

**Response to Mark Kinzer’s Finding our Way Through Nicaea:  
The Deity of Yeshua, Bilateral Ecclesiology, and Redemptive Encounter with the  
Living God**

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It is a pleasure to respond to Mark Kinzer’s thoughtful piece on Nicea. I will keep any suspense to a minimum. I see in this paper much to affirm and some things to discuss. I proceed in that order. So like a good drama, you will have to wait for the “goods.” I will proceed in the order of the paper. I am citing his draft for locations of points.

**Affirmations**

**1. Unity of the Christian Church.** I see this paragraph on page 2 as setting a key tone. I mostly agree with its thrust. Kinzer says, “As Jewish Yeshua-believers, we may identify as members of the revived “*ekklesia* of the circumcision” rather than “the Christian Church” – which we see as the “*ekklesia* of the uncircumcision,” legitimate but incomplete without its Jewish partner. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the reality of the historical Christian community as the primary enduring witness to Yeshua in the world. If we embrace bilateral ecclesiology, then we must seek unity with the Christian Church even as we maintain our own distinctive identity. Once again, the question of Yeshua's transcendent identity – now embodied in explicit and official doctrinal formulations – becomes a matter of fundamental importance. To this I would only add that in Christ Jew and Gentile believers are one and share a confession in the one God and Lord (Eph 2:11-22 with 4:1-13). This point will become important later in my response. It raises a “push comes to shove” factor in all of this discussion. In recognizing diversity in our unity or unity in our diversity, which half do we recognize when push comes to shove in a central theological area like this?

**2. Inappropriate to ask for repentance on the Creed.** On page 6, I simply wish to say amen to this statement: For some Messianic Jews, one of the troubling elements of Christian history is Nicene orthodoxy. However, unlike supersessionism, antinomianism, the inquisition, and the blood-libel, it is inappropriate for us to ask our Christian partners to repent of the Nicene Creed. The Nicene consensus on Christology has endured over more than sixteen centuries, and continues to define the basic contours of Christian faith. In those settings where commitment to Nicene orthodoxy wanes, the Christian Church loses its grip on the Good News as a whole, and weakens in its faith and spiritual vitality.

**3. Keep theological consensus and Biblical material in sight.** On page 7, the following is also important: I am only arguing that we need to keep both the later Christian theological consensus and the biblical material in sight, and seek to read each in light of the other – and also in light of additional relevant factors, such as the Jewish theological tradition. Scripture has logical and theological, but not methodological, priority. I hope to show at the end of this section how this argument was made from the Hebrew Scripture by those in support of Nicea.

**4. Context of Nicea was Arian Controversy, but complaints about Creed are justified.** On p. 10, the following context for Nicea is important to note: The Council as a whole symbolizes for us the Church's conscious and decisive *turning away* from the Jewish people and *turning to* the Roman Empire. We must acknowledge this inner reaction, and be able to explain it to our Christian friends. But it need not determine our judgment of the Nicene Creed. As Kinzer notes later, the Arian controversy is the real context for the confessions made about Yeshua. Here he says, "They are not making the supersessionist claim that the Christian Church lacks any organic connection to or dependence upon Judaism and the Jewish people; in fact, it is theologians loyal to Nicene orthodoxy who have taken the lead over the last forty years in combating supersessionism. When Christians honor the Council of Nicaea, they are doing one thing and one thing only: they are paying homage to Yeshua, and glorifying him as the divine Son who is 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being' (Hebrews 1:3)." On p. 14 he adds correctly, "Nicene orthodoxy arises as a response to and rejection of Arianism. The Arians believed that the Son of God was a creature. They accepted the biblical teaching that he existed before becoming incarnate and that the world was made through him, but they held that 'there was [a time] when He [i.e., the Son of God] was not.' If all reality may be classified as either eternal and uncreated or temporal (i.e., with a beginning in time) and created, the Arians place the pre-incarnate Son of God in the "temporal and created" category." The role of Son as creature and creation was a key concern especially given the shadow of Gnosticism with its view that even God did not create the corrupt world. All of this culminates in his highlighted point with which I fully agree: *Such a system of thought excluded in principle the living God of Scripture, the self-revealing One who enters into an intimate covenantal relationship with the people of Israel.* In rejecting Arianism, the Nicene Creed took a stand *against* the common philosophical notions of the day, and *for* the biblical portrayal of the God of Israel."

