

CHRISTIANITY—THE FIRST 300 YEARS

The Trinity; the Post-Nicene Fathers

THE NICENE COUNCIL

Already, the term “Trinity” had been employed as a description of the Three-in-One God for well over a century, first appearing in written form by Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian in the late 2nd century. Tertullian also had coined the language “three persons, one substance” to express the three-ness and one-ness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. After rejecting the various early heresies of the Ebionites, the Gnostics, the Marcionites, and the Modalists about the nature of God, the church would now encounter the most serious threat to its understanding of the godhead in the rise of Arianism. The struggle with Arianism, in turn, would lead to a more nuanced definition of the Trinity expressed in the Nicene Creed.

The Arians

In the 4th century, not long after Constantine’s rise to become the new emperor, a popular preacher named Arius (ca. AD 256-336), a Berber from North Africa, who became an important Presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt, began to contend that the Son was not eternal but was the first created Being, hence, a creature less than fully God. The Son was “made” God only by the Father’s permission and power. Arius’ followers took up a chant into the streets, “There was a time when he [the Son] was not!”

The problem with Arianism, like Modalism, is that it cut directly across plain statements in the New Testament. At the beginning of time, the Son (Logos) already was “with” God (Jn. 1:1, 3). If only God the Father was eternal and absolute, then the Logos was a sort of intermediate Being, neither fully divine nor fully a creature. If the Son was a created Being, how could he have been



In 2015 near modern Iznik (ancient Nicaea), an early basilica was discovered lying submerged in 6’-10’ of water about 165’ offshore. It was likely built on the site where the Council of Nicaea convened.

“before all things” (Col. 1:17) and how could the Father have loved him “before the world’s creation” (Jn. 17:5, 24)? Most important, if the Son was not fully divine, then the Christian church since its inception had been worshipping a creature, which is the essence of idolatry.

A Council is Called

Since this theological dispute also had political implications, Emperor Constantine called for a council of all the bishops world-wide to convene at Nicaea, Bithynia to resolve the dispute. Only the year previous, he had defeated the eastern emperor Licinius and had become the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. He soon became

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aware of the controversy over the Godhead, and he did not want his empire to have a divided church. Accordingly, some 318 bishops, whose travel expenses were paid from the imperial treasury, attended from all over the Roman Empire (and a few outside it as well). Along with presbyters and deacons, the total attendance was likely between 1200 and 1900. They met from May until the end of July AD 325. This council was the first of its kind to aim for a Christian theological consensus, and subsequent councils would follow over the years.

At Nicaea, a statement of faith (Creed of Nicaea) was drafted by the attending bishops based on the Apostles Creed. The language was debated line by line, and all but two bishops subscribed to its final form.¹ (This creed would later be slightly amended in AD 381, with some expansions concerning the Holy Spirit and the Church, in what we now call the Nicene Creed.) Without question, a significant part of this creed was especially directed at Arianism, both in its positive statements about Christ Jesus as well as the anathemas at the end against the Arians.

We believe...

in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible;

*And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, **begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and became incarnate and became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead.***

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, there was a time when He was not, and before being born he was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.

