

Nicea and its Aftermath: A Historical Survey of the First Ecumenical Council and the Ensuing Conflicts

by J. David Ray*

The First Ecumenical Council — Nicea 325

With the ascension in 312 of Constantine to the place of co-ruler of the Roman Empire came a fairly sudden and monumental shift in the life of the Christian Church in the world. Certainly the church had previously experienced times of moderate peace and tolerance from its neighbors in the Empire. But never before had it known anything close to the acceptance and freedom which was now thrown open to it by this new ruler. Constantine is often heralded as the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire—the man who declared Christianity to be the official dogma of Caesar’s realm.

Though the former is almost certainly true, the latter is somewhat less so. While he no doubt considered himself to be a follower of Christ, he did not mandate his faith to be the faith and practice of all. Constantine was that curious and at times contradictory mix of the soldier-politician. He knew the value of giving his subjects a good measure of personal and social freedom as a means of buying loyalty and minimizing dissent. But Constantine made it quite clear that his personal sympathies lay with the Christians, and thus it was inevitable that those who shared his own faith would be the primary beneficiaries of the Emperor’s power and blessing. When, in 324, Constantine defeated his co-ruler, Licinius, he not only became the absolute ruler of the Roman Empire—he also became the most powerful political leader whose favor and protection the church had known.

It is difficult to say whether the presence of this new pro-Christian Emperor actually caused the eruption of the Trinitarian conflict (the Church now having the freedom to pursue such matters instead of giving the bulk of its energies to mere survival), or whether Constantine’s arrival at the throne was an issue of providential timing (the conflict was ready to come to a head, and Constantine provided the platform for it to be addressed more completely). Most likely, both are true. The Church was no longer an infant, but was certainly in its childhood, and struggling to settle its identity, clarifying fundamental doctrine to delineate who is truly Christian and who is not. By the very nature of the name “Christian”, it is apparent that the first major doctrinal conflict to be settled is, “What does the church believe about Jesus Christ?” So, just as the entrance of the Savior into the world was “in the fullness of time”, so also all the needed

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political, social, and ecclesiastical environments were right for the church to come together and seek to clarify and codify its core belief. It was in this setting that the First Ecumenical Council was called.

The question was not, of course, a new one. The divinity of Jesus and His equality with God the Father had been discussed and debated virtually since the days of the apostles. Now, with the storms of state-endorsed persecution having passed, the climate was right for different sides of the issue to be promoted more openly. Under Constantine, the Eastern half of the Empire, still deeply saturated in the milieu of Greek philosophical speculation, quickly proved to be a fertile ground for the exploration of theological ideas—an environment which the Emperor himself encouraged. In every major city of the Empire, old and new theologies were tossed about and endlessly debated. Alexandria—the intellectual capitol of Africa—quickly became the breeding place of a doctrine which was soon to shake the Empire.

Arianism takes its name from its most visible and vocal proponent, Arius, a Libyan priest who quickly showed himself adept both at attracting attention to himself and winning converts to his views. Tall, dark-skinned, and by all contemporary accounts remarkably attractive physically and personally, he seems to have had little trouble in building a following. Alexandria, where Arius served, was the ideal locale for him to freely develop and propagate his ideas. The core of his teaching is today called “subordinationism”—the idea that Jesus the Son is not eternal, but is the first and the greatest creation of God the Father. Thus, Jesus cannot be called equal with the Father in either divinity or authority, but is subordinate to the Father.

Arius did not, however, teach that Christ was of the same substance as humans, but that He had a *degree* of divinity in that He was the first and greatest creation of the Father. Hefele observes that “[Arius] would certainly not have created so much disturbance in the minds of the people, had he not found in Alexandria a field well-prepared to receive this theory of subordination, even so far back as the time of Origen.¹ He goes on to describe the young priest as “arrogant, ambitious, sincere, cunning²” We do not know precisely when Arius began his teaching, but most sources seem to suggest it was between 318 and 320. We do, however, know for certain that he quickly attracted the attention and then the support of Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, the great city in northwest Asia Minor near the Bosphorus.

