

THE ARIAN CRISIS

HOW THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY
CAME TO BE

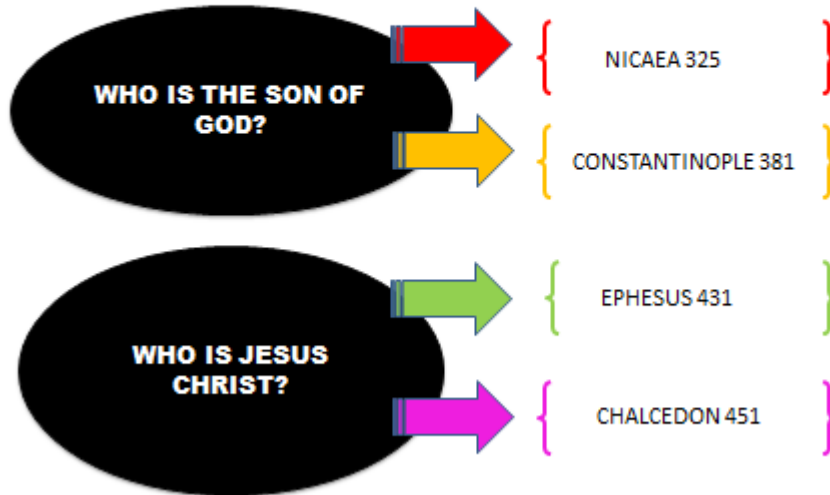
ARIANISM

Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

—Matthew 16:13 (NASB)

Orthodox Trinitarianism. The most important question of Christianity was put by Jesus to his disciples, and to answer it became the chief purpose of the first four general or ecumenical councils of the Christian Church which met to definitively answer two related questions: (1) Who is the Son of God? and (2) Who is Jesus Christ? The Son question was answered in the first two councils which convened at Nicaea 325 and Constantinople 381—in the Godhead there are three equally divine persons sharing one essence, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The second question was answered at Ephesus 431 and Chalcedon 451—Jesus the man born in Bethlehem, is unique, having in his person both a divine nature and a human nature.

THE TRINITY
THE FIRST FOUR CHURCH COUNCILS



Arianism. Beginning in the year 318, or shortly before, one Arius, a presbyter in rank in the church at Alexandria, Egypt, headed by Bishop Alexander, began troubling the peace of the church by offering his untraditional view of the Son of God. Alexander convened a synod of his presbyters and deacons and deposed Arius who, not letting this discipline rest upon him and continuing to gather converts to his radical outlook, eventually caused so many disturbances over the entire Roman Empire that Emperor Constantine convened at Nicaea in the year 325 the first ever general council to deal with rising Arianism.

Arian Son. Arius taught that the Son of God was just that, a son who had a beginning of existence as all sons do, and that his essence was distinct from that of the Father who alone had no beginning. The Son did not exist before his creation by the Father. So the Father was not always a father. The Son is therefore not **co-eternal** nor **co-equal** nor **co-essential** with the Father. The Holy Spirit was not part of what Arius taught.

Arianism was first opposed officially and with the greatest authority by the convening of the first general church council by Emperor Constantine at the city of Nicaea in 325. Nicaea is now Iznik, Turkey. Its creed opposes the teaching of Arius by declaring that the Son shares with the Father the same essence.

The Creed of Nicaea 325. “[1] We believe in one God the Father all-powerful, Maker of all things both seen and unseen, [2] And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten begotten from the Father, that is from the substance of the Father, **God from God**, **light from light**, **true God from true God**, begotten not made, consubstantial with the

Father, through whom all things came to be, both those in heaven and those in earth; [3] for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became human, [4] suffered and [5] rose up on the third day, [6] went up into the heavens, [7] is coming to judge the living and the dead. [8] **And in the Holy Spirit.** [Constantinople 381 adds: And in the Spirit, the holy, the lordly and life-giving one, proceeding forth from the Father, co-worshipped and co-glorified with Father and Son, the one who spoke through the prophets; in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.]

