Prayer
Reading: Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14; Titus 3:307; 2 Corinthians 13:14
Hymn: 396 "Holy, Holy, Holy!"
Reading: The Creed of Nicaea, 325 A.D.

The Trinitarian Controversy can also be called the Arian Controversy and the Nicene Controversy. It was a controversy over the nature and relations of the three persons of the Trinity. The first part of the controversy centered on the Son, his nature and relation to the Father. The later part of the controversy shifted to the Holy Spirit.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE CONTROVERSY: The New Testament; Ebionites and Docetists; Logos theology; Adoptionist Monarchianism and Modalistic Monarchianism (Sabellianism); Origen; Lucian of Antioch.

THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA:

The controversy began as a clash between Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, and one of his presbyters, Arius, of the suburban church of Bukaalis.

The background of Arius: Arius had been a pupil of Lucian in Antioch. He fled to Alexandria during the persecution and joined the Meletian schism, becoming a Meletian presbyter. When Bishop Peter triumphed over Meletius, Arius was reconciled and Peter made him a deacon. When Peter refused to recognize Meletian baptism, Arius revolted and was excommunicated. Arius was reconciled to Bishop Achillas, again appointed a deacon, and then a presbyter. He was a presbyter when Alexander became bishop in A.D. 312.

The outbreak of the controversy: Arius criticized a sermon of Bishop Alexander, accusing him of Sabellianism. The Meletians, who regarded Arius as a turncoat, accused him of false doctrine to Bishop Alexander. When the bishop defended his own position and questioned the position of Arius, the controversy grew. Alexandria and Egypt became excited and caught up in the controversy, with people taking sides. Arius gained a considerable following, including five presbyters and six deacons in Alexandria. The bishop called on Arius to clarify his position. When this was not satisfactory, the bishop sent out letters of warning to the clergy. When Arius continued to agitate the question, Bishop Alexander called a synod of the clergy of Alexandria and the neighboring territory (A.D. 318 and then a synod of almost a hundred Egyptian bishops (also in A.D. 318); Arius and all his adherents were condemned and deposed.

The position of Arius: Arius emphasized the divine unity and monarchy.

God the Father is the only genuine God in the full sense of the word. He is "the God"—God with the article. The Son is "God"—without the article—the Son is divine. God alone is the Father. There was a time when God existed for Himself alone. God the Father is unbegotten, eternal. The Father created the Son by an act of his will, creating him out of nothing. "Create" and "begat" mean the same in this connection. The Son is a creature. The Son is begotten. There was a time when he was not. He came into existence out of nothing. Time began to exist when he was created. The Son is the first-born and the beginning. The Son became the architect of the universe—his first creation was the Holy Spirit. The Son entered Mary's womb in the form of Logos or reasoning spirit. Jesus got his body and soul from Mary but the place of the mind was taken by the Logos. Jesus was capable of sin. He owed his heavenly status to the fact that on earth he
preserved his virtue—God adopted him as the heavenly Son. Arius repudiated all attempts to make the Son equal to the Father, to declare the Son eternal, or to regard the Son as God in substance. Each person must have his own substance. The Trinity was three independent persons and only the Father was substantially and truly God from all eternity. Arius claimed the authority of Origen.

Alexander's position: Alexander also claimed the authority of Origen. In the Trinity there is no before or after, no greater or less. The relationships of the Trinity are eternal relationships: God was eternally Father, The Son was eternally Son, and the Holy Spirit was eternally Holy Spirit. The Son was begotten out of the substance of the Father; He came from the bosom of the Father. The Son cannot be spoken of as "created" or a "creature". Alexander insisted that Arius' doctrine destroyed the whole atonement—Christ had to be fully God and fully man—he became what he came to save—the divine became human so that the human could become divine.

The spread of the controversy: both sides sent letters to bishops throughout the empire, seeking support. Arius fled to his friend, Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, who had been a fellow-pupil of Lucian. On his way to Nicomedia he visited Eusebius, the church historian and bishop of Caesarea. Eusebius gave him hospitality and let him preach. After this Eusebius of Caesarea was accused of being at least an Arian sympathizer. The Arians held a synod in Bithynia, probably in Nicomedia, and agreed with and approved Arius, and advised Alexander to withdraw his verdict. Arius returned to his church, which backed him, and the controversy grew violent—rock throwing and street fights. Arius published his Thalia. Just about the time of Constantine's final victory over Licinius, Alexander sent an open letter to the bishops.