This Eusebius was an influential friend to make, since his see, so close to the Imperial city of Constantinople, was then considered one of the most

prominent in the East. Also, Eusebius seems to have had a good relationship with the Emperor, and thus Arius wasted little time in cultivating the bishop's name and influence—a helpful resource for feeding his own ambition and for gaining an audience for his doctrines. Thus, a peaceful Empire, a pro-Christian Emperor, good roads and communication, an ambitious and persuasive priest, an influential friend, and a culture active with theological speculation all provided the perfect environment for the rapid spread of this new heresy.

Meanwhile, back in Alexandria, Arius and his ideas were attracting attention of a different kind. Alexander, the Bishop there and Arius' immediate superior, was alarmed both by the doctrines and by the methods of the young Libyan priest. It is here that we first see the great wisdom of this seasoned cleric. Himself a survivor of the recent persecutions, Alexander was now working to bring peace, healing, and spiritual growth to his see. He quickly realized both the error of subordinationism, and the immediacy of the danger it and its chief advocate were posing—not just in North Africa, but for all of the Church. Anxious to check the spread of Arianism and to quickly excise its leaders, Alexander convoked a synod at Alexandria, most likely in 321. The gathering was attended by nearly one hundred Egyptian and Libyan bishops. And the proceedings seem to have been fairly speedy and decisive. Arius and his supporters were anathematized, and the synod made clear that all who ascribed to subordinationism were considered to be outside of Christian orthodoxy.

The expulsion had little effect on Arius, except to increase his popularity and his resolve. He continued to preach, using his considerable smoothness of speech and personal charm to win converts from both the laity and from the higher clergy. It is an interesting note of Christian history that the proponents of heretical doctrines are often gifted with exceptional skills of communication and personal persuasion. The defenders of orthodoxy, on the other hand, have often been pedantic, tedious, and unapproachable. It is certainly fair to say that the subordinationist doctrine seems, at first glance at least, more logical and easier to grasp than orthodox trinitarianism. But it also seems that much of the cause of the rapid spread of this heresy was a direct result more of Arius' persuasiveness than of the strength of his ideas.

Needless to say, Alexander and his colleagues were not pleased with the young priest's insubordination, and the open conflict between the two camps now threatened to erupt into fullscale schism. Constantine took pains to keep abreast of any brewing conflict within the Church, not only because he saw himself as the guardian of the faith, but also because he wisely saw that any major dissension within the church could open the door to political instability in

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his Empire. Word of the troubles in Alexandria soon reached him (perhaps through Eusebius of Nicomedia?), and his response was to send a letter to both Alexander and Arius, urging them to forgive one another of any personal offenses and to set aside their theological differences for the good of both Church and state.

Alexander, however, recognized the critical importance of the issue and the impossibility of reconciling the two views. Arius also was not interested in relenting on his cause, which might mean yielding the celebrity and accompanying access to influential people it was bringing. Even the intervention of the Emperor was insufficient to solve the dispute, and it was only a short time later that Constantine used his authority to convene what we now know as the First Ecumenical Council.

We do not know if the Council was Constantine's own idea, or the suggestion of his advisors. But more than likely he consulted with his key bishops before formally issuing the summons. Though Constantine seems to have considered himself to be an above-average theologian, the better assessment is that he had a working knowledge of the most fundamental aspects of Christian teachings, but little more. He certainly was more than a little curious, and throughout his reign he always kept sharp (though not always orthodox) men of theology close at hand.

Although Constantine clearly did not adhere to the ancient Roman concept of the emperor as quasi-god, he does seem to have maintained enough regal vanity to believe that he was learned and wise in all important fields that his authority would touch.³ Though we have no formal statement from either Constantine or other contemporary accounts, his actions in regard to the Arian/Trinitarian conflict would indicate that he saw himself as either the temporal head of the church or, at the very least, its divinely-ordained supreme earthly protector. Thus, he must have seen it as not only his *right* but his *duty* to use his imperial authority to protect and to strengthen the church.