**5. Type of Supersessionism calls for development.** On p. 12, I agree with this observation: But it [structural supersessionism] is also the easiest form of supersessionism to address, because it does not require the repudiation of any authoritative doctrinal positions from the Church's theological tradition. Instead, it calls for a doctrinal development that adds to rather than subtracts from the Church's confession of faith.

**6. 381 is right creed to use.** On his choice of the 381 statement: This is the right choice. That statement sought to strengthen the earlier statement in AD 325 because the earlier statement had some ambiguous expressions that later Arians tried to utilize. This led to tweaking that closed those ambiguities in 381.

**7. 1 Cor 8 is tied to Shema.** On p. 16, the tie of 1 Cor 8 to the Shema is exactly what is taking place with Paul. The language here can be seen in how the text compares to Deut 6:4 LXX, where God and Lord referring to the God of Israel now has a binitarian import in Paul. In affirming Jesus' role in creation, this was the challenge to the idea of Arianism of Jesus as created. This also fits with John 1:3, Heb 1 and Col 1:15-17.

**8. Begetting speaks of only, unique.** On p. 17 and begetting. Appreciating what this

term is and is not saying is key. Kinzer notes it may mean “only” Son. This is correct. Only-begotten affirms a unique relating, not biologically, but in terms of possessing a direct relationship to God no one else has. Therefore, he is right to note, “Therefore the “today” of Psalm 2:7 must be

eternal rather than temporal. The Creed's exegetical juxtaposition of John and Psalm 2 thus yields the completely appropriate phrase, ‘begotten of his Father before all worlds.’” On p. 18, this observation is also on target: “Though the Son is ordered after and in relationship to the Father, he is not a demigod, a secondary divinity at a lower level of being from the Father.” As is the statement, “The Son is ‘begotten, not made.’ This contrast between begetting and making is crucial for the teaching of the Creed. The Son is not like a painting or a sculpture that springs from the genius of an artist but remains fundamentally different in kind from the artist himself. Just as offspring in the temporal created order are the same kind of beings as the ones who generate them, so in the eternal uncreated order the Son is as much divine as is the Father from whom he derives his being.” The son is in no way a creature is the point Kinzer sees clearly.

**9. Tie to Yeshua as Messiah is associated with Creation (and shared honor with God)** On p. 19, he nears a conclusion on the Creed and says, “Instead, the Creed upheld a commitment to an authentic encounter with the Living God who acts in a revelatory and redemptive manner within the world. It maintained the Jewish and biblical witness to the qualitative difference between the transcendent Creator and that which is created, the particular personal character of the Creator as the God of Israel, and the reality of this God’s activity within the created order. It affirmed that God can be known and encountered in the person of Yeshua the Messiah.” To this, I wish to add how this confession, seen in a trinitarian light was designed to affirm the oneness of God. I will add some examples at the end of this overview of affirmations.

Aside 1. I found the survey of Medieval Judaism as a parallel fascinating. (Role of Two powers in heaven)

**10. Yeshua not all there is to deity and Son’s existence tied to the Father.** The following on p. 27 is an appropriate summary: First, the question could mean, ‘Is Yeshua the fullness of divinity, so that there is no Father distinct from the Son, from whom the Son receives his existence and to whom that existence is eternally oriented?’ The answer to that question, according to Nicaea, is a resounding ‘no.’” Now let me restate this: The question is not whether Jesus is God but whether Jesus is all there is to God. Jesus is divine, but He is not all there is to the deity.

Here are some ancient statements that show the concerns of the early church. They are part of an article I hope to have published in a new Journal, *Journal for the Study of Early Christianity*.

The following texts explicitly mention Deut. 6:4. These passages show a concern for the idea that God is one. This unity was a fundamental idea that was widely understood by those who confessed a Trinitarian faith. In showing how many of these writers make this point, it can be taken as a given that in the period of creeds’ formation,

the unity of God was a core belief even as these writers discussed teaching about Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

*Gregory of Nyssa* (lived mid to late fourth century) from *On Not Three Gods*: Scripture says, “‘The Lord is one Lord.’ By the word *Godhead* it proclaims too the only-begotten God and does not divide unity into a duality so as to call the Father and the Son two gods, although each is called God by holy writers.”

