

THE TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY IN CHURCH HISTORY

By October 27, 1553, the transfer was complete. While many doctrines and dogmas considered orthodox in the church did not survive the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism, the inviolable nature of the doctrine of the Trinity did. It was on that date that Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva. Having already been declared a heretic by the Spanish Inquisition of the Catholic church, Servetus had supposed that he would find a more sympathetic hearing with both the Christian humanists of northern Europe and with the Protestants. After all it was those two groups who claimed to return to the original sources and to focus, on the part of the Reformers certainly, on "sola scriptura" and to strip away all of the extraneous teachings and traditions that were not clearly and unequivocally rooted in the Bible.

Thus Servetus supposed that his 1531 book On the Errors of the Trinity would be well received. In it he expressed what he thought was obvious and would thus find a hearing with the Reformers. While affirming his belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, he observed that there was no clear Biblical foundation for the Nicene formulation concerning the Trinity. He stated that the Bible does not use the word "Trinity". And the words that were required to flesh out what was to become the orthodox position were likewise absent from the New Testament. No delineation of the concepts of "substance", "essence" and "persons" as they came to be understood in the position assumed by the church. Nowhere does the New Testament observe that the Father and the Son are "consubstantial". Nowhere does it comment on the way in which the Holy Spirit "proceeded" from the Father.

As eminent church historian Roland Bainton observed in his discussion of Michael Servetus, "...the Council of Nicaea had been driven reluctantly to the conclusion that the teaching implicit in the New Testament could be safeguarded against Arian misinterpretation only if extra-Biblical language were used, since the Arians would accept any Biblical terminology and place upon it their own construction." As will be seen later, Bainton is not alone amongst church historians and theologians who, while wanting to affirm their belief in the orthodox position, are required by intellectual honesty to make the observation that the orthodox formulation about the Trinity is clearly extra-Biblical. The fallback position then is that the Council of Nicaea was, essentially, inspired by God to come to the conclusions that it did regarding the doctrine.

For Servetus it was his belief that the Reformers would be consistent in their conviction that church councils were not authoritative...that only the Bible was authoritative. But his death at the heretic's stake gave the lie to that assumption. His death sentence was passed not by Calvin's church in Geneva but by the city council, albeit with Calvin's complete support and blessing.

And in so doing they drew from Roman Catholic tradition and affirmed the sentence of death which the Code of Justinian proscribed for those who did not hold to the Catholic church's position on infant baptism and on the Trinity. It was this code, formulated under the direction of Emperor Justinian in the first half of the 6th century AD that had as its goal the unification of the empire under one system of laws and, just as importantly, under the "orthodox" theological positions of the Catholic church at that time.

Thus Michael Servetus and the early Anabaptists found themselves in similar circumstances but for different reasons. It was their position that the Bible itself did not affirm the traditional and "orthodox" positions on infant baptism and on the Trinity. Yet those positions made the transition from orthodox Catholicism to orthodox Protestantism and along the way heretical "re-

baptizers" and those who questioned the Nicene Trinitarian formulation were executed. Felix Manx was drowned by Protestants in Lake Zurich in 1527 and Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva in 1553.

There were three critical times in church history which seemed to define what the church would eventually believe and teach regarding the Trinity. The first was the ante-Nicene period of church history beginning with the first century church as we read about in the pages of the New Testament through about 312 CE. This was the time when "Christian thought" began to distinguish itself from "Jewish thought". It should be noted that both schools of thought were only partially successful in reflecting a Biblical perspective and that is why there is a distinction between the two when indeed there should be no distinction. This period spanned the time when, initially, the Christian church was seen by most as a sect of Judaism, through the first few centuries when the church became more and more of a Greco-Roman institution and, as such, adopted more of a Greek and less of a Jewish perspective.

The second was from early in the 4th century, when Christianity was first legalized under Constantine, through the next several centuries. It was during this time that fine tuning the orthodox view of the Trinity was thought to be critical in unifying the church and, in some sense, unifying the Roman Empire. It was during that time that the development of the doctrine became as much a political calculation as a theological one.

And finally, as noted in the opening paragraphs, there was the opportunity for the Reformers to revisit the issue at the very time that they were revisiting so many of the issues that had become foundational to the Catholic Church in the centuries before the Renaissance and Reformation. Let us consider those three periods in chronological order.

