



**Nichols, Stephen J.**

***For Us and For Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth  
New Jersey

Stephen J. Nichols is a professor at Lancaster Bible College and Graduate School in Lancaster, PA. Although he's written a number of works prior to this volume, this was my introduction to his writing. I was originally made aware of this volume last year by one of Nichols' former students and fellow blogger Jeff Downs. Given my interest in Christology and Patristics this book was right up my alley.

To summarize Nichols' work, this is basically a primer for the beginning student interested in the early Church's view of Christ and the formation of orthodox Christology. Half of the book (chapters 2, 4, 6) is simply quotes from the fathers themselves while the other half (chapters 1, 3, 5) is Nichols' introduction to the events with brief commentary.

In chapter one the reader is treated to introductions first to the heresies that plagued the early Christians beginning with the denial of Jesus' deity à la the Ebionites of whom Nichols says scholars tend to see as an extension of the Judaizers of whom Paul spoke (19). He then moves on to explain adoptionism dubbing it "more sophisticated" (21) than what the Ebionites espoused, noting that it's one of many views that are a subset of monarchianism which "*puts all the emphasis on the oneness of God.*" (22) Of course the reference to monarchianism segues into modalism/patipassianism with reference being made to Praxeas and Sabellius. Unfortunately, Nichols' is guilty of committing one of my pet peeves when he says: "*Jesus Christ and God the Father are not separate persons, they said.*" (22) But orthodox Trinitarians say this as well since the language of 'separation' should not be in Trinitarian vocabulary. Granted, Nichols obviously doesn't intend to say that there are three Gods or that the divine ousia is split into three parts, but it's easy to confuse people or present the wrong picture when we use words that are inconsistent with our views. He rounds the chapter out with reference to Plato's cosmology, asserting that it served as the foundation for docetism which was espoused by Valentinus and challenged by Irenaeus.

In chapter three Nichols' tackles Arianism and the first council of Nicaea. He begins by making reference to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and how it popularized the Nicene Creed and public interest in the events of the fourth century. On p. 56 there's a nice little graphic listing the seven ecumenical councils, their dates, and the key issues at hand in all of them. I always appreciate little things like that for the help they present for memorization. Nichols takes us through all of the drama from the formation of the Nicene Creed to Arius' and Athanasius' exiles, then reinstatements, then exiles, etc. When it was all said and done Nichols notes that:

Athanasius' tenacity paid off. After his death in 373, the second ecumenical council convened at Constantinople in 381. Constantius II had long passed from the scene, and Theodosius II, who ruled over the Eastern Empire from 379-395, was anxious to route the Arian controversy. At Constantinople II any potential nod to Arianism, or even wink to it, was put out of the Church once and for all. Athanasius' view of Christ as being of one substance or essence (*homoousion*) with the Father won the day, while Arius' view of Christ as similar substance with the Father (*homoiousion*) was declared to be outside the bounds of orthodoxy and thus condemned. (66)

One of the low lights of this chapter was the focus and importance he placed on the terms "homoiousion" and "homoousion." Franz Dünzl rightly points out in his recent work on the history of the doctrine of the Trinity that there was enough semantic overlap between the terms for either party to be able to affirm them. In other words, Arians could use homoousion and feel perfectly comfortable because all they would have to do is acknowledge that the Father and Son share the 'same substance' in the manner that human beings do, i.e. sharing a common nature while being numerically separate and distinct. A brief hat tip is given to the Capadocians Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen before the chapter ends.

And finally, in chapter five Nichols recounts the controversy that led up to the Council of Chalcedon. He rightly notes that Apollinarius started out with the best of intentions, seeking to defend the doctrine of Athanasius while knocking Arianism down a peg or two, but "*in his zeal ended up swinging the pendulum way to the right. In overemphasizing the deity of Christ, contrary to Arianism, Apollinarius compromised the humanity of Christ.*" (102) The heresy of one Nestorius was also contended with at Chalcedon, but not before being challenged by Cyril of Alexandria. Nestorius was understood to have asserted that Christ was two persons, while Cyril and the later council argued that Christ was one person with two natures. And the final heretic to be dealt with was Eutyches who "*overemphasized the one person... to him Christ was a third thing... the human and divine natures conjoined in such a way as to create a new being.*" (106) Nichols notes that this heresy belongs to a "*larger category of heresy called monophysitism*" (113) (meaning one nature).

Underlying this entire volume is Christ's question, "who do you say that I am?" Nichols is certainly correct to connect Christology with soteriology, and to point out that who we

say that Christ is, is integral to salvation. This was the concern of the early Church and this should be the concern of all modern Christians as well. A proper Christology is more than just right thinking; it's recognizing the one who came down from heaven "for us and for our salvation." I think that Nichols does very well to highlight this while placing the formulation of orthodox Christology in its proper context.

The volume is closed out with a glossary of key terms (149-56) as well as two appendices. In appendix one (157) we are given a list of key texts all showing the humanity of Christ, the deity of Christ, and the two natures of Christ. In appendix two (159-62) we're given a list of recommended reading, to include background and reference works, primary source material, and select books on Christology. Unfortunately, there are end notes and I'd love to be able to say that in a book of this size and with this format that they weren't a big deal, but they contain important information that would have been better served on the same page as the main text. All in all *For Us and For Our Salvation* is a good primer. I'd recommend it to the beginner who is interested in learning about the early Christological controversies before recommending some heavier reading.