Constantine issued a decree calling for all bishops throughout the empire to attend the Council which would meet at Nicea. The advantages of this location were primarily its proximity to Constantinople and easy access both by water and by road. Also, though close to the imperial capitol, Nicea was far enough away to provide ample protection from the distractions (and intrigues) of Constantinople. The decree included a provision that the travel expenses were to be covered by the imperial treasury, and all were assured safe conduct guaranteed by the full authority of the imperial forces. There is a remarkable irony in this, with the violent state endorsed persecutions of Christendom still

well within recent memory, and a great many of those who packed their bags for the trip to Nicea bore in their own bodies the visible wounds and infirmities which they had received for the name of Christ. Citing contemporary accounts concerning the participants, Hefele relates that, "Paphnutius had one eye bored out and his legs cut off during Maximin's persecution. Another, Paul of Neo-Caesarea, had had his hands burnt by the red-hot irons that Licinius had commanded to be applied to them"⁴ Many more had lost family and dear friends at the hands of the same state that was now warmly bidding them to come together for their mutual benefit. It must have seemed a powerful witness to the sudden twists and turns of governing powers and human opinions that these same roads on which they were traveling at imperial beneficence only recently had been used to carry them and their fellow disciples for show trials, physical and mental torture, and all too often, painful death.

Sources generally agree that there were three hundred eighteen bishops in attendance, as well as many others from the lower clergy. The Council opened on or about May 25, 325, and the group quickly began to work on the Arian dilemma. Arius, though only a priest, was given full freedom to present his case. As many as seventeen or eighteen bishops openly sided with him, as well as a great many priests and laymen. Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria and point man for the orthodox position, initially directed the defense, but his precocious young deacon and clerk, Athanasius, was most likely the guiding force in shaping Alexander's presentation.

The bishops had been working for nearly three weeks when, on June 14, Emperor Constantine arrived to formally open the Council he had called. Eusebius of Caesarea describes the scene:

At the signal which announced the entrance of the emperor, all arose, and he appeared in the midst of them, his purple robe, resplendent with gold and precious stones, dazzling the eyes of the beholders. That his mind was impressed with religious awe was evident in his downcast eyes, his blushing countenance, and his modest step and movement.⁵

With a mixture of fatherly demeanor and the humility of a man who recognized that he was in the company of his spiritual superiors, he addressed the group in Latin, thanking them for their attendance, rejoicing that he may share their company, and stating his sense of responsibility to use his power to keep dissension from harming the church. Therefore, he instructed, they were not to quit until they had resolved the conflict. It is clear that, while Constantine made reference to the appearance of heterodox teachings, he was trusting that as men

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of God, whatever the bishops could all agree to would be acceptable to him as being the will of God.

Although the council's debate began as a battle between the Arian and the Alexandrian parties, a third party quickly emerged seeking a compromise between the two camps. Led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, this group (often called the "semi-Arians") sought to tone down Arius' extremism and to blur some of the differences with Alexander's camp. This view initially drew a larger number of adherents than did either the orthodox or the strict Arians, and clearly many saw it as a *via media* for resolving the conflict in a way that would make everyone present somewhat satisfied. The Council's central mandate clearly was to produce a document which could be presented as the church's united statement on the question of Christ's nature and His relationship to the Father. Whether they intended to produce an actual *creed* for general congregational use is less clear. But as the participants hammered through the issues at hand, a creed is indeed what began to take shape.

The orthodox then proposed the word *homoousious* (consubstantial) to define the essential relationship of the Father and the Son. Obviously, the strict Arians balked at the concept. But the semi-Arians proposed instead *homoiousious* (of a similar—though not identical—substance), hoping perhaps that the ambiguity would be adequate to bring the participants together. At this point it seems that the young Athanasius revealed the best of his intellectual and rhetorical skills. This new proposal, he posited, was perhaps even worse than the overt Arian view of one God—the Father, and His greatest creation, Christ the Son. In that, at least, was still monotheism, but the *homoiousious* of the semi-Arians opened the door for *at least* two gods, and did nothing to establish a clear view of Christ's relationship of authority with the Father. Most damning, however, was the lack of any biblical or early church support for such a view. Athanasius' withering and pointed attack on the semi-Arian proposal was clearly effective, as it is apparent that a large number of the semi-Arians abandoned the idea and began to side with the orthodox. Beisner notes that "*homoousious*, of course, was the main bone in the new form of the creed. The Athanasians were delighted at its presence. There was no possible way the Arians could reinterpret it to fit their theology, and it was impossible for any Arian, without being dishonest, to sign the Nicene Creed."⁶