THE ANTE-NICENE PERIOD

Without dealing with this particular subject matter in great detail, we have some glimpses of what the Jews of Jesus' day believed with regard to their Messianic expectations. What is immediately clear is that their expectations would not include the fully formed doctrine of the Trinity that is held by the church today. Most Christians today would suggest that was because that view had to wait until such time as God saw fit to bring it forth from the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. But Jews today would say that is because that view is directly contradictory to the most basic tenet which distinguished Judaism from all other ancient religions...monotheism.

Where then lies the truth of the matter? Indeed there is ample evidence that the Jews in New Testament times would have good reason to look upon Jesus and conclude that he was indeed the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. But because much of their teaching tradition at this time was oral, we don't have extant the written teaching even of Hillel or Gamaliel (roughly contemporaneous with Jesus). Hillel especially continues to be a major intellectual force in Judaism but all we know of him is from oral tradition. But in spite of that there is every indication that at this time there was no single unified understanding of who this Messiah was to be.

Yet there are certainly Messianic references found, for example, amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls which seem to have been collected and stored in caves somewhere from about 150 BCE to 70 CE, where they lay undiscovered until a Bedouin shepherd boy found them in 1947. Much of what is found is fragmentary rather than whole documents but included in them is the five line "Pierced Messiah" text which is thought by some to discuss a triumphant warrior king/messiah who will be killed, even using words that suggest he would be "pierced". Other fragments

discuss the “wicked one” putting to death the “righteous one”. This is important because, in contrast to the view widely held today, it is possible that Jews of the first century had reason to expect a “suffering Messiah” rather than purely a triumphant Davidic type royal figure.

And yet another important 14 line fragment includes three critical elements: 1) speaking of a single messianic figure who will rule heaven and earth. 2) speaking in the clearest possible language of the resurrection of the dead which was expected to occur during the time of the Messiah and 3) it contains an exact verbal parallel with the gospels of Matthew and Luke. (This information is drawn from a Biblical Archaeology Review article by Michael O. Wise and James D. Tabor entitled “The Messiah at Qumran”.

There is so much more we could say about what is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but let us here note the comments of Jewish scholar, A.F. Segal who, prior to his death in February of 2011, taught religion at Barnard College and other schools and is quoted in a book on the subject as saying: “In violation of the usual scholarly methods, I would like to use Christian documents to explore larger issues within the Jewish community. After all, rabbinic Judaism has left us documents of uncertain origins in oral tradition from the third century and alter, while the New Testament, while also have oral roots, was in written form by the beginning of the second century. The New Testament is hence much better evidence for the history of Judaism than is rabbinic Judaism for the origins of Christianity.”

I would agree with that position. We can treat the New Testament sources as faithful and true in reflecting what the Jews of Jesus’ day expected with regard to the Messiah. Indeed the gospel accounts are rife with stories about the very nature of Jesus being a central discussion. Was he or was he not the Messiah? (John 1:41) Was he or was he not the son of God? (John 19:7) So we can look at both Jewish sources as well as the historical New Testament documents for an understanding of who and what a believing Jew of Jesus’ day might be looking for in the Messiah.

Elsewhere in this project will be a thorough examination of this question that draws on the documentary evidence of both the Old and the New Testament. So that will be better left to those more complete discussions. But what must be clearly noted for our purposes in this paper was that nowhere in Jewish thought nor in first century Christian thought was there the detailed Trinitarian position that has been handed down to the church since 325 AD. Nowhere to be found is either the church historian or the theologian who would suggest that the orthodox position, in all its glory, is clearly and plainly taught in the pages of the New Testament, much less in the Jewish writings of the time.

Also addressed elsewhere in this project but best expressed here as well is the misunderstanding that is common with regard to the views expressed by John in his gospel. We can indeed regard this gospel as an accurate historical expression of what Jesus’ closest disciples understood to be the nature of Jesus himself. But where so many get off track is in reading into John’s gospel an understanding that it is unlikely John himself had. Specifically it is often taught that John’s thought was heavily influenced by the teaching of Philo, a Jewish Platonist who lived in Alexandria, Egypt from about 30 BCE until about 50 CE. Philo’s extensive use of the word “logos” and his development of this idea is suggested by many to provide the background to John’s use of the word in the first chapter of his gospel. And from there the line is clearly drawn from John 1:1 through Platonic philosophy to get eventually to the view that was expressed and embraced by the Council of Nicaea. But here is what Dr. Ronald Nash had to say in an article for the Christian Research Institute entitled: “Was the New Testament Influenced by Philo?” He observed: “Sixty years ago, the view that the writer of the fourth Gospel was influenced by

Philo's use of *logos* was something of an official doctrine in certain circles. With few exceptions, however, the drift of scholarship has been away from Philo as a source for John's Logos doctrine.”