This text appeals to John 1:18 in discussing Jesus as the only begotten when Gregory makes his point. Although not present in the scriptural citation, Gregory introduces the word *Godhead* to discuss the idea that Lord is one. He notes that there are two names but treats them as a unit, in part because of the scriptural confession that God is one. The citation of the Lord being one Lord renders the LXX of Deut 6:4. In effect, Gregory is reasoning, if God is one and Jesus is called God, then there is one God with a unity of persons in a *Godhead*.

*Hilary of Poitiers* (c 300-368) from *On the Trinity* 7:12: Let us see whether the confession of the apostle Thomas agrees with this teaching of the Evangelist, when he says, “My Lord and My God.” He is therefore God whom he acknowledges as God. And certainly he was aware that the Lord had said, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one.” And how did the faith of the apostle become unmindful of the first commandment, so that he confessed Christ as God, since we are to live in confession of one God? The apostle who perceived the faith of the entire mystery through the power of resurrection, after he had often heard “I and the Father are One” and “All things that the Father has are mine” and “I in the Father and the Father in me” now can confess that the name God expresses the nature of Christ without endangering the faith. Without breach of loyalty to the One God, the Father, his devotion could now regard the Son of God as God, since he believed that everything contained in the nature of the Son was truly of the same nature with the Father. No longer need he fear that such a confession as his was the proclamation of a second God, a treason against the unity of the Divine nature; for it was not a second God Whom that perfect birth of the *Godhead* had brought into being. Thus it was with full knowledge of the mystery of the Gospel that Thomas confessed his Lord and his God.<sup>2</sup>

Here Hilary argues that the resurrection provided the breakthrough in understanding for Thomas. He notes clearly both the first commandment to worship only God and the *Shema*. These texts make it a given that there is only one God. Yet, for Hilary, Jesus so identified himself with God by things said within John’s gospel (John 10:30; 16:15; 14:1,

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<sup>1</sup> A solid collection of citations is present in *Ancient Christian Doctrine 1: We Believe in One God*. Edited by Gerald L. Bray. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2009). All the citations I give come from this collection. In the texts that follow we name the author and give the citation immediately.

<sup>2</sup> This is the only text I have altered in translation from the *Ancient Christian Doctrine* rendering. I also cited a longer portion of the text than that volume does. There is a need for more context to be clear exactly what Hilary is saying and why. So I opted for the translation from the *Post Nicene Fathers*, volume 2 for latter half of this cited text.

10), that Thomas could make the confession of Jesus as God and still believe in one God. He even goes into detail to explain what he means and how Thomas could say this.

*Epiphanius of Salamis* (lived mid to late fourth century) from *Panarion* 8:5: The law of God given to the Jews prescribed...that they should acknowledge and worship only one God. His name is predicated in unity...the Trinity is proclaimed as one, and this is what was always believed by the best of them, the prophets and the saints.

Once again we have an implicit citation of either the *Shema*, the first commandment or both. This drives the confession of God for Ephphanius.

*Ambrose* (c 340-397) from *On the Holy Spirit* 3.15.105: Such too was the teaching of the Law: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord," that is unchangeable, always abiding in unity of power, always the same and not altered by any accession or diminution. Therefore Moses called him One."

In a work defending the exalted position of the Spirit, Ambrose cites the *Shema*. Again in the midst of discussing a multiplicity of persons in God, the idea of God's unity is present and seen as crucial.

To these I could add: *Augustine* (354-430) from *On Faith and the Creed* 9:16, *Letters* no. 238, or *Fulgentius of Ruspe* (c 462-527) from *To Peter, On the Faith* 1.3.

These are the passages that refer directly to the *Shema*. This passage is central to the early church's confession that there is one God. These theologians are putting together things they see in the church's sacred texts: (1) the affirmation God is one, (2) the confession of Jesus as God by people like Thomas, and (3) the presence of the Spirit as a sanctifying agent in the believer.

So ten substantive agreements. Not bad. In fact, I enjoyed reading this paper. But now for the fun. Given this seeming strong endorsement of appreciation for Nicea, how does Kinzer apply this affirmation. It is here I begin to see factors that lead me to wonder if the paper ultimately is as consistent as it could or should be.