To be fair, both camps were, at least in part, developing their theologies in an effort to avoid heretical paths that had previously plagued the church. The key argument for Arius was the preservation of the fundamental monotheism that was at the core of Judaism and one of its most critical links with

Christianity. In a culture that had been dominated by pagan polytheism, it was vital that the Christian gospel make clear its absolute incompatibility with that system. An eternal Son, co-equal with the eternal Father, was simply too close to a doctrine of two gods, and posed too great a risk of being just another variation on polytheism. Certainly, it is easier for the average person to comprehend the subordinationist view than to grasp the Alexandrian tenet of Father and Son as co-equal, co-eternal, and co-divine. This was, perhaps, the prime strength of Arianism that led to its easy acceptance.⁷

Secondary to this argument from monotheism was Christ's suitability as the complete substitutionary sacrifice. If Christ is not a created being, how could he then be able to make atonement for people who were not like Him? There could, in the Arian view, be no substitution for human sin from one who was fully divine. Thus, while Jesus could be a special, unique creature, one possessing many divine powers, even a co-creator, He had to be a created human to bear the sins of created humans.

For Alexander and his orthodox party, there was also much at stake. They saw Arianism as contrary to the biblical witness concerning Christ, and at best a serious blurring of Christ's unique identity as fully divine *and* fully human. They saw Arianism as the artificial creation of a middle order halfway between divinity and humanity that was not attested to by the biblical record nor had it been the testimony of the church since the apostolic generation. Christ simply could not be able to offer redemption through Himself unless He was also in full equality with God, to whom alone belongs the power of redemption.

As the debates proceeded, Eusebius of Nicomedia himself vacillated, displaying his personal vanity and political pragmatism by trying to gauge which way the council would finally go and wanting to appear that this had been his place all along. Historians are generally agreed that Eusebius wanted essentially two things: to keep his post, and to curry favor with the Emperor. The contrasts between Eusebius and his ranking opponent, Alexander, are striking. While Eusebius is perpetually checking the winds of popular opinion, cultivating relationships with the power brokers and other influential persons of church and state, Alexander seems completely oblivious to much of anything else going on around him except his quest for the purity of the church's doctrine and the maintenance of clerical discipline. Indeed, the writings of Alexander which are still available are lengthy and tedious, with a painstaking attention to detail that is admirable but which does not hold the reader's attention or foster a desire to read more. Eusebius is the ever-striving politician, Alexander is the ever-vigilant theologian. Not coincidentally, their chief underlings--Arius and Athanasius, respectively, reflect similar character traits.⁸

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The introduction of *homoousious* thus focused the debate, and in a short time brought about the end of the semi-Arian compromise and forced all the participants to choose either the Arian or the Athanasian position. There was no longer any middle ground. The Creed itself was completed on or about June 19, and though there is not universal agreement as to how many of the bishops signed, most witnesses agree that all but two did (although some accounts say as many as eighteen remained opposed until Constantine himself intervened with a mixture of fatherly persuasion and thinly-veiled threats against the dissenters' continued employment in their sees). The Creed thus became the doctrinal standard for Christendom, and the boundary separating orthodoxy from heresy regarding the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Council formally adjourned on August 25, 325, with a large feast hosted by Constantine to thank the Council for its work.

This was not, however, to be the end of the story. A man like Arius, with a towering self-confidence, a love for the limelight, and a circle of sympathetic friends in high places, was not about to let a group of elderly churchmen block the road for his ambitions. Indeed, the Council members barely had time to return to their homes and churches before Arius' influential supporters began working to undermine the effect of the Council's work—especially the dogma of *homoousious*. In Constantine, Nicea's vanquished found a responsive and fairly naïve ear.

Of course, it is impossible for us to make an authoritative statement on the extent of Constantine's understanding of the theological issues involved, or in his motives for taking the side of the Alexandrian party, or in his later decisive shift against them. It does seem apparent that, at least at the outset, he thought the differences between the Alexandrian and Arian positions trifling, since he at first urged Alexander and Arius to work things out or put the issue aside. We must bear in mind that his imperial worldview was thoroughly Roman in its value of order virtually above all else.

