



The Arian Controversy

Fourth Century

Introduction

- The Arian controversy was the greatest theological controversy in church history. It centered on the fundamental question, "Who is the Christ?"
 - The debate centered specifically on Christ as the Son, or Logos. What is His relation to the Father?
- There were four primary personalities: Alexander (313-328), Arius (256-336), Athanasius (296-373), and Eusebius of Nicomedia (263-339).
 - Other people played a significant role too, but these are play the largest role in the initial controversy.
- Alexander was a patriarch, Arius was an excommunicated presbyter, Athanasius was his replacement, and Eusebius wanted to please the emperor with a compromise.
- The Council of Nicaea was called in 325 by Constantine to settle the issue once and for all.



Background to the Controversy

- When Constantine gained control of the East in 324, he realized the eastern church was bitterly divided by a major doctrinal dispute.
- It began in 318 in Alexandria with a Libyan named Arius (256-336), an elderly presbyter.
 - He argued that the Father alone is God. Only the Father was eternal, infinite, and uncreated.
 - He claimed the Logos is a created being. He says there was once a time when the Son was not, and he is the greatest of all God's creations and closer to God than the rest. All creation must relate to God through the Son.
 - Arius's motive was to defend the truth that there is only one God. He disagreed with Origen's degrees or grades of divinity (popular with Eastern bishops). Arius rightly understood there are no degrees and an infinite distance separates God from all that is not God.
 - However, he reasoned this meant the Son could not be God if the Father is God, since there is only one God.
- Arius was strongly opposed by the Alexandrian bishop, Alexander.
 - He also rejected Origen's degrees of divinity, but argued that it demonstrates something opposite to Arius. It shows that the Son is fully and truly God, in the same absolute sense as the Father.
 - Both sides accused the other of polytheism.



Background to the Controversy

- Arius was deposed by a council of Egyptian bishops in 320.
- Arius went to Israel to gain support from other eastern bishops.
 - He had many friends that were educated at the same theological school as himself—Lucian's Antiochene theological school.
 - They were now dispersed clergy, and he wrote letters to them. Lucian's view of Christ was similar to Arius's. The letters worked and popularized his cause.
- Eventually, most church leaders in the east were caught up in this dispute.
 - It turns out that of the bishops that sided with Arius, very few understood and believed Arius's doctrine of Christ as a created being.
 - In fact, it was confusing since it seemed like Arius and Alexander were closer to each other than traditional Origen-based Eastern theology.
- Constantine felt that as Christian emperor, he needed to restore unity to the divided church.
 - So he summoned the first ecumenical council of bishops from all over the Eastern Empire, and a few from the West, to settle this.
 - They met at Nicaea in north-west Asia Minor in 325.



The Council of Nicaea

- Constantine wanted this to be resolved quickly and expected the council to be short. He was wrong.
 - It lasted from May 20 to July 25.
 - 318 bishops attended as did their underlings (presbyters and deacons). Thousands of others attended as observers, but only bishops could vote.
 - Some who were present leave for us a phenomenal scene: Men with missing limbs, scars, missing eyes, crutches, and so on. They all carried these badges of honor from the persecution of Diocletian. They had stories to tell.
 - Constantine gave them a palace to meet in.
- Constantine took an active part in the debates and discussions, acting like a chairman.
- His advisor, Western bishop Hosius of Cordova, had a strong belief in Christ's full deity (like most Western Christians).
 - Hosius convinced Constantine that such a position should be accepted by the bishops.
- A confession of faith (after many drafts) emerged. The final produce is the Nicene Creed. You can see clear anti-Arian verbiage in it (read from pg. 222).



Nicaea's Lesser Known Decision

- The Council also settled the debate about Easter, what to do with heretics, and those who denied Christ during persecution.
- Concerning Easter, there were two opinions.
 - 1) It could not be a fixed date, but needs to be a Sunday every year since Christ rose on Sunday.
 - 2) Use the calendar to figure out what day of the year Jesus rose from the dead (based on the Passover) and then permanently observe that day.
 - The decision of the council was to compromise with the two positions.
- Easter is celebrated the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.
 - The vernal equinox is the day that is half way between the middle of winter and the middle of summer. It is March 21.
 - It is possible to have a full moon the next day, or up to 29 days later. Thus Easter can end up falling on any Sunday between the end of March and most of April.
 - This compromise allows us to celebrate it on a Sunday, but also to keep it close to the time of Passover. On some lucky years it is probably possible to celebrate Easter on the right date and have it be a Sunday.

