, Cyril, who had died in 444.

Eutyches began to teach a kind of fundamentalist and derived version of the teaching of Cyril. In Eutyches' terms, following the Incarnation of the Son of God, there was both one **hypostasis** and one **physis** (nature) which was both human and divine. The problem lay in Cyril's earlier use of the Greek word **physis** to imply what the Latin word **persona** meant, whereas normally 'persona' is the Latin translation for **hypostasis**. A better translation of **physis** (Gk) is **natura** (Lat). Interestingly, here the use of Latin helps clarify the distinction of **persona** and **natura**, whereas their Greek equivalents, **hypostasis** and **physis** have overlapping meanings. (Sometimes the best way of working out theology is to try to translate it into another language! - which is what anyone involved in cross-cultural mission has to do.)

Eutyches was influential because of his renown as a holy man. As a result, his teaching was widely taken up in the East. The Western Church's most influential voice in the controversy was that of **Pope Leo I**. Leo, while contradicting Eutyches' position that there was one nature in Christ after the Incarnation, stated that it was due to misunderstanding rather than deliberate perversity.

The Controversy rumbled on from 448 to 451, with Constantinople being a centre of opposition to Eutyches' teaching, and Alexandria being a centre of support. A series of local synods were held, with each coming to competing conclusion and once again the spectre of Christianity causing political division emerged. This, again, forced the Emperor, Marcian, to convene the Council in 451. Pope Leo, who could not attend because of the problem with invasions from Attila the Hun, sent his legates together with a doctrinal letter, which he had written, which has subsequently been called **Leo's Tome**. This proved very influential upon the Council and showed, again, how the West – and in particular Rome – had proven its influence by holding to a doctrinal position which subsequent history had proved to be orthodox (such as on the *homoousios*). Rome was also able to stand aside from the political rivalry of Constantinople and Alexandria.

The Council concluded:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, **without confusion, without change, without division, without separation**; (έν δύο φύσεσιν άσυγχύτως, άτρέπτως, άδιαιρέτως, άχωρίστως the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person (**prosopon**) and one Subsistence (**hypostasis**), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten God (μονογενή Θεόν), the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

This managed to mediate, and clarify the 'thin line' of orthodoxy between two opposite errors:

- **confusing** the human and divine natures into some third thing (point against Eutyches)
- **changing** the human and divine natures by the union so that they were no longer what we normally would understand by these terms (point against Eutyches)
- **dividing** the one Person of the Incarnate Christ into two Persons, hence undoing the Incarnation (point against Nestorianism)



- **separating** the one Person of the Incarnate Christ into two separate Persons – like one riding on the shoulders of the other (point against Nestorianism)

With Chalcedon, a set of specific uses of words in Latin and Greek became the established language of orthodox Christian teaching:

Christ is a union of **two natures** (Greek: **physes**, Latin: **naturae**) – human and divine, in **one person** (Greek: **prosopon**, **hypostasis**, Latin: **persona**).

Trying to work out what we mean by **nature** and **person** is to go beyond the remit of this module, and is really quite complicated. However, behind this is the need to maintain the integrity of both divine and human in the one, united Person of Christ.