## Issues

**1. Prefer distinguishable and inseparable. Ecclesiology means a bond to the Gentile church. Distinct could mean separate in a sense that severs unity.** On page 5, Kinzer says, "This view perceives the *ekklesia* to be a single but essentially twofold reality: the one *ekklesia* of Messiah is composed of a Jewish and a multi-national *ekklesia*. They are distinct, but inseparable. The Messianic Jewish community has its own distinct identity, but it also has an intimate partnership with the Christian Church." Here I would prefer distinguishable but inseparable to Kinzer's distinct but inseparable. It is important to appreciate there are Jewish believers and Gentile believers and they are not to be homogenized. But the language of being distinct risks creating a separateness that risks

the more crucial unity, which all of Scripture presents as key evidence of the reconciliation that shows God is at work. The Eph 2 and 4 texts already noted make this point strongly.

**2. Jewish roots are more present at Nicea than suggested.** On p. 12, Kinzer laments the lack of context about the Jewish people in the creed. He argues this would have helped its formulation. Perhaps. I am not sure the Jewish roots and origin was a matter for contemporary debate and a doctrinal statement often is produced in reaction to something. The fact the church accepted the Hebrew Scripture and rejected Marcion showed at least a recognition and degree of appreciation to the church's Jewish roots. This is but a minor quibble.

**3. Exaltation of Son is rooted in Jewish period of early church and leads to Son being a focus in worship.** On p. 24 I see a statement I would want to make with some care. Kinzer, says, "However, in the history of Christian spirituality this delicate balance became increasingly precarious, as the equal divinity of the Son was stressed at the expense of the distinction between the Father and the Son. Especially in the Western Church, this exaltation of the Son threatened the unique position of the Father as the source and goal of all things. Consequently, many Christians have a diminished sense of the inner order and differentiation within the divine life, an order that was expressed in the early Yeshua community by its normal mode of worshipping the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit." I simply note that language like that in Phil 2:9-11 and Rev 4-5 show that the Son is able to be focused upon in worship. On p. 25, Kinzer notes, "Though the Messianic Jewish movement possesses very few universal characteristics, a reasonable candidate for this designation is the custom of addressing formal congregational worship to God the Father rather than to Yeshua the Son." I simply note that usually in the Gentile church this is done in the church of Gentiles by praying to the Father in or through the name of the Son. So this may not be a distinctive as is claimed. In addition, we have examples of baptism being in the name of Jesus in Acts. So once again to turn attention to the Son need not be seen as a problem.

**4. Nicene does not need to be interpreted but explained. Our priority is with God; vindication of Yeshua, which leads to affirmation of deity as a result of sharing the right hand of God and His throne.** My biggest concern deals with the application of the principle of *dialectic ecclesial continuity* expressed on p. 27. What gets me started is the statement: "Our hermeneutic of *dialectical ecclesial continuity* thus enables us to receive appreciatively from our Christian ecclesial partner, but also to offer proposals for rebalancing and repair that derive from our participation in the ongoing stream of Jewish ecclesial tradition. We can affirm the Nicene Creed, and then add our voice to the continuing argument as to how it should best be interpreted and practiced." I do not disagree with the principle of dual connections. I do have questions about how to prioritize it. Let me begin with a question: What do we do with Paul's comfort in substituting Jesus for the Father in citations of texts like Isa 45 and worship in Phil 2:10-11? I think I prefer thinking through how to help Jews who do not believe understand how one make the confession about Jesus as Son and how it works. Perhaps what is needed is an equivalent to Nicea written for those in a Jewish context that affirms what it

affirms but in words that Jews who do not believe may contemplate anew who Yeshua is.

**5. Limitation of covenant participation applies to both Jews and Gentiles.** On p. 29, this stream of reaction continues. Kinzer says, “While we might question whether this should be so, we can also appreciate the rationale for such an exclusionary practice. For Gentiles, union with Yeshua opens up for the first time participation in the covenant which God made with the patriarchs and matriarchs. Rejection of Yeshua's role as divine mediator of God's creative, revelatory, and redemptive purposes puts the covenant status of these Gentiles in jeopardy.” The limitation of covenant relationship is not just for individual Gentiles. Actually the limitation applies for all- Jew and Gentile. The cleansing Jesus mediates he does for both Jew and Gentile. This was the point of Paul going to the synagogues to proclaim it. Without this, the nation had missed her time of visitation and remained under judgment as AD 70 suggested (Luke 19:41-44).

