

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

A 1700 Year History



Athanasius

Session 6: The Life of Athanasius & the Second Ecumenical Council

Introduction

Watch a YouTube [video](#), “Who Was Athanasius?” by the Christian historian Ryan Reeves, which introduces his life and role in the Arian Controversy.

The Life and Writings of Athanasius

Historical Explanation

Athanasius lived from 298–373 A.D. and was born in Alexandria, Egypt. We do not know if his family was Christian or not, but if his family was pagan, then he and his mother became Christian when he was young. In 313 A.D. he became an assistant to Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria. In 321 the Council of Alexandria condemned Arianism, and shortly thereafter Constantine sent Hosius to resolve the conflict with Arius. Athanasius attended the Council of Nicea in 325, but much more focus was on Alexander than Athanasius. In 328 Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria. At this time Arius came back from his exile. In 335, Athanasius was accused of mistreating Arius and was deposed. Constantine (who had a daughter who was Arian) exiled Athanasius to Gaul (modern day France) in 335, and Athanasius would not be freed until Constantine died in 337. During this time, Arius was reinstated as the bishop of Alexandria, but he died before taking office. In 340, Julius called for a synod in Rome, which ruled against Arius and for Athanasius.

Athanasius lived a difficult life. All in all, he was exiled five times. A Latin phrase developed, *Athanasius contra mundum et mundus contra Athanasium*, “Athanasius against the world, and the world against Athanasius.” Through it all, he staunchly defended the doctrine of the Nicene Creed against Arianism. Some of his famous writings include *On the Incarnation*, which both Jesus’ divine and human nature, and *Four Discourses against the Arians*, which affirmed the Father’s begetting of the Son was a relationship between the two, not a moment in time.

Read a selection below from Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. As you read, **star** points where he affirms Jesus' full divinity.

How the Incarnation did not limit the ubiquity of the Word, nor diminish His Purity. (Simile of the Sun.)

For He was not, as might be imagined, circumscribed in the body, nor, while present in the body, was He absent elsewhere; nor, while He moved the body, was the universe left void of His working and Providence; but, thing most marvelous, Word as He was, so far from being contained by anything, He rather contained all things Himself; and just as while present in the whole of Creation, He is at once distinct in being from the universe, and present in all things by His own power,—giving order to all things, and over all and in all revealing His own providence, and giving life to each thing and all things, including the whole without being included, but being in His own Father alone wholly and in every respect,—2. thus, even while present in a human body and Himself quickening it, He was, without inconsistency, quickening the universe as well, and was in every process of nature, and was outside the whole, and while known from the body by His works, He was none the less manifest from the working of the universe as well. 3. Now, it is the function of soul to behold even what is outside its own body, by acts of thought, without, however, working outside its own body, or moving by its presence things remote from the body. Never, that is, does a man, by thinking of things at a distance, by that fact either move or displace them; nor if a man were to sit in his own house and reason about the heavenly bodies, would he by that fact either move the sun or make the heavens revolve. But he sees that they move and have their being, without being actually able to influence them. 4. Now, the Word of God in His man's nature was not like that; for He was not bound to His body, but rather was Himself wielding it, so that He was not only in it, but was actually in everything, and while external to the universe, abode in His Father only. 5. And this was the wonderful thing that He was at once walking as man, and as the Word was quickening all things, and as the Son was dwelling with His Father. So that not even when the Virgin bore Him did He suffer any change, nor by being in the body was [His glory] dulled: but, on the contrary, He sanctified the body also.

6. For not even by being in the universe does He share in its nature, but all things, on the contrary, are quickened and sustained by Him. 7. For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: “who did,” for so it says, “no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.”¹

¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 17. Translation comes from Philip Schaff, NPNF 2.4:45.

The Council of Constantinople

Historical Explanation

For a while it seemed that the Arian term *homoiousios* (“of similar being/essence”) would replace the Nicene word *homoousios* (“of the same being/essence”). However, Athanasius and others continued to champion the creed of 325, reminding their hearers that “318 fathers” had signed it. Those who supported alternative theologies gained influence with some of the emperors who succeeded Constantine. As a result, Athanasius was exiled several times, as were numerous other bishops. Even Liberius, the bishop of Rome, was kidnapped and exiled in 355 until he was willing to sign a new, more Arian creed. (There was even two Roman emperors who supported Arianism: Constantius II, who ruled from 337–361, and Valens, who ruled from 364–378).

During this period, a controversy also arose over the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed of 325 simply state belief in “the Holy Spirit.” Apparently, there was no major debate about the third member of the Trinity when these creeds were composed. But by the 360s, some men began teaching that the Holy Spirit was not eternal or equal to the other two members of the Trinity. Rather, they said he was created by the Son to be a servant of the Father and the Son. Those who held this new teaching were called Pneumatomachi (“Spirit-fighters”) or Macedonians (after Macedonius, the former patriarch of Constantinople who may have first developed this teaching). Athanasius was joined by two bishops from Cappadocia (in present-day Turkey), Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, in writing tracts to show that this teaching was false and that the Spirit is an equal member of the Trinity.

Shortly after coming to the throne in 379, Emperor Theodosius I (died in 395) determined that another ecumenical council was needed to deal with the false teachings that continued to plague the church. He called this council for mid-381 to meet in the eastern capital city of Constantinople. This time about two hundred bishops were present. Another famous theologian from nearby Cappadocia, Gregory of Nazianzus, played a key role in the deliberations.

How does the history after 325 A.D. demonstrate the dangers of mingling church authority with secular government? Draw some applications for our present age.

Compare Acts 5:3 and 5:4. Agree/disagree: “The Holy Spirit is a power or force that allows God to accomplish his work.”

Respond: “The church was thrown into chaos because of the Arian disagreement. Wouldn’t it have been better for the two sides to agree to disagree? After all, they both still believed in Jesus, and that’s all that’s needed to get to heaven! We should learn from their mistakes and not make such a fuss over small differences in doctrine but, instead, focus on uniting all Christians into one church.”

The Nicene Creed of 381 A.D.

Historical Explanation

In addition to defending the faith against a variety of semi-Arian beliefs, the Council of Constantinople also spoke out strongly on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Rather than writing a new creed, however, the council made some additions and modifications to the Nicene Creed of 325. Compare the two texts below, and you will see that what we today refer to and recite as the Nicene Creed is actually the modified version from 381, technically called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

The Nicene Creed of 325	The Nicene Creed of 381
We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of all things seen and unseen.	We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made, the things in heaven and on earth.	And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down and was incarnate, and became truly human. He suffered; on the third day he rose again; He ascended into heaven; He will come to judge the living and the dead.	For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.	And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [<i>and the Son</i>], who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.
The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was a time when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence or a creation or changeable or alterable.	

Identify phrases that were added to the creed of 381 to clarify the church’s position against false teaching. Which phrase(s) stand out to you as most important, and why?

Conclusion

Compile a brief list of doctrines that generally have been agreed upon in the past but have become controversial today. Discuss: How should the church address these issues? Should we add doctrinal statements about them in our creeds or confessions? What are the pros and cons of doing so?