<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/index.htm>

Athanasius and the Imagery of Light. Nicaea coined the phrase “light from light” to speak of the Son because that is what God is (1John 1:5) and that is what Heb 1:3 says is also true of the Son who is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (ESV). The church father most responsible for defending Nicaea and the Trinity in the fourth century was Athanasius, secretary to Bishop Alexander at Nicaea in 325, and later his replacement at the head of the church in Alexandria. He used the image of light in his extensive attacks on Arianism to ask: when was the sun in the sky ever without its beams of radiance? The obvious answer is never. So, in like fashion, he said, is the existence of the Son; for as radiance from the Father, he must ever have been from Him and therefore must be eternal as is the Father

Timelines

Arianism grew during the Roman Empire. What follows is an outline of periods and events.

Rome

Roman Kingdom	Roman Republic	Roman Empire
753BC – 509BC	508BC – 27BC	27BC – AD 1453

Roman Empire (divided by Emperor Diocletian in 285)

Western Roman Empire	Eastern Roman Empire
285 – 476	313 – 1453

WESTERN AND EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE DIOCLETIAN AND CONSTANTINE



Persecutions of Christians by the Emperors (remarks are from Wikipedia)

Nero 37-68	64. Great Fire. Nero rumored to blame, but "to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians [or Chrestians] by the populace" ... "...a vast multitude, were convicted, not so much of the crime of incendiarism as of hatred of the human race. And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport; for they were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set on fire, and when day declined, were burned to serve for nocturnal lights." (Tacitus <i>Annals</i> XV.44)
Decius 201-51	The persecution under Decius was the first universal and organized persecution of Christians, and it would have lasting significance for the Christian church. In January of 250, Decius issued an edict requiring all citizens to sacrifice to the emperor in the presence of a Roman official and obtain a certificate (<i>libellus</i>) proving they had done so.
Valerian ca 193- ca 264	Under Valerian, who took the throne in 253, all Christian clergy were required to sacrifice to the gods. In a 257 edict, the punishment was exile; in 258, the punishment was death.
Diocletian 244-311	The Diocletianic Persecution (or Great Persecution) was the last and most severe persecution of Christians in the Roman empire. In 303, Emperor Diocletian and his colleagues Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius issued a series of edicts rescinding the legal rights of Christians and demanding that they comply with traditional Roman religious practices. Later edicts targeted the clergy and demanded universal sacrifice, ordering all inhabitants to sacrifice to the gods.

End of Persecutions—Edict of Milan 313—. The text below is the proclamation made jointly by **Emperors Constantine and Licinius**

When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I, Licinius Augustus, fortunately met near Mediolanurn (Milan), and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred; [...] now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation. [...] we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases [...] Moreover, in the case of the Christians especially we esteemed it best to order that [...] those places where they were previously accustomed to assemble, [...] the same shall be restored to the Christians without payment or any claim of recompense and without any kind of fraud or deception [...].

From Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.*, ch. 48. opera, ed. O. F. Fritzsche, II, p 288 sq. (Bibl Patr. Ecc. Lat. XI).
Translated in University of Pennsylvania. Dept. of History: Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1897?-1907?]), Vol 4:, 1, pp. 28-30. This text is in the public domain. <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/Bible/milan.stm>

Websites Related to Arianism:

- Ⓢ For texts of the major church councils—Papal Encyclicals.net
<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/index.htm>
- Ⓢ For the writings of Athanasius—Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL)
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.html>
- Ⓢ For various reliable histories of Christianity and the Arian Crisis
 - ➡ **John Henry Newman**, *Arians of the Fourth Century*.
<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/arians/index.html>
 - ➡ **William Bright**, *A History of the Church from the Edict of Milan, A.D. 313, to the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451*.
http://books.google.com/books?id=yo0OAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+age+of+the+fathers+bright&source=gb_ssimilarbooks_s&cad=1#v=onepage&q&f=false
 - ➡ **Henry Melvill Gwatkin**, *The Arian Controversy*

<http://books.google.com/books?id=EMATAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

➡ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*

http://books.google.com/books?id=Titk-TEYqD4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=j+n+d+kelly&hl=en&ei=OgdpTpzjAYniiALmxripDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

➡ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*

<http://books.google.com/books?id=UivDgM0WywoC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>