

Church History: 1st Nicene Council, 325 AD

By Tim Hendricks

July 4, 2021

I. Background

A. Eastern Churches

- Mostly spoke Greek
- Generally held to teachings of Origen regarding God's nature
- Had previously contended with Sabellius/Sabellianism.

B. Western Churches

- Mostly spoke Latin
- Generally held to teachings of Tertullian regarding God's nature.

C. Sabellius/Sabellianism (mid-3rd Century, Rome?)

- Sabellius taught that there is only one God having different manifestations but only one of them at a time.
- At the time of the Nicene Council it had come to be called patripassianism a term meaning that since the Christ is simply a different manifestation of the father it was actually the Father who had suffered the Passion.
- Modern day modalism is an extension of Sabellianism
- Sabellius was proclaimed a heretic and excommunicated 220 AD.

D. Tertulian (ca 145 - 220 AD, Carthage, N. Africa)

- First known theologian to use the word trinity, that Father, Son and Spirit are three persons with one substance.
- Later became a Montanist and as such was labeled a heretic.
- Montanism is related to modern day New Apostolic Reformation teaching.

E. Origen (ca 185 - 254 AD, Alexandria)

- Taught that while Jesus is both man and God he is inferior to the Father.
- By the time the Nicene Council is convened in 325 AD Origen's methods and thoughts are the prevailing

guiding principles for the Eastern churches.

F. Constantine the Great (272 - 337 AD, Emperor 306-337 AD)

- Believed God enabled him to be the first Christian Emperor.
- Saw the Church as critical to his power structure.

G. Arius/Arianism (ca 256 - 336, Alexandria)

- Taught that Jesus was the first creation of God the Father and then Jesus created everything else.
- Arianism lives on in the teachings of Jehova's Witnesses/Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

H. Alexander of Alexandria (ca. ? - 326 or 328 AD, Alexandria)

- Bishop of Alexandria over Arius. First to contend with Arius' teachings/Arianism.
- Believed that the Father and Logos were coeternal and of equal importance within the Godhead.

II. The 1st Nicene Council

A. Alexandrian Controversy

- Alexander was bishop of Alexandria and one of his presbyters was named Arius. Arius had been trained by a man named Lucius. As a result of his training and his own thoughts Arius came to the conclusion that there is one God then the Logos of Origen and other teachers couldn't be God, but instead must be a created being.
- Alexander also disagreed with Origen but in the opposite direction from Arius. Origen taught that the Logos was subordinate to the Father, but Alexander was convinced that they were equal. When Arius refused to yield to Alexander's conception of God Alexander

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convened a council of Egyptian bishops who revoked Arius' presbyter title along with all his rights, responsibilities and duties.

- Arius responded by writing letters to all of Lucius' former students trying to persuade them to see things his way and to force Alexander to return Alexander to his former position. When Alexander refused the likelihood of further division in the Eastern churches as well as civil unrest cause Constantine to take action.

B. Purpose and Attendance

- When Constantine unified the empire he realized there was division between the Western and Eastern churches, and he began debating what to do. When he heard of a dispute that threatened to further divide the Eastern churches stemming from an argument between the Bishop of Alexandria and one of his presbyters Constantine decided to convene a council of bishops from around the empire to try to settle all these differences and unify the universal church.
- Of important note, Constantine provided for the expense of the Council and of those in attendance and personally presided over the council.

C. What happened at the Council

- Initially the council dealt with matters of church function e.g. electing elders, presbyters and bishops; baptism; catechism; etc. Most thought the dispute between Alexander and Arius was an issue for the local church at Alexandria.
- Arius himself was only a presbyter, and even that was in doubt, so Eusebius of Nicomedia, a prestigious bishop who was convinced Arius was

correct, presented an oration in favor of Arius' teachings on Christ's deity. Eusebius expected the other bishops to immediately take up his cause. Instead upon hearing Arius' ideas clearly explained to them the majority of the bishops became convinced of his error and the focus of the council became refuting Arianism.

- At first the bishops tried to use scripture to refute Arius, but at least partially because of Origen's hermeneutic principles, which favored allegory over plain meaning for scripture, the Arians were generally able to affirm what the council said without being compelled to change their beliefs.
- In the end the bishops at Nicaea settled instead on writing a creed which would leave no room for interpretation as to the deity of Christ or the error of Arianism. This seemed to work well until a dispute arose about a single letter in a single word, **homoousias** vs. **homoiousias**
 - **homoousias**: of the same essence
 - **homoiousias**: of similar essence
- The emperor favored, some say suggested, homoousias. This was also the favored term of the Patripassians who believe there is one God who was the Father until he came as the Logos. Those who opposed this word feared its use would give rise to renewed conflict with the Sabellians. Those who opposed homoiousias feared it wasn't a strong enough response to Arianism. Ultimately homoousias prevailed likely because it was the favored option of the emperor, but this led to reluctant acceptance of the creed and later to outright rejection of it.
- The creed also includes statements anathematizing Arius, his teachings and anyone who agreed with him. Additionally, the emperor exiled Arius.

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III. The end of the controversy?

- This should have settled the controversy since the council and the emperor agreed on the incorrect nature of Arius' teaching, but unfortunately the Arians didn't just give up. Eventually Eusebius of Nicomedia succeeded in convincing Constantine to recall Arius, and later he was actually able to have Alexander of Alexandria exiled.
- Alexander would be recalled and exiled repeatedly before he died and was succeeded by a different presbyter who had been present at Nicaea, Athanasius.
- Athanasius would also be repeatedly exiled and eventually tortured, but along the way he would also successfully bring about broad acceptance of the Nicene Creed and drive Arianism into obscurity.
- Athanasius would not succeed in completely eliminating Arianism though as the teachings of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society and Jehovah's Witnesses closely resemble ancient Arianism.

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
Creator 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 essence of the Father,
God from God,
light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not created,
of the same essence as the Father,
through Whom all things were created
both in heaven and on earth;

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Who for us human beings and for our salvation
came down and was incarnate,
was made man,
suffered and rose again on the third day,
ascended into heavens,
and is coming again to judge the living and the dead,
and in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say, There was a time when He was not;
and, He was not before He was created; and He was created out of nothing,
or out of another essence or thing; and The Son of God is created, or changeable, or can alter -
the holy catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes those who say such things.