But the fact that Platonism was not a significant influence on the writers of the New Testament does not negate the fact that Platonism ended up playing a major role in the development of the orthodox position expressed at Nicaea. However the evidence would suggest that influence came later and was not in the background of the thinking of the writers of the New Testament. As we saw in the opening paragraphs and as we will see a bit later in this paper, in order to give clear expression to what the Athanasians wanted to be understood about the Trinity, it was necessary to draw on both extra-Biblical verbiage and ideas to make their points with all the detail they felt was necessary to guard against heresy. That level of detail is not to be found in either Jewish thinking and teaching in the first century nor in the New Testament documents themselves.

But the transition from the simple New Testament observations and teaching about Jesus to the complex formulations of the 4th century did indeed take place and cannot be denied. The source of those changes can be found primarily in three places.

First of all was the historical reality that, by the end of the first century, Christianity was no longer just a Jewish sect but rather was a movement that was now dominated by Gentiles rather than Jews. And as such it was normal that the teaching and understanding would lose some of the Jewish flavor that was rooted in the Old Testament. That change became more and more evident as the years went by. In some ways it was amplified by a Gentile aversion to and even rejection of the Jews. While anti-semitism seems to be the card that was dealt to the Jews from the very beginning, it is unfortunate to note that even the Christians who should have seen the roots of their faith in Judaism were usually either willingly ignorant and apathetic about their Jewish roots or were even further willing to reject and turn away from their Jewish roots and thus distance themselves from Jews. So it wasn't long before Christians failed to appreciate the worldview and theology that had been handed down to them by the Jews and in the writings of the Old Testament.

While the Christians were moving away from Judaism and Jewish thought, they were moving toward Greek thought. That was true most obviously because Greek thought dominated the culture of their day. A Gentile could not live in the world without being exposed at the deepest level to Greek thought and influences. And so it was during this time that Christians had to make a choice about how they would respond to Jewish thought. The different approaches are seen first in the words of Tertullian (155-230 AD) who stated “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does the Academy have to do with the Church?” But in contrast there was the approach of Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) about whom it can be observed that he was desirous of showing and developing connections between Christianity and classical wisdom and philosophy. The movement that was to win the day was that which would make Christianity and the message of the New Testament palatable to the Greek intellectuals of the day and in making that move, it was necessary to make more and more adaptations of the message of the New Testament to align it with prevalent Greek thought.

And finally there was the political reality of the early 4th century. By this time the Roman Empire was racked time and again with civil wars and battles for power. The empire was pretty much divided in two between east and west with four rulers altogether...two each in the east and the west. So the rivalries and fighting and literal warfare were tearing apart the empire. And at the same time, for almost three centuries, Christianity had been outlawed and the church had

been persecuted, usually violently and extensively, forcing Christians to often live in the shadows and even on the run. Into that setting strode Constantine who, after vanquishing his political rivals, went to great lengths to unify the Empire. Tradition has it that his climactic victory in battle was preceded by a dream that he had in which he was told “In this sign (that of the cross), conquer!” With that inspiration Constantine not only legalized Christianity (leaving it to a later Emperor to actually make it the state religion) but he also saw it as an organizing principle...that the church could actually be used as a way to help unify the empire and hold it together against political rivalries and factions. Thus he called the Council of Nicaea to get together all of the bishops who, just a few decades earlier had feared for their lives, and to encourage them to order both their doctrine and their practice in such a way that they would be a unifying force in the empire.

Some elaboration on the second and third points is in order here. As soon as Christianity began to find its way into Gentile culture it was necessary for Christian thinkers to comment on where it did or did not fit into Greek thought and Roman culture. This was particularly true because the church was facing persecution from the very beginning. Initially it was localized but eventually the persecution became empire wide and very extensive. Because Christianity was at odds with the Roman culture, persecution was inevitable. When Nero encouraged the notion in the mid first century that the emperor was divine, Christians had to make a choice about beliefs and practices that inevitably were in conflict with Rome. So to many early Christian thinkers it seemed advisable to show ways in which Christianity was in fact not in conflict with Greco-Roman thought and culture.

