



# **A Short Introduction to the First Nicene Council (Illustrated)**

*Johann von Mosheim, Arthur Stanley*

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Controversies in the Christian Church concerning the mystery of the Trinity began in the second century, prior to which the word trinity—a term not found in the Scriptures—had scarcely been used in Christian writings. It was prominently introduced by theologians of the second century, who employed new metaphysical methods in their attempts to explain the divine nature. The dispute turned upon the questions whether Christ was God or man or an intermediate being, whether or not he was created, and like inquiries. Arius, a deacon of Alexandria, early in the fourth century, held that Christ was a created being, though superior to all other created beings. The Son, he maintained, is of a nature similar to—not the same as—that of the Father, to whom the Son is subordinate. This heresy obtained such currency in the Church that, in 321, a provincial synod at Alexandria excommunicated Arius, who in his learned writings had set them forth since 318. Once started among the people, the controversy begun in the schools became very bitter, and in many of the churches partisans of the heretical view equalled in number those of the orthodox. Meanwhile Arius continued to publish his doctrines.

The emperor Constantine, having become the patron of Christianity, conceived that the controversy might be settled by an assembly of the whole Church, and in the year 325 he convoked the first council of Nicæa, which was also the first ecumenical or general council. At this council, before which Arius defended his views, over three hundred bishops were in attendance, and pronounced in favor of the orthodox doctrine—that of the equality of the Son with the Father—and condemned the Arians to exile and their books to be burned. This council also promulgated the Nicene Creed in its early form. The chief opponent of the Arians was Athanasius, the "Father of Orthodoxy," whose name was given to a modified creed later adopted into the Greek, Roman, and English services. The Arian heresy, however, continued to spread in the East, and had the strong support of Constantine and his son Constantius. The controversy was renewed again and again, and for a long time Arianism was an important factor in theological and political affairs. Some phases of its peculiar doctrine have reappeared in various teachings and sects of modern times. But the orthodox doctrine affirmed at Nicæa has prevailed in the great branches of the Christian Church, and the acceptance of its fundamental principle—that of the Incarnation—in the post-apostolic age was destined to have an incalculable influence upon the development of individual and national life, civil as well as religious, throughout the world.

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