

## *The Trinitarian Controversy*

### I. Background

#### A. Major Factions

1. Arians
  - a. “There was a time when the Son was not”
  - b. Leader: Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria
2. Orthodox
  - a. *Homoousia*: The Son and the Father are of the same “substance,” *ousia*, (Latin: *consubstantial*).
  - b. Leader: Athanasius
3. “Semi-Arians”
  - a. *Homoiousia*: The Son and the Father are of similar substance
  - b. Strong minority
  - c. Opposed to Arianism but also worried about Sabellianism
4. Uncommitted middle party
  - a. Leader: Eusebius of Caesarea
  - b. Sought a peaceable solution

#### B. Issues

1. “Substance” or “essence” (Greek *ousia*)
  - a. Has idea of that which makes something what it is. (Whatever is the essence of God, the Father, Son, and Spirit possess)
  - b. Some modern translations use “being”
2. Problem: Find a middle way between Modalism and tritheism
3. Famous jibe of Edward Gibbon, that only a diphthong separated the two parties and resulted in a theological war, is incorrect. A diphthong sometimes makes a great difference—and the Arians were more than a “diphthong” away from the truth

### II. Council of Nicea (325)

#### A. History

1. Arius promoted his heretical teaching
2. Emperor Constantine summoned a council at Nicea (325) to settle question
3. About 300 (traditionally 318) bishops attended, nearly all from the eastern empire

#### B. Results

1. Actions
  - a. Condemned Arius & followers
  - b. Adopted a creed: “Nicene 1.0” (Not the modern Nicene Creed)
2. Significance
  - a. **First “ecumenical council,”** although it is based on the precedent of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). (**Note Beale 227-28 for test**)
    - 1) “Ecumenical” means “pertaining to the whole world,” i.e., “worldwide,” referring (in theory) to both scope and authority
    - 2) The Eastern Church accepts only the first seven
    - 3) True ecumenical council called by an emperor
  - b. Rushdoony: Purpose was to defend the truth, not find a basis of agreement
  - c. Our Perspective
    - 1) We often approve of substance of the councils
    - 2) But we do not accept all the details or all the historical circumstances

### III. Arian Controversy Continues

#### A. Imperial Fickleness

1. Constantine, influenced by his family, began to favor the Arians
2. Constantius, his son and successor, openly favored the Arian cause

#### B. *Athanasius contra mundum*—"Athanasius against the world"

1. Athanasius succeeded as bishop of Alexandria and became the leading champion of Nicene orthodoxy.
2. Athanasius was exiled five times during his 45-years in office

#### C. Continuing Controversy

1. Gregory of Nyssa (paraphrase): Ask someone how much something is, and he lectures to you the Begotten and the Unbegotten. Inquire the price of bread, and you are told, "The Father is greater than the Son and the son subordinate to the Father." Ask if the bath is ready, and you are answered, "The Son of God was created from nothing."
2. Controversy is almost entirely in the East
3. In addition, deity of the Holy Spirit began to become an issue later in the 4<sup>th</sup> century
4. Arians drove the Semi-Arians to the orthodox

### IV. Council of Constantinople (381)

#### A. Nature of the Council

1. **Second ecumenical council.**
2. Athanasius was dead and the "Three Cappadocians" were the most important leaders.
  - a. Basil of Caesarea (the Great); Gregory of Nyssa; and Gregory of Nazianzus.
  - b. Defined established the standard Trinitarian terminology: three *hypostases* (persons) in one *ousia* (essence or substance)

#### B. Teachings condemned

1. Apollinarianism
2. Pneumatomachianism (Macedonianism)—denying the deity of the Holy Spirit
3. Arianism in all forms

#### C. The "Nicene" Creed (from *Book of Common Prayer*)

1. On Christ
  - a. "Begotten of the Father before all worlds"
  - b. "God of God, ... very [true] God of very [true] God"
  - c. "Begotten, not made"
  - d. "Of one substance with the Father."
2. On the Holy Spirit
  - a. "Lord and Giver of Life"
  - b. "Proceeds from the Father and the Son [*filioque*]"
    - 1) "Procession" describes His relation to the Father (and the Son) as "begotten" describes Christ's relation to the Father
    - 2) "And the Son" (*filioque*) not part of the original creed & later became controversial
  - c. "With the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified"

#### D. Question of Philosophy

1. Central Question (Harold O.J. Brown)
  - a. *Not* whether they used Greek categories
  - b. Rather, did they accurately reflect or distort NT teaching?
2. Idea "whatness" and "whoness" (Anthony Meredith)

- a. In the Godhead: Three “whos” and one “what”
  - b. In Christ, there are two “whats” in one “who”
  - 3. ***Trinity*** a shorthand for a bundle of concepts
  - 4. The teaching is essential because the components are essential
    - a. Deity of each person of the Godhead
    - b. Monotheism
- E. Aftermath
- 1. Arianism survived among the barbarians until the early Middle Ages
    - a. Ulfilas: missionary to the Goths
    - b. Generally tolerant of Trinitarians
  - 2. Trinitarianism triumphed by degrees
    - a. Doctrinally: Patrick in British Isles
    - b. Politically: Clovis and conversion of Franks