I have already mentioned Justin Martyr and Tertullian but it is important particularly to take note of what was happening in Alexandria, mentioned earlier as the home of the Jewish thinker Philo. This very important city had always been a place where education thrived and which was a seedbed for new ideas and the transformation of old ideas. While Tertullian in distant Carthage to the west was willing to disparage Greek thought, his contemporary, Clement of Alexandria (who died around 211-216 CE) went out of his way to reconcile Christianity and Greek thought. He drew extensively on Plato and wanted to show that there was only one truth which was found as much in ancient Greek philosophers as it was in the documents of the Old and New Testaments. But to accomplish his task it became necessary for him to rely more and more on allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures rather than allowing them to speak plainly for themselves.

As an aside at this point it should be noted that late in his life Tertullian linked up with the heretical Montanist movement and, while a part of this movement, he wrote “Against Praxeas”. It was here that he offered the extra-Biblical vocabulary that would be used later to give expression to orthodox Trinitarianism. It was this discussion of substance and person, from the pen of a heretic, which would later provide the verbiage for what would become established church doctrine.

Following Clement in Alexandria was Origen (185-254 CE) who allowed for Scripture to have a triple sense of meaning...literal, moral and allegorical. With that much latitude in interpretive practice it would later become easier to have the Scriptures say just about anything that the interpreter wanted to have them say. But we must note that, even at this later date, Origen himself did not embrace what was to become the orthodox position. Indeed it would be fair to consider Origen something of a “subordinationist”...one who believed and taught that in very significant ways Jesus was “less than” or subordinate to the Father.

What is clear from looking at the ante-Nicene fathers is that for the first few centuries of the church the most prominent Christian thinkers did not at all hold to positions on the person and nature of Jesus that would be considered fully orthodox to the later church. Some of their positions would be considered outright heretical while others would simply be considered incomplete. But it was not until Nicaea that there was any clear expression of a position that would receive widespread acceptance.

Another impulse at that time factored into the development of these ideas. While the Greeks were a little bit embarrassed at this time by their own crude religious traditions and mythology as expressed much earlier in Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, they were quite willing to emphasize the antiquity of their ideas. The thinking was that because they were older they had validity. And thus Christianity, which had only recently come on the scene, was considered illegitimate because of its recent origins. So that provided an impulse for Christian thinkers to suggest the antiquity of Christian thought by drawing on supposed parallels in Plato and, more particularly by taking John's comments about the logos in the first chapter of his gospel and adapting and conforming them to Platonic thought. Several of the ante-Nicene Fathers took upon themselves this task and thus further separated the New Testament from its Jewish roots and context.

Still others at that time strove to embrace the Greek "way" of thinking as opposed to Jewish thought. So for them drawing together a tightly reasoned argument to support their philosophical position was critical. And if that meant going beyond the verbiage of the New Testament sources and reaching past the arguments and intents of the New Testament authors then so be it. If that was what was needed to make Christianity palatable to the Greco-Roman world then many Christian thinkers were quite willing to go in that direction.

Certainly not all of the Christian thinkers at that time went down this path but enough did that the table was set for the bishops at Nicaea to find the concepts and verbiage they needed to shape what was to become the orthodox position on the Trinity.

As to the third point above, it is critical to remember that the persecution that the church faced did not allow for the fractious arguments that would come to characterize the church for many centuries after Christianity was legalized. When Christians feared for their very lives, they didn't have as much time and energy to devote to developing theological distinctions. Indeed since their very lives often depended on their unity and support for each other, they didn't have the luxury of being able to get into fights, literally and figuratively, over theological fine points. But after 312, that all changed as this early critical period of the development of Trinitarian thought has drawn to a close.

FROM THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES

The next critical period began on that date when Constantine won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and soon thereafter legalized Christianity. It is not coincidentally that it was in 314 CE that Arius was first licensed to preach under the authority of Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria. But it wasn't long before the teachings of Arius were seen to be quite different from and, in many cases, contradictory to the teachings of Alexander. Indeed Arius came to the conclusion that the Logos was neither co-eternal nor divine and that Alexander's teaching about Jesus amounted to a renunciation of monotheism. To Arius it seemed obvious that if both the Father and the Son were divine, and if they were indeed two completely separate and distinct persons, then there was no longer one God but two. Obviously for Alexander those were fighting words and with the legalization of Christianity, they had the freedom to fight it out in a very public manner.