While Christian historians have traditionally sided with the view that Constantine's motivation for intervening stemmed mainly from his genuine devotion to Christ and His church, others, in recent times particularly, have suggested significantly less noble inclinations. Indeed, the same man who so piously presided over Christendom's first general council would, within a year, order the murder of his first-born son Crispus and shortly thereafter, the young man's mother, Constantine's first wife, Fausta. Truly, like so many strong leaders, he was a man of stark contradictions which cannot be easily reconciled while maintaining historical honesty.

In 328, only a brief time after his triumph at Nicea, Alexandria's aged Bishop Alexander died. And his faithful understudy and *wunderkind* Athanasius—still barely thirty—was the obvious choice as his successor. Yet, any honeymoon Athanasius might have hoped for in his new bishopric was severely short-lived. Indeed, the young cleric would not have had time even to arrange his desk before the Arian party fiercely began a new round of attacks, clearly hoping both to exact retribution on the man they saw as the architect of the defeat at Nicea, and also to keep him far from any position of power and influence that might strengthen the hold of the orthodox on the development of church doctrine.

Perhaps the most significant player in this act of the drama was the conniving Eusebius of Nicomedia. Up until now his skills in choosing sides and arguments had proven faulty. Most likely a true Arian at the core, power more than doctrine seemed dear to his heart. His vigorous defense of Arius at the Council had soured the Emperor's opinion of him, and Eusebius' slowness in supporting the *homoousios* had earned him three years of exile. But as soon as he returned, he immediately began courting Constantine's favor once more, and his toadying skills apparently won back the favor of the great eastern warrior and self-styled protector of Christendom.

Eusebius wasted no time in convincing the Emperor that *homoousios* posed a grave threat to the church, being an unsound and incomprehensible doctrine that would only confuse the masses and which could not survive the attacks it would invite from pagan religions.

The first tangible victory for the Arians came with the Emperor's exhortation to Athanasius to restore Arius to communion in the church. Athanasius' response is likely just what the Arians were hoping for: a firm refusal. Surely the Arians knew that, for all of his bluster about being a humble protector of the church, Constantine was a man of vanity commensurate with his imperial authority. Regardless of his doctrinal sympathies, he was not likely to respond with warmth and favor to anyone in his realm—whether nobleman or cleric—who showed the temerity to balk at his bidding. Thus it was that Athanasius immediately saw his favor in Constantine's eyes evaporate.

The Arian party did not waste an instant in seizing the opportunity this change in atmosphere was opening for them. Working on multiple fronts, particularly through local councils as well as Constantine's inner circle, the Arians quickly engineered a smear campaign against the Alexandrian bishop as well as a drive to exonerate their banished hero. Eusebius of Nicomedia managed to arrange a synod at Tyre whose primary purpose seems to have been the defamation and ouster of Athanasius. How this gathering was sanctioned and

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justified is not quite clear. Certainly the church has never recognized its validity. Yet, it was successful in its mission, which was inevitable given its sponsorship and makeup. Most of all, though, was the emperor's concurrence through silence. There was now no doubt that Athanasius had lost Constantine's favor, so he was ousted from Alexandria in 336 and forced into exile in Trier in Gaul, thus beginning a cycle of forced movement that would last for much of the remainder of his life.

What was the real reason for Constantine's change in preference toward Arianism? It is fairly unlikely that it was the result of deeper personal theological reflection. He was certainly a man of complexity, and also a political pragmatist who was more prone to make decisions based on current exigencies rather than long-term vision. Though many have offered speculations, the truth is that we can be no more sure of the motives for Constantine's conversion to Christianity than we can be of the genuineness of his Christianity itself

Meanwhile, the Arians were making the most of their newfound acceptance with the Emperor. Unity in Christendom remained paramount for him. Possibly aided by the influence of his sister Constantia, a committed Arian sympathizer, the emperor invited Arius to return to the fold, provided he simply provide his assent to the Nicene declaration. For one so blinded by personal ambition and arrogance, to give formal lip service to the Emperor concerning a dogma he passionately had fought and would continue to fight with all his power seemed inconsequential.

