

Historical Division: The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

Historical Context

- **Timeframe:** Early 4th century AD
- **Political Climate:** Christianity had recently moved from persecution under Roman emperors to protection and toleration under **Emperor Constantine I**, who issued the **Edict of Milan** in 313 AD.
- **Church Landscape:** Rapid growth of Christianity brought doctrinal diversity, including divergent teachings about the nature of Christ.

Primary Characters

1. Arius (c. 256–336 AD)

- **Role:** Elder (presbyter) of the church in Alexandria
- **Belief:** Argued that **Jesus Christ was a created being**—not eternal, not equal to God the Father.
- **Famous quote:** “There was a time when he [the Son] was not.”
- **Theological position:**
 - Jesus is subordinate to the Father.
 - The Son is divine but **not of the same essence** (*homoousios*) as the Father.
 - Appealed to **monotheism** and sought to preserve the unique transcendence of the Father.

2. Athanasius (c. 296–373 AD)

- **Role:** Deacon under Bishop Alexander of Alexandria; later Bishop himself.
- **Belief:** Argued that Jesus is **fully divine and eternal**, equal with the Father.
- **Theological position:**
 - The Son is **“of the same essence”** (*homoousios*) as the Father.
 - Only if Christ is fully God can He offer **real salvation**.

- Emphasized the unity of the Trinity: **One God in three co-equal Persons.**

3. Emperor Constantine I

- **Role:** Roman Emperor seeking political and religious unity across the empire.
- **Motive:** Feared that Christian infighting would destabilize the empire.
- **Action:** Convened the **First Ecumenical Council** at **Nicaea**, seeking to resolve the theological crisis.

Points of Contention

| Topic | Arian View | Nicene/Athanasius View |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Nature of the Son | Created being, not eternal | Uncreated, co-eternal with the Father |
| Divinity of Christ | Divine in a subordinate, lesser sense | Fully divine, equal in essence to the Father |
| Essence (ousia) | Heteroousios – of different essence | Homoousios – of same essence |
| Soteriology | Christ reveals God but cannot fully save | Only God can save; Christ must be God |
| Scriptural Use | Emphasized Proverbs 8:22 (“created”) | Emphasized John 1:1 (“the Word was God”) |

High-Level Sequence of Events

1. Rise of Arianism (c. 318 AD)

- Arius begins preaching in Alexandria.
- Gains followers across Egypt, North Africa, and parts of the Eastern Empire.
- Bishop Alexander of Alexandria excommunicates Arius.

2. Widening Controversy (c. 319–324)

- Arius travels and spreads his views; writes letters to influential bishops.
- Political tensions rise as bishops across the empire take sides.

3. Constantine Intervenes (c. 324)

- Constantine becomes sole emperor.
- Alarmed at the division within the Church, he attempts reconciliation through a letter and envoy (Hosius of Cordoba).

4. Council of Nicaea Convened (325 AD)

- Held in **Nicaea**, in modern-day Turkey.
- Over **300 bishops** attend (mostly Eastern, some Western).
- **Key Result:** The **Nicene Creed** is drafted, affirming that Christ is "*begotten, not made, of one essence (homoousios) with the Father.*"
- **Arius is declared a heretic** and exiled; his writings burned.

5. Aftermath and Legacy

- Although Arius is condemned, **Arianism continues** to influence many, especially among Germanic tribes.
- Athanasius faces repeated exile but remains a fierce defender of Nicene orthodoxy.
- The Nicene Creed is reaffirmed and expanded at the **Council of Constantinople (381 AD)**.

Lasting Significance

Doctrinal Unity

- The Nicene Creed became the **bedrock of Christian orthodoxy**, affirming:
 - The full deity of Christ
 - The Trinitarian nature of God

Ecclesiastical Division

- The debate led to **centuries of division**, exiles, and even violence.

- **Arianism survived for hundreds of years** in parts of the empire and among barbarian tribes.

Church and Empire Fusion

- Constantine's role introduced a new dynamic: the **State as mediator and enforcer of doctrine**.
- Set precedent for **imperial involvement** in theological disputes.

Immediate Aftermath (325 AD)

Official Condemnation

- Arius was **declared a heretic** by the Council.
- His teachings were **explicitly rejected** in the **Nicene Creed**, especially through the affirmation that the Son is "**of the same essence**" (ὁμοούσιος / *homoousios*) **with the Father**.
- His **writings were ordered to be burned**. Possession of them could result in **capital punishment**.

Exile

- Arius was **exiled to Illyria** (in the Balkans).
- A few prominent bishops who supported him (like **Theognis of Nicaea**, **Eusebius of Nicomedia**, and **Maris of Chalcedon**) were also **exiled** for refusing to sign the Nicene Creed.

Reversal and Political Rehabilitation (328–335 AD)

Constantine's Change of Heart

- Around **328 AD**, Constantine began to **soften his stance** toward Arius.
- Influenced by **Eusebius of Nicomedia** (a powerful political bishop and Arian sympathizer), Constantine recalled **Arius from exile**.