While most of the churches in the east still held a view of Jesus that could only be considered subordinationist, it was in the west that there was a yet not fully formed view of Jesus that made him equal to the Father but without being so distinct as to give rise to charges of polytheism. It was in Alexandria, with the work first of Alexander but more importantly with the work of his protégé Athanasius that this view was to be given clear shape.

By 318 Alexander called a council of all of Egypt's bishops and Arius and his followers were excommunicated and banished for their beliefs. Arius immediately appealed to his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia (not the contemporary church historian Eusebius of Caesarea) who was considered by many to be the de facto leader of the eastern church and who was very influential in the court of Constantine at that time. Eusebius came to the defense of Arius albeit to a position that Arius had moderated somewhat with regard to the person and nature of Jesus. Eusebius called a regional church council of his own which included other very prominent bishops and which found Arius' position to be fully acceptable. So these competing and contradictory church councils put Constantine in a difficult position. Even as he was trying to create a political unity in his previous divided empire, the church seemed to be spinning out of control and fracturing beyond repair with bishops ruling against and even excommunicating each other.

When Hosius of Cordova, himself a prominent churchman and now Constantine's personal emissary to the church, failed to be able to unify the two factions, the very first empire wide (and thus "ecumenical") church council was called to decide this issue and others that would allow for the unification of the church. Hosius fired off a pre-emptive salvo a few months prior to the Council of Nicaea when he oversaw the installation of an anti-Arian bishop at Antioch.

The council itself was attended by approximately 250 bishops, almost all from the eastern part of the empire. Only a handful of bishops came from the west due in part to the distances involved but also due to their lack of real interest in the Arian controversy. The opening ceremonies were held in Constantine's own palace. Imagine then the effect that would have on the bishops attending. Just a few short years earlier they were often hiding out and in fear for their lives but now they were welcomed into the personal residence of the Emperor himself where they were feted and celebrated. Constantine himself offered an address which spoke to his strong desire for unity within the church and within the empire. Hint, hint.

While it was actually Alexander and Athanasius who were presenting a newer and more innovative position, they were able to gain the upper hand quite quickly in the Council. Even though Eusebius of Caesarea had been recently excommunicated for his Arian views, he was very close to the Emperor and was thus allowed to present a creed which used language that it was deemed would be acceptable to both parties, depending on how they chose to interpret the language. But at this point Hosius insisted on adding a notorious phrase that was to be at the center of so much of the controversy from that point on. He insisted that any creedal statement would include the comment that Jesus is "homoousios" with the Father. That is to say that he shares the same essence or substance as the Father.

To many of the eastern bishops this was considered an unnecessary provocation to add in a concept that was clearly extra-Biblical...one that they had rejected often in the past. It is unclear whether or not Constantine grasped the nuances of the issue but regardless, he allowed his chosen emissary Hosius to press the issue. At that point Eusebius agreed to accept the wording and thus he was reinstated in the church. It was now clear that any who opposed this wording would be considered heretical and thus would face punishment, not only within the church but quite likely from the emperor himself who had chosen to engage on this issue. It is not clear that

Constantine himself was necessarily even a Christian at this time, much less was he a theologian or Bible student of any weight at all. The final outcome was that all but two bishops signed off on this creedal statement. Those two, Libyan bishops who were strong supporters of Arius, were summarily excommunicated and sent packing.

But it would be wrong to suggest that the creedal affirmation solved the problem. Many of the bishops, even as they were preparing to sign on to the creed even with the inclusion of the offensive word “homoousios”, were already commenting that this word did not necessarily mean what Hosius insisted that it meant. Even at that time they were giving an interpretation to the wording of the creed that allowed them to maintain their previous position even while giving the impression that they had accepted this new Athanasian position. Thus there was external conformity in the church but the discord was still very much rampant just below the surface. Indeed there began a number of contradictory events that illustrate that the dispute was not solved. Both Eusebius (of Nicomedia) and Arius were first excommunicated and exiled and then welcomed back. On the other side of the issue, Athanasius who had been the critical person to shape the orthodox position was exiled and welcomed back a number of times. For the next several centuries the position of the church was still very much up for grabs, swinging wildly back and forth between the “orthodox” Athanasian position and the “heretical” eastern/Arian position. In fact in 359 there was a series of councils at Rimini and Seleucia attended by about 500 bishops which would be considered much more ecumenical than the Council of Nicaea. But these councils are largely lost to history because, as Jerome observed of their creedal statements: “The whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian.”

