During the reign of Constantine, Christianity was torn by dissension. It has been estimated that there were as many as ninety Christian sects at that time. The concept of God, the proper method of administering baptism, the meaning of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the correct date of Easter were only a few issues that plagued the membership. If Christianity was to be employed to advance unity in the empire, Constantine realized that it would be necessary first to promote unity within that church.

Constantine’s most celebrated intervention in a Christian theological dispute was his attempt to solve the conflict pertaining to the Godhead. Arius, a popular clergyman of the most influential church in Alexandria, taught that there is one God the Father, the Son being separate and distinct from the Father. Since the Father imparted to him divine qualities, Jesus became a God, but remained inferior to the Supreme Being. He maintained that the other member of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, is also inferior to the Father, and that the three separate and distinct Beings form the Trinity. Because there was a time when the Son did not exist, being created by the Father, Arius contended that Christ is not coexistent with the Supreme Being. Only the Father is eternal, he argued. Nevertheless, Christ, the Son, is the creator and ruler of the universe and therefore should be worshipped.

In Alexandria where Arius popularized his interpretation of the Godhead, Bishop Alexander contended that the Son is eternal and that the three Gods forming the Trinity are of one essence. This controversy over the Trinity became so bitter and widespread that Constantine determined to intervene in order to advance peace and unity in the church and prevent the possible eruption of political discord in the empire.

Consequently, Constantine declared that the clergy. Since the deliberations were held in the eastern section of the Roman Empire where Arian Christianity was most popular, it is not surprising that the vast per cent of the men who assembled endorsed the views espoused by Arius. Hundreds of persons, clergy and lay members, gathered for this first ecumenical or universal council of the church, and about three hundred of this group were bishops. … the West actually sent less than eight representatives. Since the Bishop of Rome was too old to travel to Nicaea, he sent two presbyters to represent him. The controversial personalities from Alexandria were present, Arius and Alexander, Alexander bringing with him a secretary, a young deacon, Athanasius. There were even a few pagan philosophers present who presented their views before the cosmopolitan assembly.

After the bishops were seated according to rank, a heated discussion commenced. Immediately, the Roman emperor assumed the responsibility of serving as the head of the council, becoming an active participant. Since a majority of the religious leaders were Arians and because the emperor’s sister Constantia was an avowed Arian, most bishops concluded that there would be little difficulty in securing an approval of the interpretations endorsed by Arius. However, after Arius presented his views, the minority, who believed in a Godhead of one essence, turned the deliberations into a mass of confusion, probably seizing the petition of Arius and tearing it to pieces. Eusebius of Caesarea then introduced a compromise based upon an old baptismal creed. This compromise was an ambiguous description of the Godhead, but was so indefinite that various groups could accept it by incorporating their interpretations into the creed. The Caesarean creed was then amended to contain a precise definition of God including that Christ was “begotten and not made,” and was of “one essence with the Father.” For some unexplained reason, Constantine decided to support this latter move which was a popular western interpretation of the Godhead. Although he probably was not converted to any particular concept of God at that time, he determined that this view would best promote the unity he desired and insisted that the delegates endorse the concept of “one essence.” A Roman emperor, therefore, who had not been baptized and who did not claim any special revelation determined which of the conflicting views of God would become the official view of the church. Under Constantine’s supervision the bishops were forced to sign the Nicene Creed; two who refused were banished along with Arius. The early New Testament program of apostles inspired by revelation had been replaced by secular influence and use of force.

At the conclusion of the conference at Nicaea Constantine thought that a major issue had finally been settled, but within a few months, the
emperor learned that the controversy over the nature of the Godhead continued among the Christians. The decision had been imposed upon the delegates and the Nicene Creed was unacceptable to the majority of the Christian leaders who had attended the conference. As the pressure of the emperor was released and as the members traveled to their homes, they gradually reacted against the verdict. Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia and many other influential Christians were dissatisfied with the verdict. Some rationalists had accepted the creed with modifications, such as their resolving that one substance really meant similar or like substance. Within four decades, at least twelve councils of bishops were convened to again consider this problem. Some were held in the East; others in the West. Most of the councils held in the East rejected the Nicene Creed but most held in the West confirmed a belief in the basic views expressed in that document. Most of the councils wrote their own creeds so it is evident that the Council of Nicaea failed to establish during the reign of Constantine the uniformity of belief on the nature of God which he had so vigorously sought.

Athanasius, a native of Alexandria who succeeded Alexander as bishop in that town, emerged as the leading supporter of the Nicene concept of God. Favoring the policy handed down by Constantine that no one should attack the Nicene Creed Athanasius conscientiously waged war against the Arians. However, his opponents were too strong in number and were guided by too many capable figures.

Eventually Eusebius of Nicomedia won a major influence in Constantine’s court. Recognizing that the Nicene council had failed to restore uniformity by dogmatically accepting the views of a minority, Constantine decided to enforce a compromise that he thought might be interpreted by all major groups as an expression of their faith. Reversing his stand, the Roman Emperor advised Athanasius to restore Arius to power as a bishop in Alexandria. When Athanasius stubbornly refused the order, he was banished to Gaul. Finally, shortly before his death, Constantine was baptized by an Arian, Eusebius of Nicomedia. Although the Nicene Creed was never officially rejected by Constantine, it was greatly undermined by his actions, and at the death of the first Christian emperor it appeared as though the followers of Arius had triumphed over the disciples of Athanasius.

Major controversies centered on the nature of God continued without interruption until the end of the fourth century. After decades of political and theological divisions in which verdicts failed to become permanent policies, Theodosius in 383 became sole and absolute emperor of the Roman Empire. Theodosius’ name is associated with two great triumphs — the triumph of Christianity and of the Nicene Faith. Whereas Constantine established toleration, granting Christianity a legal status, Theodosius declared that Christianity was to be the only legal religion in the empire…. The Christian persecution of the pagans was far more effective than had been the pagan persecution of the Christians. “Never in human history,” concludes Kenneth Scott Latourette, “have ancient religions so deeply entrenched in the culture of a civilized people been eradicated so completely over so large an area.” [A History of the Expansion of Christianity, 1:247–48.]

Theodosius also attempted to be the sole arbitrator of the church by determining church policy and doctrines, including the condemnation of Arianism. In an attempt to reach a final and lasting decision on the nature of God, he convoked a council in 381 at Constantinople, in what became known as the Second Ecumenical Council held in the Christian church. The clergy at this deliberation condemned Arianism and adopted the Nicene concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of one essence. After making the Nicene Creed the only legal creed describing the nature of God, Theodosius inaugurated a reign of terror among the Arians, forcing many to flee from Constantinople, a town where Arianism at one time and been the popular view. Although Arianism struggled through centuries of brutal oppression, this philosophy was finally and almost completely eradicated. Aided by pressure from the state, the Athanasian view became universally accepted by the Christians, and under the direction of a theocratic monarchy, Christianity became a world religion.