The Primary Issue

- The primary issue in this dispute was the Arian controversy.
 - The debate was centered around the Greek word *ousias*, which means “substance.”
- The most important word was *homoousios*. Anathemas were added to the creed. This is a stronger act than excommunication. Excommunication back then meant to temporarily ban them from the Lord’s table. Anathema meant to declare them unbelievers (read anathema on pg 223).
 - All but two of Arius’s supporters gave in and signed the creed. Arius refused. He and his two followers were sent into exile by Constantine.
- What was Arius’s specific argument?
 - He believed the Scriptures supported his position.
 - One argument centered around Wisdom in Proverbs 8 where it is said to share characteristics with Christ and is said to have been the first of the Father’s creations.
 - Other arguments came from Mark 13:32; John 5:19; John 14:28; and 1 Corinthians 15:28. These passages speak of Christ’s submission to the Father and His being subject to Him. Christ did not know the day of His return.
 - Arius thought these comparisons showed Christ as deficient in comparison to the Father.

The Primary Issue

- The Nicene argument was as follows:
- Christ was and is the same substance and nature as the Father (*homoousias*).
 - Any other statement is polytheistic by default.
 - The monotheism of the OT and the continued insistence of it in the NT must be defended. Arianism was incompatible with monotheism.
 - In John 10:30, Jesus declared, “I and the Father are one!” The Greek word is “hen” and means substance or essence. So Jesus’s own words agree with *homoousias*, even if this term is not in the Bible.
 - There are numerous other Scriptures that also affirm the deity of Christ.
 - The Scriptures used by the Arians simply display a subordinate role for Christ in terms of the economy, but not in terms of ontological inferiority.
- The Council of Nicaea voted in favor of Alexander’s and Athanasius’ position.
 - “Jesus is true God of true God, begotten not made, and of the same substance of God.”
 - Only 3 of the 318 bishops voted for the Arian position (contra to *Di Vinci Code*).
 - Although this seems cut and dry, it was not. The empire was about to enter great turmoil over this.

The Nicene Fallout

- The council and creed did not bring the unity the emperor desired. The Eastern church divided over this for the next 50 years.
- There were three parties: Arian, Nicene, and Origenist (majority of eastern bishops).
 - Origenist position: Son is divine, not created, but in some way inferior to the Father by being a degree less divine than absolute divinity).
- The main dispute was actually between the Nicenes and Origenists. The language the Nicenes used to express Christ's divinity confused the Origenists. It came down to *homoousias*.
 - The Nicene party meant that the Father and Son share the same divine nature.
 - The problem is the Sabellian heretics used the word *ousia* to argue the Father and Son were the same person. That is how the Origenists understood the Nicene position.
 - Because the Origenists despised the Sabellian heresy so much, they joined with heretics, the Arians, in the battle against the orthodox Nicene party.
 - They also misunderstood *homoousia* to imply that divine nature was split apart in two between the Father and Son, when that was not the case.



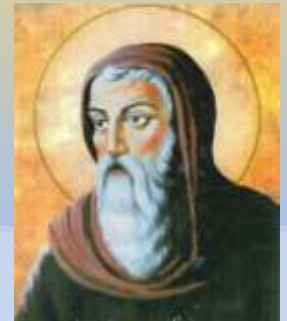
Origenists vs. Nicenes

- Thus, the Origenists thought the Nicenes were Sabellians, and the Nicene party thought the Origenists were Arians!
- Since the Origenists saw the Son as inferior to the Father, it sounded like the arguments of the Arians, even though they believed the Son was eternal and not created.
 - The Nicene view was that if they are not fully Arian, then they are semi-Arian, which is still unacceptable.
 - The result of language confusion allowed the real heretics, the Arians, to set the Nicenes and Origenists against each other for a bitter 50 years.
- The Origenists were the majority in the East, and they disliked *homoousias*.
 - They accepted it at the Council of Nicaea because of the presence of Constantine. They were intimidated.
 - But afterward, they had serious doubts about what they had agreed to. Some objected to the word not being in the Bible; others thought it opened a door to Sabellianism.
- So most of the Eastern church rejected the creed. Only the Alexandrians stood behind it.