There is one thing going on at this time that would seem comical if it wasn't so tragic. And that is the fact that, because the “orthodox” position, articulated first in the Nicene Creed and a little later in much more mind-numbing detail in the Athanasian Creed, was so detailed and nuanced, many theologians of the time who expended energy trying to articulate and explain the orthodox position would eventually find themselves crossing into heresy. In other words, the complexities were such that even those who sought to defend it would eventually say something that would put them in the position of having taken a “heretical” stance on the issue. Even as it was true then, so it is true today for those who attempt to go very far in defending the orthodox position.

And it didn't end here. For the next several centuries it was uncertain what would be the final orthodox position of the emerging Catholic church. Would it be that of Arius or of Athanasius? Even though both the Protestant and Catholic church look back to the Council of Nicaea as a great unifying force, the theological arguments were not settled for several hundred years. It was the ongoing Trinitarian controversy that gave rise to the final split between the western Roman Catholic church and the church in the east when, in 1054 the western church insisted that the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son whereas the Nicene Creed had stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father but through the Son, thus ever so slightly suggesting the subordination of the Son to the Father. When the western churches insisted on the word “filioque”, that was a step too far with the result that when Cardinal Humbert was sent by Pope Leo IX to bring the eastern church into line on several issues, he ended up, on June 16, 1054, excommunicating the entire eastern church in the name of the pope who, unbeknownst to Humbert, had died shortly before that time without giving Humbert proper notification.

There is a great deal of contemporary additional evidence that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity did not get the overwhelming and unqualified support within the church that, today, we

are often told was the case back when the doctrine became official church doctrine. Indeed our current church history textbooks upon which we rely for the accounts of what was happening at that time all seem to agree that there was not nearly the unanimity and accord that we would like to think would accompany the formulation of any “orthodox” position. Here are quotes from and some observations about comments made in several of those church history texts.

As Justo Gonzalez puts it on page 165 of the first volume of his The Story of Christianity: “At first the assembly sought to do this (i.e. settle on the wording that would describe the nature of the Trinity) through a series of passages of Scripture. But it soon became evident that by limiting itself to biblical texts the Council would find it very difficult to express its rejection of Arianism in unmistakable terms. It was then decided to agree on a creed that would express the faith of the church in such a way that Arianism was clearly excluded.” Thus the Nicene Creed came into being. The significance of this observation is critical. The Scriptures were not clear so they came up with an extra-Biblical doctrinal formulation to express their disagreement with Arius.

From Berkhof’s The History of Christian Doctrines: “The Trinitarian controversy, which came to a head in the struggle between Arius and Athanasius, had its roots in the past. The early Church Fathers, as we have seen, had no clear conception of the Trinity.” (pg. 83). He goes on to note (pg. 87) that the emperor was pushing them to come to a unanimous conclusion in order to support his efforts to unify the empire.

In its discussion of the controversy, Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity says this about Tertullian who is noted for having originated the concept of one substance but three persons that was later to become the orthodox position. On pages 111-112: “The Monarchians were assailed on all sides...In writing a book to refute Praxeas, perhaps a nickname for a Roman bishop, Tertullian gave the Latin West a theological vocabulary that has hardly yet been bettered. He drew upon Stoicism and Roman law for his language, and taught that God was one being (substantia) but three concrete individuals (personae).” There is also the note on page 110 that “both Jews and pagans such as Celsus accused Christians of having two gods.” He also notes on page 112-113 that “Before the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) all theologians viewed the Son as in one way or another subordinate to the Father.”

