

A New Eusebius

DOCUMENTS ILLUSTRATING THE
HISTORY OF THE CHURCH TO AD 337

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291 Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his Church, on the Creed of Nicaea

Socrates, *HE*, I.8; Theodoret, *HE*, I.12; Opitz, *Urkunde* 22, pp. 42ff.

- 1 What was transacted concerning the faith of the Church at the Great Council assembled at Nicaea, you have probably learned, Beloved, from other sources, rumour being wont to precede the accurate account of what is doing. But lest in such reports the circumstances of the case have been misrepresented, we have been obliged to transmit to you, first, the formula of faith presented by ourselves; and next, the second, which they have published with additions to our words. Our own formulary, then, which was read in the presence of our most pious emperor, and declared to be good and unexceptionable:
- 2 'As we have received from the Bishops who preceded us, and in our first catechizings, and when we received baptism, and as we have learned from the divine Scriptures, and as we constantly believed and taught as presbyter and bishop, so believing also at the time present, we report to you our faith, and it is this:
- 3 'We believe in One God, Father Almighty, the Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, Only

begotten Son, first-born of all creation,⁸ before all the ages begotten from the Father, by whom also all things were made; who for our salvation was incarnate, and lived among men, and suffered, and rose again the third day, and ascended to the Father, and will come again in glory to judge living and dead. And we believe also in One Holy Spirit':

Believing each of these to be and to exist, the Father truly Father, and the Son truly Son, and the Holy Spirit truly Holy Spirit, as also our Lord, sending forth his disciples for the preaching, said, *Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*⁹ Concerning whom we confidently affirm that so we hold, and so we think, and so we have held aforetime, and we maintain this faith unto the death, anathematizing every godless heresy. That this we have ever thought from our heart and soul, from the time we recollect ourselves, and now think and say in truth, before God Almighty and our Lord Jesus Christ do we witness, being able by proofs to show and to convince you that, in times past also, we constantly believed and preached thus.'

- 4 On this faith being publicly put forth by us, no room for contradiction appeared; but our most pious emperor, before any one else, testified that it was most orthodox. He confessed, moreover, that such were his own sentiments; and he advised all present to agree to it, and to subscribe its articles and to assent to them, with the insertion of the single word *Consubstantial* (ὁμοούσιος) which, moreover, he interpreted himself saying that the Son is consubstantial not according to bodily affections, and that the Son subsisted from the Father neither according to division, nor severance: for the immaterial, and intellectual, and incorporeal nature could not be the subject of any bodily affection, but that it became us to conceive of such things in a divine and ineffable manner. And our most wise and most religious emperor reasoned in this way; but they, because of the addition of *Consubstantial*, drew up the following formulary:

'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 of the Father, Only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, Very God from very God, begotten not made, Consubstantial with the Father, by whom all

8. Col. 1.15

9. Matt. 28.19

things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge living and dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

And those who say "There was when he was not," and "Before his generation he was not," and "he came to be from nothing," or those who pretend that the Son of God is "Of other *hypostasis* or substance," or "created," or "alterable," or "mutable," the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.'

- 5 On their suggesting this formula, we did not let it pass without inquiry in what sense they used the expressions 'of the substance of the Father' and 'Consubstantial with the Father.' Accordingly, questions and explanations took place, and the discussion tested the meaning of these phrases. And they professed that the phrase 'of the substance' was indicative of the Son's being indeed from the Father, yet without being as if a part of him. And with this understanding, we thought good to assent to the meaning of the pious teaching suggesting that the Son was from the Father, not, however, a part of his substance. On this account, we assented to the meaning ourselves, without declining even the term 'Consubstantial,' peace being the aim which we set before us, and fear of deviating from the correct meaning.
- 6 In the same way, we also admitted 'begotten, not made,' since they said that 'made' was an appellation common to the other creatures which came to be through the Son, to whom the Son had no likeness. Wherefore, he was not a work resembling the things which through him came to be, but was of an essence which is too high for the level of any work; and which the Divine Oracles teach to have been generated from the Father, the mode of generation being ineffable and inexplicable to every originated nature.
- 7 And so too on examination there are grounds for saying that the Son is 'Consubstantial' with the Father; not in the way of bodies, nor like mortal beings, for he is not such by division of essence, or by severance, no, nor by any affection, or alteration, or changing of the Father's substance and power (since from all such the unoriginate nature of the Father is alien); but because 'Consubstantial with the Father' suggests that the Son of God bears no resemblance to the originated creatures, but that to his Father alone who begat him is he in every way assimilated, and that he is not of any other *hypostasis* and substance, but from the Father. To this term also, thus interpreted, it

