

## Arius and the Council of Nicea

*From A Cloud of Witnesses*

by David Bell

The Church, with its newly established toleration and support, was no longer preoccupied with survival but with theology. The basic theological issue was that of the true relationship between the *Father* and the *Son* within the Trinity. Early Christian writers influenced by Platonism, were often subordinationist.

Arius, the Alexandrian presbyter who was actually trained in Syrian Antioch, taught that the Son of God was subordinate to the Father, that even “there as, when he was not.’ There was a “time” (an inappropriate term) “when” the Son of God did not exist except potentially in the mind of the Father. He was a “creature” (“but not as one of the creatures”) who came into existence by the *will* of the Father. He was not of the same essence/nature of the Father and thus He was not God except by grace. He may have received attributes of divinity, but He was not God by nature.

A summary of Arian thought:

- 1) There was a “time” when God the Son did not exist as a distinct person of the Trinity;
- 2) God the Son is subordinate to God the Father;
- 3) God the Son is not truly God by nature; and
- 4) God the Son is not of the same essence/nature as God the Father.

The refutation by St. Athanasius the Great:

- 1) The Christian faith has always been Trinitarian. God is One and Three, from all eternity. This is the scriptural witness.
- 2) Only God can be worshipped, all else is idolatry. The Arian Christ is not God and thus cannot be worshipped. The Trinitarian baptismal formula implies the divinity of the Son and the Spirit.

- 3) Only God is able to *save* and to divinize his creatures by grace. The Son of God is God by nature and thus brings us the gift of salvation, a gift He could not bring if He Himself were not fully God."

The Emperor Constantine intervened and called together the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325. Perhaps 318 bishops were present, almost all of whom were from the East. The bishop of Rome, Sylvester, was represented by two priests.

The original Nicene Creed articulated the following as Orthodox faith:

- 1) The Son is begotten from the Father, not created or made;
- 2) The Son is *true* God, not a subordinate Being;
- 3) The Son is *consubstantial* with the Father, not of a different nature or *ousia*.  
Thus "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

The key term is, of course, *homoousios* which is often translated as "consubstantial," "of one essence."