Bruce Shelley’s book Church History in Plain Language has this title for chapter 10: “Splitting Important Hairs: The Doctrine of the Trinity”. He begins the chapter (pg. 113) by saying: “Of all the things that Christians say about God, the most distinctive is that God is three persons.” And a little later: “Christians themselves are hard pressed to explain what they mean when they sing of the ‘blessed Trinity.’ Most are content to treat the doctrine as a piece of sublime mystery. It wasn’t so in the early church. Fourth-century Christians felt a nagging restlessness about the doctrine, like scholars who have a piece of unfinished research.” At the Council of Nicaea the 300+ bishops kept arguing and wrangling and simply could not decide how to formulate the wording of the creed. The final wording was suggested by Bishop Hosius of Cordova who was influential with Constantine. Then Shelley observes (on page 116): “After more days of inconclusive debate the impatient emperor intervened to demand that this statement be adopted. Thus, there emerged that Nicene Creed...” And on the next page (117): “After Nicaea, however, first Constantine and then his successors stepped in again and again to banish this churchman or exile that one. Control of church offices too often depended on control of the emperor’s favor...no career better illustrates the way in which imperial power took over actual control of the church than that of Athanasius.”

Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his massive A History of Christianity introduces the discussion of the Trinitarian controversy by saying “A problem which long vexed the Church, and which even now has not been solved to the satisfaction of all who bear the Christian name, is that of the Trinity.” Then a little later (page 142) he says: “These first century Christians did not attempt to make a complete orderly statement of their beliefs about Christ. Here and there, as in the Gospel according to John and in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, something of what they believed to be the place of Christ in the human drama and in the universe is set forth. Yet these early disciples were so carried away with the breathtaking vision of what they believed Christ meant and of what God had done and was doing in him that they could not put it in sober intellectual terms, nor did they attempt to answer all the questions which Christians would inevitably raise as they struggled with the problems presented by this unique and climactic person whom they had come to know.” Then on page 156, in talking about the Nicene Creed he observes: “The words were not always wisely chosen, perhaps because words could not be found which would exactly stand for the reality.”

Jaroslav Pelikan, in The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (pg. 172) says: “The climax of the doctrinal development of the early church was the dogma of the Trinity.... Such a statement about the relation of the Nicene dogma of the Trinity to the centuries preceding it could, however, give the superficial impression of a greater smoothness than the facts warrant for the formulation and reformulation of the dogma were called forth by a doctrinal debate more vigorous than any the church had ever experienced.” And a bit later (pg. 173) “Doctrine often seemed to be the victim – or the product – of church politics and of conflicts of personality.”

THE REFORMATION

That brings us to the last of the three critical period in church history regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. The Reformation was, by definition, a time when a part of the church reformed itself in practice and in doctrine. By the late 15th century there were so many things wrong with the Catholic church that even its most faithful adherents found themselves unable any longer to simply turn a blind eye to the problems. In practice the church of the Middle Ages had a stranglehold on virtually all of society and culture. The church was the biggest landowner in all of Europe and the popes had become, by the time of Innocent III (1160 – 1216), more powerful than any king in Europe. And spiritually it was thought that the church held the “keys to the kingdom” and thus were in a position to judge who would receive eternal life and who would not. Indeed Boniface VIII (1235 – 1303) issued the appropriately titled papal bull “Unam Sanctam” which most notably declared that no one could be saved outside the church and without participation in the sacraments of the church.

Yet the church was exceedingly corrupt. Greed was the driving force in church politics because powerful positions in the church were accompanied by great wealth and prestige. That is perhaps the sorriest legacy of the council of Nicaea. Once Christianity was not only legalized but a few decades later was made the religion of the state, the entire focus of the church changed from spiritual to temporal matters. In the early centuries of the church there was a tremendous cost to being a Christian...perhaps even to the extent of the forfeiture of one’s life. But after Constantine, leadership in the church was one of the easiest paths to advancement in all areas.

Besides the greed there was incredible moral corruption with church leaders not even trying hard to hide their sexual conquests even though they had taken a vow of celibacy. And the power associated with the church was virtually unparalleled in that society because it seemingly incorporated not only temporal power but spiritual as well.

So thinking during the Renaissance began questioning the intellectual foundations of the church and later in the Renaissance the Christian Humanists of Northern Europe dealt not only with intellectual and theological issues but also tried to bring about a reform of morals within the church as well. That all came out of advances in education and learning that showed that many of the foundations of the church were laid on very shaky ground indeed.