Constantine becomes involved: Constantine became alarmed, sensing that the controversy was threatening the peace and unity of his empire. He sent his religious adviser and chaplain, Hosius, Bishop of Cordova, to Alexandria with a document addressed "To Alexander and Arius." The emperor's document and Hosius treated the matter as learned hair-splitting, a matter of foolish questions and quarrelling over trivialities. Both sides were offended and insisted that the foundations of the faith and salvation were at stake. Both sides criticised the emperor for meddling in theology. Alexander was offended that Arius was treated as his equal. When Hosius reported his failure, the emperor called for a world-wide council to meet in Ancyra in Galatia. Hosius called a preliminary council of some fifty bishops to meet in Antioch where Eustathios was the new bishop. No one from Egypt was present. The bishops decided against Arius, adopted a formula that closely followed the ideas of Alexander, but asserting that the genesis of the Son far excelled all human understanding. The Son was begotten, not created. Three bishops refused to sign the condemnation of Arius: Theodotos of Laodicea, Narcissos of Neronias in Cilicia, and Eusebius, the church historian from Caesarea. The three were first excommunicated and then granted time for consideration—until the emperor's council. Hence Eusebius of Caesarea came to the council under a cloud. The emperor decided to move the council to Nicaea, thirty miles from his capital in Nicomedia, so that he could personally participate.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA, A.D. 325

The minutes of the council no longer exist: existing reports are incomplete and do not always agree in detail.

Constantine summoned the bishops of the empire to come by imperial post
and at imperial expense. According to tradition 318 bishops came—Most were from the East. The western delegation was led by Hosius of Cordova, and included two presbyters from Rome representing its aged bishop, Caecilian of Carthage, and one bishop each from Pannonia, Calabria, and Gaul. Eastern bishops came from as far as Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Persia.

The synod was held in the high central chamber of the royal palace. The bishops were seated in rows parallel to the long walls. There were problems of protocol in seating. The emperor entered in the purple but without military guard. The bishops stood.

Eusebius of Nicomedia gave an address of gratitude to the Emperor. The Emperor addressed the bishops in Latin and translation into Greek followed. The emperor exhorted the bishops to peace and unity.

The bishops got down to business with charges and countercharges delivered in Greek which the emperor also spoke. The Arians submitted an Arian creed which was quickly rejected. Eusebius of Caesarea submitted the ancient creed of his church in an attempt to clear himself. The three bishops provisionally excommunicated at Antioch were readmitted—the emperor wanted peace and unity. Arius was willing to accept the creed of Eusebius of Caesarea. Alexander could see that Arius would read into it his own meaning. It also became clear that Arius would accept everything in Scripture, saying he believed it as strongly as Alexander.

Three parties stood out: an Arian minority led by Arius and his friend, Eusebius of Nicomedia; the Alexandrian minority of Alexander who had brought with him a young deacon, Athanasius; and the big middle party led by Eusebius of Caesarea. It became clear to the emperor that a unanimous decision was impossible; a minority would have to be sacrificed. Alexander and the West would never accept Arius. The middle party wanted to please the emperor. Since Arius would accept everything in Scripture, reading into it his own meaning, it would be necessary to go to philosophy. When the emperor let it be known he favored "homoiousios", the West, the middle party, and the Alexandrians were willing to accept this, although the term had been condemned earlier in discussions with Sabellius, with Paul of Samosata, and the Meletians. Alexander insisted that anathemas be added at the end to make sure Arianism was clearly rejected.

The emperor sent Arius into exile along with two bishops who refused to sign the creed: Secundus of Ptolemais and Theonas of Marmarika. Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea signed the creed but would not condemn Arius and were exiled—the opinion was that they had not signed in good faith.

The bishops passed a number of disciplinary canons: a bishop should not meddle in the matters of another bishop; a bishop could not move from one see to another; Meletians and Novatians were offered pardon if they would return to the church; the Roman date of Easter was approved.

Constantine gave a banquet for the bishops and presented them with gifts.