appeared well to assent; since we were aware that even among the ancients some learned and illustrious bishops and writers have used the term 'Consubstantial,' in their theological teaching concerning the Father and Son.

- 8 So much then be said concerning the Faith which was published; to which all of us assented, not without inquiry, but according to the specific meanings, mentioned before the most religious emperor himself, and justified by the fore-mentioned considerations. And as to the anathemas published by them at the end of the Faith, we thought it without offence because it forbade to use words not in Scripture, from which almost all the confusion and disorder in the Church have come. Since then no divinely inspired Scripture has used the phrases, 'out of nothing' and 'once he was not,' and the rest which follow, there appeared no ground for using or teaching them; to which also we assented as a good decision, since it had not been our custom hitherto to use these terms.
- 9 Moreover, to anathematize 'Before his generation he was not' did not seem preposterous, in that it is confessed by all, that the Son of God was before the generation according to the flesh.
- 10 Nay, our most religious emperor did, at the time, prove, in a speech, that he was in being even according to his divine generation which is before all ages, since even before he was generated in actuality, he was potentially with the Father ingenerately, the Father being always Father, as King always, and Saviour always, being all things potentially, and being always in the same respects and in the same way.
- 11 This we have been forced to transmit to you, Beloved, as making clear to you the deliberation of our inquiry and assent, and how reasonably we resisted even to the last minute, as long as we were offended at statements which differed from our own, but received without contention what no longer pained us as soon as, on a candid examination of the sense of the words, they appeared to us to coincide with what we ourselves have professed in the faith which we previously declared. (LF, altered.)

'Eusebius's sorry letter . . . betrays no change of heart' (F. L. Cross, *The Study of Athanasius*, p. 14). He regards the Creed of Nicaea with suspicion, and hides its authors in the anonymity of 'they'. As we know from 288, Eusebius came to Nicaea under the ban of a provisional excommunication, and his reading of the Creed of Caesarea, with the declarations that accompanied the reading, show that he produced his creed to rehabilitate himself. In this he was successful. It is clear that the emperor was present on this occasion and that in the

mind of Eusebius there existed an idea (mistaken, it would seem) that a close connection existed between his Caesarean creed and the creed of the Council. Our knowledge of the actual proceedings is so limited that we cannot follow the discussions that led to the drawing up of the Creed, but comparison makes it clear that the Creed of Nicaea contains little that is distinctively Caesarean. On the whole question see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Ch. VII, The Creed of Nicaea, and Ch. VIII, The Meaning and Use of the Nicene Creed.

7. At the council the words οὐσία and ὑπόστασις are synonymous. The word ὁμοούσιος was perfectly well known to members of the council, cf. 284, but they applied different senses to it; as Eusebius says, 'To this term also *thus interpreted*, it seemed well to assent'.

On the use of ὁμοούσιος by 'some learned and illustrious bishops and writers', Eusebius could look back to the correspondence of the Dionysii (225, 226). Athanasius (*On the Decrees of the Council of Nicaea*, 25) points out that the words ἐκ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας ἔφθη had been used by Theognostus of Alexandria. On Clement of Alexandria and ὁμοούσιος, see Bethune-Baker, *Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 133, n. 2, on Origen, *ibid.*, p. 147, n. 4.

9. Eusebius' statement about, 'Before his generation he was not', appears to miss the point at issue completely.