**6. Need to receive creed as a boundary- that was its point and is what taking Nicea seriously means. Doctrine is affirmation and denial together.** On p. 30 He continues, “As part of the bilateral *ekklesia*, we refuse to accept the Jewish community's negative doctrinal boundary marker, just as we refuse to accept the Christian community's negative boundary marker dealing with our covenantal practice of the Torah. (Once again, we realize the significance of our hermeneutic of *dialectical* ecclesial continuity.) But should we exclude from our midst those Messianic Jews who adhere to these negative boundary markers, i.e., who deny the deity of Yeshua, or who deny the covenantal obligation of Torah? I am not convinced that we should. Affirmation of the deity of Yeshua and affirmation of the covenantal obligation of Torah observance for Jews are the two central principles of our communal existence, and we can rightly require that our leaders uphold them. They are our center, but they need not constitute our outer boundary.” I am not sure I accept this analogy. Let's assume this for a second. IF Jesus realizes the Abrahamic covenant as seed and his work activates the benefits of that covenant (as well as the new covenant), then to reject Jesus and his person in accomplishing this costs one covenantal relationship at a personal level). John the Baptist's teaching warns us that biology alone is not enough to be in covenant. I think it is one thing to say Israel as a nation remains in covenantal hope (this I affirm), but that does not mean that hope is automatic for individual Jews or given generations of Jews. More than this is the inconsistency of not affirming the confession as a boundary marker. Then what is the statement doing in a core confession? In my view, this is inconsistent with the rest of the paper. Jesus' person is part of what makes his work his work. It is what allows Jesus to be received back by the Father and given a place at God's right hand. It is what make the statement in the creed creedal! So it is a real boundary that needs affirmation as a boundary. If it does not function as such, then it is not creedal in the sense the church over the centuries has confessed this core idea or in the sense John 1 or 1 John affirms the idea of Jesus as Word incarnate sent from God, fully divine and fully human. Question: If someone denied the full humanity of Jesus in a reverse but similar manner, would that be a non-boundary view as 1 John seems to affirm? And what are we to do with Roman 10:9-13? Is this role as boundary marker not its ultimate point?

**7. We need to accept, not protest, this boundary or we lose our solidarity with the**

**full church. This confession of Yeshua is OUR confession (Jew and Gentile). IT is part of what being in the New Man of Ephesians 2 means.** On p. 31, Kinzer completes his application: “We exist as a movement in part to protest this negative border. Such a protest constitutes a crucial element in our prophetic calling. Moreover, our long-term viability depends on the success of that protest. We already see significant changes in the Church's attitude towards its negative boundary. While the Messianic Jewish view on the Torah has not yet carried the day, the contrary view is no longer a universal presupposition. We can and should hope and pray for the same changes in the Jewish community's attitude towards its negative boundary.” I disagree strongly here as well. The issue is that Jesus divides and does so within Israel (Luke 2:34-35). Loyalty to him and his person means that if one must choose between a Judaism that does not recognize the exalted Messiah God spoke for in resurrection and a church that confesses him, one must choose for the church and her teaching. There is a major reason Israel was under judgment from Jesus. It was because her leaders denied who He was and who God showed in vindication who God saw him to be (Mark 14:62). This brings me back to a question I raised at the start, which is where I wish to close. Here is the question as I see it: “In recognizing diversity in our unity or unity in our diversity, which half do we recognize when push comes to shove in a central theological area like this?” In the end, we are called to side with the confession that exalts Yeshua as God did in the resurrection. His place at God’s right hand is God’s ultimate answer to our topic.

In affirming Nicea we affirm this because that confession’s roots are in the Shema and the activity of the *Shekinah*. God has the right to reveal himself and did so by exalting Yeshua to His side. We may prefer slightly different wording to make the point (and that can be discussed), but the idea of Jesus as fully divine and as Son is a place where we must remain one with the body of Yeshua Jew and Gentile.