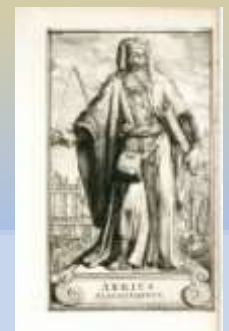
Athanasius (296-373)

- In 328, Alexandria received a new bishop, Athanasius. He was the outstanding champion of Nicene orthodoxy.
 - He was previously the senior deacon of the former bishop Alexander.
 - He participated in the council of Nicaea, where he stood out with his excellent arguments for Christ's deity.
- Athanasius' entire theology was based on his view of soteriology.
 - The main idea was theosis—or deification (that grace lifts human nature to share in the glory and immortality of God).
 - Athanasius asked how can Christ make human nature divine if He Himself was less than God? Salvation is human nature sharing in the glory of God's nature. So to effect this, Christ must be God and man in one person. God lowers Himself to humanity so that He can lift humanity into the very life of God.
 - Otherwise, the work of Christ and salvation makes no sense. So Jesus must be equal to the Father.
- Also, the church worships Christ. It always has. Only God is to be worshipped.
- Athanasius was unwavering, and his single-minded devotion to this fixed in stone an orthodox view of the Trinity in the entire church.
 - He was witty and humorous too (footnote on pg 229.).



Arian Gains

- With the fighting between the Nicene party and the Origenists, the Arians were able to build up their strength.
- Their chief proponent was a bishop named Eusebius of Nicomedia (in Asia Minor).
 - He was clever at politics and built a network of influence in Constantine's royal court.
 - So Constantine made him bishop of Constantinople in 339.
 - Eusebius was able to get Arius recalled from exile in 328. He never rose to importance again, however, and he horrifically died in 336. His bowels hemorrhaged and he died with intense diarrhea where parts of his spleen and liver came out.
 - The Emperor saw this as a vindication of the Nicene Creed.
- But prior to this, Eusebius was able to convince Constantine to expel supporters of Nicaea, including Athanasius.
 - This was based on a false accusation that Athanasius threatened to blockade the Empire's grain supply.
 - This would be the first of five exiles for Athanasius—he spent 17 of his 45 years as bishop of Alexandria in exile.



Further Division Under Constantine's Sons

- When Constantine died in 337, his empire was divided between his sons: Constans in the West and Constantius in the East.
 - The former favored the Nicene party, and the latter favored the Arians. Western bishops were solidly Nicene in their theology—Arianism had no chance there. So Athanasius often spent his exiles in Rome.
- The bishop of Rome reviewed Athanasius's case and declared him wrongfully deposed.
- The Eastern bishops retaliated by claiming that Rome has no right to judge such a case.
 - They assembled a council of Eastern bishops in Antioch in 341 (so it is not ecumenical), and they drafted a new creed that left out *homoousias*.
- The Origenists offered the *homoiousias* label instead. This means Christ is similar in essence or substance to the Father.
 - The Arians could agree to this (even if they meant something different than the Origenists), but the Nicene party could not agree. Young Athanasius said it is no different than Arianism.
- Because the bishop of Rome backed Athanasius, this nearly led to a complete split between the Eastern and Western churches. Even their respective emperors were split along these lines.
- The two emperors commanded an ecumenical council in 343 at Sardica (in Bulgaria) to reconcile the two sides.
 - The East refused to allow Athanasius and Marcellus to take part, so the both sides had their own councils and cursed each other.

Imperial Oscillation

- Over the next few years, the two sides made concessions to each other.
 - The West stopped supporting Marcellus because it turned out he was a Sabellian. The East in return, accepted Athanasius, and he returned to Alexandria in 346.
- Things continued to improve until a rogue general, Magnentius, murdered the Nicene emperor of the West, Constans. In 353, Constantius of the east defeated the general and became the sole ruler of the Empire.
- This enabled a new Arian-led persecution of the Nicene party. Constantius's chief argument is God would not have made him sole emperor if his Arian beliefs were false.
- He sent into exile many bishops and presbyters that refused to submit to him.
 - His most famous victim was Hilary of Poitiers (315-368) of Western France. While in exile in 356, he wrote an influential treatise *On the Trinity*. He is sometimes called the Athanasius of the West.
 - He was the first great Western hymn writer. While in the East, he saw how the Arians were deceiving the masses with hymns, so he responded by writing orthodox hymns.