Arius had a chance to regain power and influence at the highest level (and have the last laugh on his enemies), and he was not about to let such a trivial matter as doctrinal conviction detour his path. To seal the deal, Constantine ordered the Bishop of Constantinople to administer Communion to the prodigal priest. But even the leader of the Roman Empire did not have the final say in the matter, as Arius, openly exulting in what would be the consummation of his victory, died suddenly of an unknown illness the very night before the service of restoration was to occur. Some suspected foul play, but many of those still faithful to the Nicene faith saw it as God's hand preventing a heretic from defiling the church.⁹

While Athanasius' exile in Trier might have appeared to be a defeat, it was to plant the seeds that would grow to produce a strong Trinitarian foundation in the Western church. Olson notes that,

[on] his travels to and from Trier, Athanasius made many contacts with Christian leaders in the West who came to sympathize with him. After all, Constantine was not

universally considered a hero in the Latin West for moving the imperial seat eastward to Constantinople. Just because Athanasius was being exiled by the emperor was no reason for them to shun him. He was received by many Western bishops with open arms, and his influence among them for Trinitarian orthodoxy (the Nicene formula) was profound.¹⁰

If the road for Athanasius and the orthodox party had become bumpy, it was only to get worse. And remain so for quite some time. The following year, 337, Emperor Constantine became seriously ill. The great defender of the church had, like many in his day, postponed baptism into the church until it appeared his remaining days were few, fearing that any significant post-baptismal sins would complicate his hopes for eternal glory. Thus, in what was one of the most critical moments in his personal faith, the emperor could certainly select any cleric he preferred to do the honor. Perhaps, then, the clearest mark of how things had turned is the man that he chose: Eusebius of Nicomedia—the crafty and conniving spokesman for Arius at Nicea and fierce opponent of *homousios*. Arius may not have lived to see the victory of his own vindication, but his friend, defender, and partner in heresy could certainly smile at the irony of his new status as the emperor’s favorite cleric.

Shortly afterward, Constantine died, having effectively bequeathed his empire to his three sons, Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans (creativity in naming children seems to have been a gift that eluded this family). Constantine II was given the territories of Gaul, Britain, Spain, and part of Africa. Constantius II received Constantinople and most of the East, while Constans landed between the two, inheriting Italy, the remainder of Africa, and the Illyrian provinces.

Whatever peace the empire might have hoped for from its new leaders was short-lived. In 340, Constantine II went to war against Constans and died in the conflict, his brother then staking claim to his lands. Constans is generally regarded as having shifted from Arianism to the Nicene faith, and is in fact the only one of the three to actually receive Christian baptism. But in general, the tide of opinion in the east was turning toward Arianism, which was now entering its days of glory.

During the years which followed, political rather than theological conflicts drove the issue. Constans increasingly sought to find some middle ground. Initially he banned pagan sacrifice, but later issued an edict that discouraged any harm to pagan temples. In 350, a revolt by Magnentius, one of his generals, drove him from power. He was assassinated later that year, and numerous accounts declare that he was dragged from a temple before being

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killed. Magnentius was a committed pagan, but, in an attempt to strengthen his support base, he declared himself to be sympathetic to the Nicene cause. Indeed, it was he who issued the first Roman coins bearing the *chi-rho* emblem that had been Constantine's sign of Christian allegiance. However, within a year after his victory over Constans, Magnentius was attacked and defeated by Constantius, giving the latter sole rule of the empire for the next decade.

Constantius soon came under the sway of an outspoken Arian, Valens, bishop at Mursa Major, where Maxentius had been defeated. The influential bishop used his position to rally support for Constantius, which earned him great favor in the emperor's eyes. Valens used his new political power to bring the emperor's energies against the Nicene party, and a string of councils and synods were called at which the Arians freely exercised their new power in condemning Nicene leaders.