- Arius submitted a **creed that sounded orthodox** (but was ambiguously worded), which led Constantine to consider him **rehabilitated**.

Controversy over Arius's Readmission

- **Athanasius**, now Bishop of Alexandria, **refused to readmit Arius** into communion.
- Athanasius was **deposed and exiled in 335** at the **Synod of Tyre**, orchestrated by Arian sympathizers and political allies.
- Arius was set to be reinstated in **Constantinople**, but died **suddenly and mysteriously** in 336, just before his ceremonial return—seen by many as divine judgment.

Arian Resurgence After Constantine's Death (337 AD)

Under Emperor Constantius II (r. 337–361)

- Constantius, one of Constantine's sons, was a strong **Arian sympathizer**.
- **Arian bishops were restored**, and Nicene bishops like **Athanasius** faced multiple exiles.
- Arianism became **dominant** in the Eastern Church for a time.

Violent Suppression of Nicenes

- In some places, Nicene clergy were **exiled, imprisoned, or replaced**.
- Church politics became a battlefield of **imperial favor**, with doctrinal fidelity often secondary to allegiance.

Restoration of Nicene Orthodoxy

Under Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379–395)

- Theodosius was a **strong Nicene**.
- He **expelled Arian bishops, called the Council of Constantinople (381)** to reaffirm the Nicene Creed, and made **Nicene Christianity the official state religion** of the Roman Empire.

Summary of Treatment of Arius & His Supporters

| Phase | Treatment | Summary |
|---------|---------------|--|
| 325–328 | Condemned | Arius exiled; writings burned |
| 328–335 | Rehabilitated | Arius recalled, semi-reinstated |
| 336 | Dies suddenly | En route to ceremonial readmission |
| 337–361 | Resurgence | Arianism gains dominance under Constantius |
| 381 | Final defeat | Rejected officially at Council of Constantinople |

Theological Legacy

- Though condemned, **Arianism continued among Gothic and Germanic tribes** well into the 6th century.
- The controversy **shaped the formation of creeds, councils, and canon law**.
- The drama highlights the **complex entanglement of theology, church, and state** in early Christian history.

Nicene Creed (Original – 325 AD)

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 (*ousia*) of the Father,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father;
through whom all things were made,
who for us men and for our salvation
came down,
and was incarnate,
and was made man,
suffered,
and rose again on the third day,
ascended into the heavens,
and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say:

“There was a time when he was not,”

and “He was not before he was made,”

and “He was made out of nothing,”

or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance (*heteroousios*),

or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable,

the **Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.**

Key Features of the 325 Creed

- **Brief mention of the Holy Spirit**, with no doctrinal elaboration (this would come at Constantinople in 381).
- **Anathemas (condemnations)** explicitly reject Arian positions.
- Heavy use of Greek philosophical terms like:
 - **Homoousios** ("of one substance")
 - **Hypostasis** ("subsistence" or "person")
- Intended to **preserve the full deity and eternal nature of Christ**.

The Nicene Creed (381 AD)

We believe in one God,

the Father Almighty,

Maker of heaven and earth,

and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,

the only-begotten Son of God,

begotten of the Father before all worlds,

Light of Light,

very God of very God,

begotten, not made,

being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men and for our salvation

came down from heaven,

and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,

and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered and was buried;
and the third day He rose again,
according to the Scriptures;
and ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father;
and He shall come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord and Giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. **Amen.**

Notes on Variants

- The phrase “**and the Son**” (Latin: *Filioque*) in “*who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]*” was **added later by the Western Church**, leading to major theological controversy and the **Great Schism of 1054** between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

- The **original 325 AD version** of the Nicene Creed was shorter and primarily focused on **affirming the divinity of Christ**. The **381 AD version** expanded the section on the Holy Spirit and ecclesiology.

| Creedal Element | Nicene Creed (325 AD) | Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD) |
|---|---|--|
| Belief in One God | We believe in one God | We believe in one God |
| Creation (Maker of...) | Maker of all things visible and invisible | Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible |
| Christ's Sonship | One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God | One Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God |
| Christ's Begotten Nature | Begotten of the Father, only-begotten, from the substance of the Father | Begotten of the Father before all worlds |
| Christ's Divinity (Light from Light...) | God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God | Light of Light, very God of very God |
| Christ's Substance with Father | Begotten, not made, of one substance (homoousios) with the Father | Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father |
| Christ's Role in Creation | Through whom all things were made | By whom all things were made |
| Incarnation and Purpose | Who for us men and our salvation came down, and was incarnate, and was made man | Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven... and was made man |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Suffering and Death | Suffered | Crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried |
| Resurrection and Ascension | Rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven | The third day He rose again... ascended... sits at the right hand |
| Judgment | Will come to judge the living and the dead | He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead |
| Holy Spirit Mention | And in the Holy Spirit | And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life |
| Holy Spirit Theology | Not elaborated | Who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]... worshiped and glorified |
| Church, Baptism, Resurrection | Not included | One holy catholic and apostolic Church... one baptism... resurrection of the dead |
| Anathemas (Condemnations) | Anathemas against Arian views included | Not included |