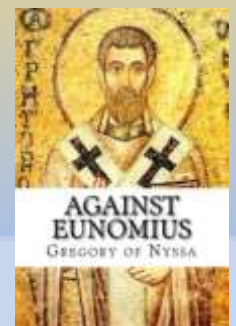


Bad Times for Nicene Christians

- The year 356 was a bad year of Nicenes.
 - The bishop of Rome was exiled. Hosius of Cordova (now 100 years old) was imprisoned and tortured. This was Constantius's doing.
 - Both the bishop of Rome and Hosius cracked under the pressure and signed an Arian confession.
 - That hurt the cause badly. Fortunately Hosius renounced the Arian creed on his deathbed in 357 and confessed Christ's deity.
- Also, in 356, Athanasius was exiled again, but this time the emperor wanted him arrested and punished.
 - He hid in the Egyptian desert for 6 years, and was cared for by desert monks.
- All church buildings were given to Arians, and so in Alexandria, the orthodox worshiped outside.
 - One day the soldiers kindled a large fire, and took the Orthodox women of Alexandria, and told them to convert to Arianism or be burned alive. They refused. So the women were stripped naked and savagely beaten.
- Constantius's tactics were so brutal that by 360, most of the Empire was forced into accepting a form of Arianism.

Origenists Wake Up

- With the state favor, Arianism produced two eloquent champions—Aetius and Eunomius.
 - They were very bold in teaching the Son was not like the Father.
- At this point, the Origenists realized they were on the wrong side, but it was too late. They too now started being deposed.
 - They now understood why it was important to stress Christ's divinity to the degree that the Nicene party did.
- Cyril of Jerusalem, an Origenist, joined the Nicene party and became one their greatest spokesmen, especially at the Council of Constantinople.
- Constantius died in 361, but he was replaced by Julian the Apostate.
- Julian allowed all exiled bishops to return.
 - His goal was to cause more division and confusion in the churches so as to destroy Christianity. The opposite happened.
- Athanasius returned to Alexandria as a popular hero. He also wised up.
 - He realized the Origenists were fighting the same battle against the Arians. In 362, he suggested an alliance between the Nicenes and Origenists in the hope that they could reach doctrinal agreement and defeat those who say the Son was created.



Nicene and Origenist Unity

- Athanasius argued that those who accepted the creed of Nicaea, but have doubts about the term *homoousia* should not be treated as enemies, but as brothers.
- He argued that they mean the same thing with *homoiousia* that Athanasius and other Nicenes mean with *homoousia*.
 - He recognized they are simply arguing about a word.
 - This led to a peace and unity that Julian the Apostate had not expected. So he exiled Athanasius again.
- After Julian's death, Valentinian became emperor and he placed his brother Valens over the East. Valens was an Arian and he started persecuting non-Arians.
 - Athanasius came back right after Julian's death, but was then exiled again by Valens.
- Valens realized his persecution only strengthened the unity between the Nicenes and the Origenists, so he relented and Athanasius was allowed to come back.
 - He served the rest of his days unbothered and died in peace in 373.
 - It was his opposition to Arianism that did more than anything else to defeat Arianism.

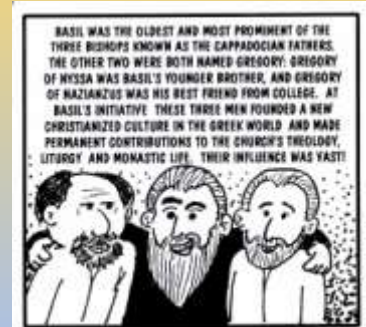
Cappadocian Fathers

- Athanasius was replaced by a new generation of Nicene theologians, three in particular known as the Cappadocian Fathers. Basil of Caesarea (330-379), Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), and Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390).
 - They were all natives of Cappadocia in Asia Minor.
- Basil and Gregory of Nyssa were brothers from a wealthy Christian family.
 - Basil, when young, studied in Caesarea (capital of Cappadocia), where he befriended Gregory of Nazianzus. They were like David and Jonathan. They were both experts of Pagan culture and philosophy without wandering from their Christian beliefs.
- Basil was called to be presbyter in Caesarea, where he earned a name for combating Arianism there. In 370, he was made bishop there.
- Gregory, his friend, became bishop in his hometown of Nazianzus. He wasn't as much of a public combatant, but in 379-81, he served as a bishop in Constantinople, which was majority Arian.
 - His *Five Theological Orations* summed up Nicene doctrine, refuted Arianism, and gave Nicene orthodoxy a boost, to where in the capital many started flocking to orthodoxy.
 - He and John Chrysostom were the most eloquent preachers in the patristic period.