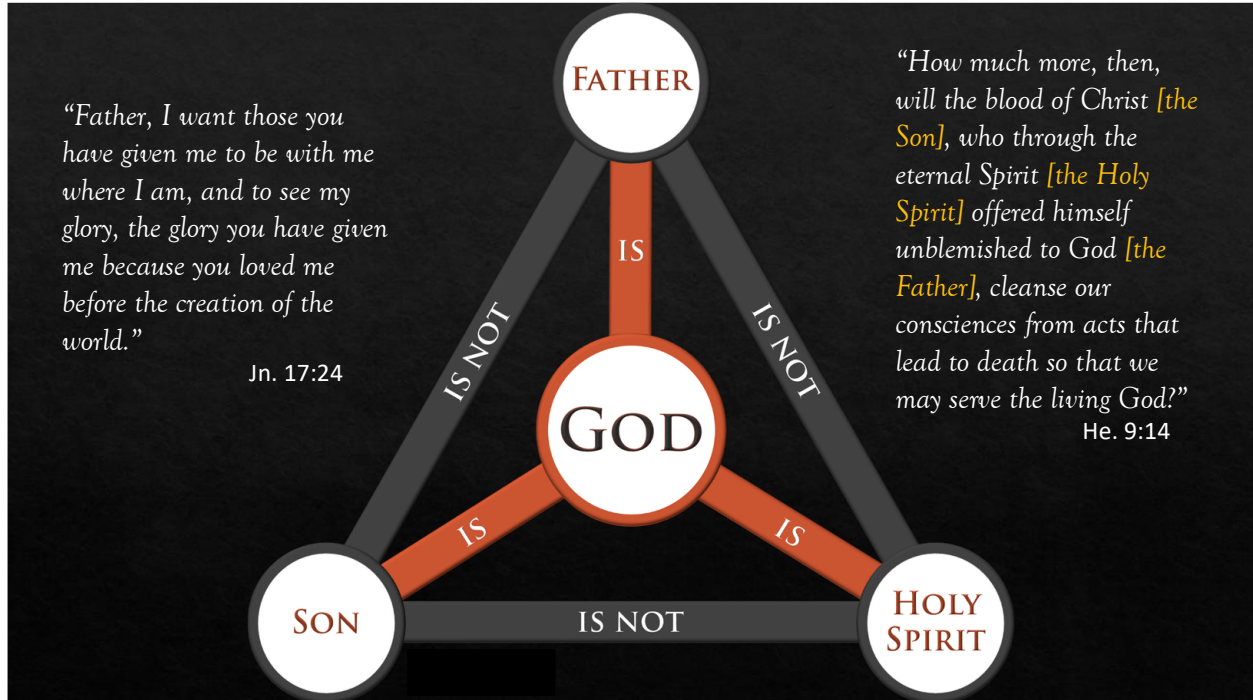
Two Competing Views

ARIANISM	TRINITARIANISM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ <i>God is a simple "one."</i> ◆ <i>The Son is less than God. He was the first created Being, hence not fully God.</i> ◆ <i>The Son is inferior to the Father.</i> ◆ <i>The Holy Spirit is impersonal.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ <i>God is a complex "one."</i> ◆ <i>Jesus is God the Son incarnate. He is the Son eternally, and this is part of his essential nature.</i> ◆ <i>God is one Substance in three Persons.</i> ◆ <i>The Holy Spirit is personal.</i>

The Council of Nicaea and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity lie at the foundation of all Christian theology. It stands as one of the church's most profound and pivotal teachings, that there is one God, but he exists in three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This defines the essence of God as he is in himself.

¹ In his 2003 popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown claimed that this was a "close vote," an egregious misrepresentation.

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CONSTANTINE AND CHRISTIANITY

Without doubt, Constantine was pivotal in Christianity being transformed from a persecuted faith to the dominant religion in the empire. His conversion in AD 312 was a turning point in which he reported seeing a vision before a major battle at the Milvian Bridge. He claimed to have had a vision of the cross and the words, “In this sign, conquer.” His subsequent victory led him to embrace Christianity. Within the year, he had granted religious tolerance throughout the empire in the Edict of Milan. This decree not only recognized Christianity as a legal religion, it also mandated the return of confiscated properties to Christians.



Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem

Under his rulership, Christianity began to gain prominence, eventually becoming the state religion of the empire. He supported the construction of new basilicas, such as, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, as well as new churches in Rome and Constantinople. He commissioned some 50 new copies of the Bible, large format Bibles for use in the churches. He also promoted Christian leaders to important government positions. All

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this spelled a pronounced cultural shift. Pagan practices began to decline and Christian beliefs became more popular.

There was a downside to Constantine's favors toward Christianity, however. Future emperors would seek political change through Christianity, which in turn would make the church more and more political. Soon, the wars of the empire became "holy wars." While he favored Christianity, he also permitted the traditional pagan cults to continue, sometimes even patronizing them and allowing their images to appear on imperial coinage. This, in turn, raised questions about the sincerity of his conversion. Was he a genuine Christian or a political mastermind who used Christianity as a means to foster political unity in the empire? Many citizens, following the lead of the emperor, now converted to Christianity, but the motives leading to such conversions might well have been social advantage as much as faith. In the end, Constantine's influence was a mixed blessing.

POST-NICENE CHRISTIANITY

Christianity following the Nicene Council and the reign of Constantine would be substantially different than it had been for the first three centuries of its existence. Martyrdom ceased, monastic life increased, and the church became increasingly powerful and wealthy. The Council of Nicaea set the precedent for additional ecumenical councils, which would be convened periodically over the next several hundred years. The first four are generally accepted by Lutherans, Anglicans, and Reformed Churches. The first seven are accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Roman Catholic Church accepts some 21 altogether, the most recent being Vatican II (1962-1965), though most of these were attended only by Roman Catholic Bishops, so they were hardly ecumenical in the plain sense of the word.

Several important church leaders were prominent, including Athanasius (champion of the doctrine of the Trinity), Eusebius (church historian), Chrysostom (famed as the "golden mouthed" orator because of his preaching skills), Jerome (who translated the Latin Vulgate), and Augustine (a theologian who influenced generations to come).

Three issues, especially, would mark the years of the late 4th century and early 5th century. One of them was a new translation of the Bible by St. Jerome, the **Latin Vulgate**. In AD 382, Damasus I, the Bishop of Rome, commissioned a new "common version" (*edition vulgate*), which would become the standard Bible for the next thousand years in the western church. (The eastern church continued to use the Greek text.) Jerome completed this version in AD 405. Also in the late 300s and early 400s, a British theologian, **Pelagius**, arrived in Rome promoting a theological system which argued that humans have freedom to choose between good and evil without the necessity of divine grace. His views, ultimately condemned as heretical, were countered by St. Augustine, who developed what would later blossom into the Calvinism of the Reformation. The third issue concerned the nature of Christ. Did he have a single will and a single nature, or did he have two wills and two natures, one human and the other divine? Some were concerned that Christ not be divided into two beings. Others were concerned that in affirming Christ's humanity, his deity would not be diminished. The **Council of Chalcedon** (AD 451) would clarify that Christ was fully God and fully human. The two natures remain distinct though united.