It was into that intellectual milieu that Martin Luther came on the scene early in the 16th century. At first he had no sense or intention of “reforming” or tearing down the Catholic Church. He strove only to help get the church back on track. But within a year or two it became clear to Luther and to his opponents that there was much more at stake than originally thought. Soon Luther was driven to clearly articulate some very basic principles. Central to his thought was his new understanding that ultimate authority must ascribed only to the Bible and specifically not to the church...either the Pope personally or the church councils. Throughout the Middle Ages the church had come to understand that when the Pope spoke authoritatively, that is “ex cathedra” it was as if God himself was speaking. His words had that level of authority in the church. Likewise there was a movement that ascribed the same sort of authority to some but not all church councils. But Luther opposed all of that and held that the only ultimate authority was to be found in the Scriptures...both Old and New Testament.

Holding that position, Luther did not hesitate to contradict many beliefs that were dearly held by the church...beliefs about the very nature of salvation, about the role that Jesus played in God’s unfolding plan, even about the very nature of God Himself in many respects. Indeed perhaps the most famous recorded quote of Luther as he was defending his positions which contradicted those of the church was reportedly this: "Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." It was that willingness to question some of the most fundamental beliefs of the church that suggested to Michael Servetus that he would find a positive reception for his Trinitarian beliefs amongst the reformers.

It should be noted that he might well have reason to think that from the views of the Christian Humanists as well. Desiderius Erasmus was not a Protestant reformer but even so, as a Humanist he seemed willing to question whether or not the orthodox position on the Trinity was as essential as many thought. In his preface to a written work by Hilary, Erasmus says this when talking about the Arian controversy: “We define so many things which may be left to ignorance or in doubt without loss of salvation. Is it not possible to have fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without being able to explain philosophically the distinction between them and between the nativity of the Son and the procession of the Holy Ghost?...You will not be damned if you do not know whether the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son has one or two beginnings, but you will not escape damnation, if you do not cultivate the fruits of the Spirit which are...” For Erasmus there were some battles worth fighting and a purely orthodox understanding of the Trinity was not, at least initially, where he was inclined to take a stand.

Luther himself was hesitant to use the word “homoousios” which had become the linchpin of the orthodox Athanasian position. He reportedly observed “If my soul loathes this word “homoousios” and I am unwilling to use it, I shall not on that account be a heretic, for who will compel me to use it provided I hold to the substance which was defended in the councils from Scripture?” Here you see the fine line that Luther attempted to walk on the issue. He wanted to

affirm the ultimate sole authority of the Scriptures yet he could not bring himself to reject the Athanasian Trinitarian position that had been passed down for well over a millennia.

But the whole thing finally came to a head when Michael Servetus boldly marched into Calvin's Geneva and attempted to engage John Calvin in a dialogue on the issue. From the very beginning Calvin rejected the arguments put forth by Servetus. Since Servetus' arguments and statements were quite wide ranging, on several points it would seem clear that Calvin's position was more firmly grounded in Scripture than was that of Servetus. But Servetus' argument that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was not to be found anywhere in Scripture and thus was "extra-Biblical" was an argument that Calvin would not entertain as convincing. The best that the Reformers seemed to be able to do was first of all recognize, as had the churchmen of the early 4th century, that the language of the New Testament was not sufficient to express the nuances and fine points of the doctrine of the Trinity.

At that point the reformers seemed to fell back on the idea of mystery and the notion that in some sense the Council of Nicaea did indeed have an authority that they were willing to accept even though other councils were found to be guilty of many grave errors. Yet the other outcomes of that very council, things like the organization of the church which provided the structure for Roman Catholicism, the primacy of the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch and Rome, and the establishment of portions of the church liturgy...things like that were not accepted by the reformers even though they seemed to ascribe some sort of divine authority to the council with regard to its formulation of the Nicene Creed.

So there seemed to be some inconsistency amongst the reformers on this issue. On the one hand they desired to get back to the purity of doctrine that they thought could be found in the first century words of the writers of the New Testament and they expressed an unwillingness to ascribe any ultimate authority to extra-Biblical institutions like the papacy and church councils. But when push came to shove, on this issue John Calvin and other reformers showed themselves to be more children of the Middle Ages than of the Reformation.

With regard to both the Catholic and Protestant "orthodox" positions on the Trinity, the lines that were drawn many centuries ago seem to be intact to this day. The final Athanasian interpretation of the Nicene Creed would generally be agreed upon today by Protestants and Catholics alike. The battles that were fought then are no longer being fought. Thus even in these, the early years of the 21st century, the orthodox view is that which was shaped not by the written documentation left by the first century writers of the New Testament but rather by the political and ecclesiastical machinations of the fourth through eleventh centuries.