Cappadocian Fathers

- Gregory of Nyssa was bishop of a town near Caesarea.
- He was so effective in arguing against Arianism that he was invited to give the opening address at the Council of Constantinople in 381.
 - Unfortunately, his love for Origen caused him to embrace universal salvation.
 - Though an embarrassment, he was a net-positive especially in his contributions to classic Trinitarianism.
- All in all, the Cappadocian fathers rank among Athanasius for the remarkable theologians of the Eastern church of the 4th century.
- They completed the unity among the Nicene and the Origenist parties by persuading both sides to use new theological language.



Better Theological Language

- The problem is derived from two Greek words, *hypostasis* and *ousia*. Before the Cappadocians, these two words were synonyms.
 - That is why it was previously confusing when the Nicenes said the Father and the Son have one divine nature or essence. They used the word *hypostasis* and *ousia* to say this.
 - The Origenists would say the Father and the Son were two distinct persons, but they used the exact same words.
- To remove the confusion, Basil, with the other two, made two proposals.
 - First, henceforth *ousia* should only refer to the one divine nature of substance.
 - Second, the word *hypostasis* should refer specifically to the two distinct persons, the Father and the Son.
- The Cappadocians also settled the controversy as to whether or not the Holy Spirit was God.
 - After arguing about Christ, it's not surprising similar arguments would arise about the Holy Spirit.
 - Some who rejected Arianism still argued that the Holy Spirit was not God. They were called Pneumatomachians (fighters against the Spirit).
 - Athanasius had already argued that the Holy Spirit must be seen as God along with the Father and the Son. The Cappadocians strengthened this argument, and insisted that *homoousias* must also be applied to the Holy Spirit.

Better Theological Language

- Therefore, the dispute over the Son eventually led to a quest for the full doctrine of the Trinity.
- The Cappadocians offered this formula for expressing the Trinity: God is three *hypostases* in one *ousia*.
 - God the Father possesses one divine nature that He shares completely with His Son whom He begets from all eternity, and with the Holy Spirit whom He eternally spirates (breathes forth).
- The Nicenes and Origenists united and rallied around this formula of three *hypostases* and one *ousia*.
 - Origenists gave up the idea that the Son was inferior to the Father in His divine nature.
 - The Nicenes distanced themselves from anything sounding Sabellian.
- This allowed them to present a united front against the Arians.



Council of Constantinople, 381

- Valens died fighting the Goths in 378. The Western emperor, a Nicene supporter, appointed a Nicene emperor for the East, a soldier named Theodosius.
 - In 380, Theodosius issued an edict that only allowed Nicene believers to use the title Catholic. This then gave possession of all church buildings to the orthodox believers.
- In 381, Theodosius summoned an ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381. It produced a revised version of the creed from the Council of Nicaea.
 - This updated one is what is known as the Nicene Creed.
 - It reaffirmed and enhanced the teaching from 325. It confirmed the word *homoousias*. It extended the deity of the Son to the Holy Spirit.
- Within 100 years, this creed became so influential in the East that it was recited in their worship services as a public confession of faith (read it on pg. 241).
- Western churches started doing the same about hundred years later.
 - The Council of Constantinople was the deathblow to Arianism within the Catholic Church, though it lived on in some Germanic tribes for several centuries.

Conclusion

- The Arian controversy was true threat to orthodox Christianity. This is why contending for the faith delivered to us is so important.
- This victory of Trinitarian orthodoxy, however, did not solve all theological controversy. In fact, it gives birth to others.
- Now that is settled that the Son is *homoousias* with the Father and the Holy Spirit, how do we understand the incarnation?
- How can one that is *homoousias* with the Father also be *homoousias* with humanity.
 - The answers offered become extremely divisive, but the controversy will lead to a robust creed that speaks to this.
 - A precise Trinitarian theology then require the church to labor for a precise Christology.