

Arian Heresy in the Early Church

It was at that time that the Arian controversy was fought out. Arius denied the eternity of the Word. John said, "In the beginning was the Word" -He always existed. When everything that had a beginning began, the Word *was*. Arius declared that the Word was the greatest of all beings that ever emanated from God. His opponents insisted that the Word was one with the Father in one eternal Trinity-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: one God in three persons. It was the most tremendous issue the church had ever been called to face. For over a century, it was the burning question that provoked heated controversy everywhere. For years the church was almost ripped apart over two words, *homoiosian* ("of like substance") and *homoousian*. ("of the same substance"). The first was the battle cry of the Arians; the second of the orthodox, headed by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. So irreconcilable were the contending parties that Constantine at last decided to intervene. He called a great church-council, which convened in the city of Nicea, to debate the question as to what the apostolic teaching really had been. Was Jesus truly God, or was He only the greatest being that God had ever brought into existence? Over three hundred bishops met together, and Constantine, sitting on a golden throne, presided as the acknowledged head of the Christian church. At the same time he still bore the title Pontifex Maximus, or High Priest of the Heathen-the same title that the Pope bears at the present time.

The matter in question was examined from all sides. Again and again Constantine was called in to quiet disturbances since feelings ran so high. On one occasion it is related that a brilliant Arian seemed to have almost silenced opposition. The great assemblage appeared to be about to cast its vote in favor of the damnable Unitarian heresy. Then a hermit from the deserts of Africa, clad chiefly in tiger's skin, sprang to his feet. He tore the skin from his back, disclosing great scars (the result of having been thrown into the arena among the wild beasts and his back dreadfully disfigured by their claws). He cried dramatically, "These are the brand-marks of the Lord Jesus Christ, and I cannot hear this blasphemy." Then he proceeded to give a stirring address, setting forth clearly the truth as to Christ's eternal deity. The majority of the council realized in a moment that it was indeed the voice of the Spirit of God. Whether this story is actually true or not I cannot say, but it illustrates the spirit that pervaded many who were in attendance, most of whom had passed through the terrible persecution of Diocletian. The final result was that the council of Nicea put itself on record as confessing the true deity of our Lord Jesus Christ-"very God of very God," "Light of lights," "perfection of perfection"-God and man in one blessed person, nevermore to be separated. Thus was settled once and forever, in a public way, the acknowledged faith of the church of God, which held fast His Word and did not deny His Name.

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