For the ensuing generation, instability ruled the church regarding the doctrine of the *homoousios*. The battle was played out on the local as well as the imperial level, with the prevailing doctrine varying even from town to town. Local councils became almost as ubiquitous as dandelions in spring. As difficult as this must have been for orthodox clerics, it must certainly have provided more confusion for the laity, who could only try to gauge for themselves which party to believe and which bishops and priests had their spiritual best interests at heart. For Athanasius, it would have been a matter of trying to determine whether he was in or out of official favor on any given day in any given town. Indeed, as the primary standard-bearer for Nicene orthodoxy, he was perpetually caught in the shifting imperial winds, and made an easy whipping-boy or champion for whatever preference a particular emperor happened to be holding. The record of his exiles and repatriations reads like a dizzying travelogue of the fourth century Roman Empire, as Collins' summary indicates:

Athanasius was exiled to Trier in Gaul by Constantine I in 336, then sent back to Alexandria by Constantine II in 340. Constans [won over from Arianism to orthodoxy by Athanasius himself] forced his brother [Constantius II, who had banned him from Alexandria] to accept Athanasius back again in 346, but Constantius was able to send him off once more in 356, after he made himself ruler of the whole Empire. The bishop remained in exile till after the death of Constantius in 361, and was then allowed back to Alexandria by the pagan Julian, who was happy to intensify the divisions within the Christian ranks.¹¹

Julian, a nephew of Constantine, sought to return the empire to the paganism he saw as its past glory. Though raised a Christian, no doubt the rampant and liberal familial bloodshed he had witnessed within his own professing Christian family had aided in the development of his distaste for the “religion of the Galilean”, as he contemptuously called it. Julian’s decree of 362, however, allowed a number of exiled bishops to return to their sees (perhaps hoping to fuel sectarian conflicts among the various Christian factions). Later that same year, though, he apparently had second thoughts about his clemency to Athanasius, likely having begun to recognize and fear the bishop’s tremendous influence. He declared that it had not been his intention to include Athanasius in the earlier decree, and back to exile he went for a fourth time.

The following year, Julian’s brief reign ended, and Athanasius again came home to Alexandria under the blessing of the new emperor, Jovian. The latter’s tenure was also brief, and his successor, Valens, (no relation to the bishop of Mursa Major) was a devoted Arian who wasted no time in reversing Jovian’s decree reversing Julian’s amendment of his own decree—and, for a fifth time, Athanasius was sent off. This time, however, he was permitted to simply move outside the limits of Alexandria. Soon after (possibly that same year), Valens relented and Athanasius was allowed to return to his native city to live out his remaining years.

The struggle after Nicea continued for fifty-six years, and was most consistent and intense in the East, whereas the West, more and more an orthodox stronghold, experienced gradually increasing stability on the Nicene issue. Finally in 381, Emperor Theodosius, a staunch Nicene supporter who harbored little good will toward the Arian party, determined to end the crisis once and for all by calling another general council. The Council of Constantinople (also known as the Second Ecumenical Council) essentially restated the conclusions of Nicea, and ordered the immediate restoration of all bishops who had been ousted for their allegiance to the Nicene faith. While this was not the end of Arianism, it was the end of the party’s reign through imperial favor. Theodosius was no Constantine—there would be no vacillating in this emperor’s doctrinal allegiance, nor in his zeal to remove those who were not completely loyal to the Councils’ findings.

It was a victory for orthodoxy, and for Athanasius personally—yet one he did not live to see. The great bishop, theologian, pastor, involuntary traveler, and defender of the faith died peacefully near Alexandria on May 2, 373, finally home, surrounded by fiends, and confident that the One he had faithfully served and for whom he had suffered much would ultimately triumph.

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¹ Charles J. Hefele, *A History of the General Councils* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871), vol. 1, 239.

² *Ibid.*, 242.

³ Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Barnes insists that Constantine was, in fact, well-versed in Christian theology, but it was not the driving force in his decisions surrounding Nicea.

⁴ Hefele, 272.

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C. F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 395.

⁶ E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1984), 119.

⁷ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought, vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 261ff.

⁸ Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Barnes puts forth an energetic and dense attempt to de-mythologize Athanasius, critiquing his character and motives.

⁹ Hans A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine* (London: Routledge Press, 1996), 51.

¹⁰ Roger C. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 163.

¹¹ Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe: 300-1000* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 64.