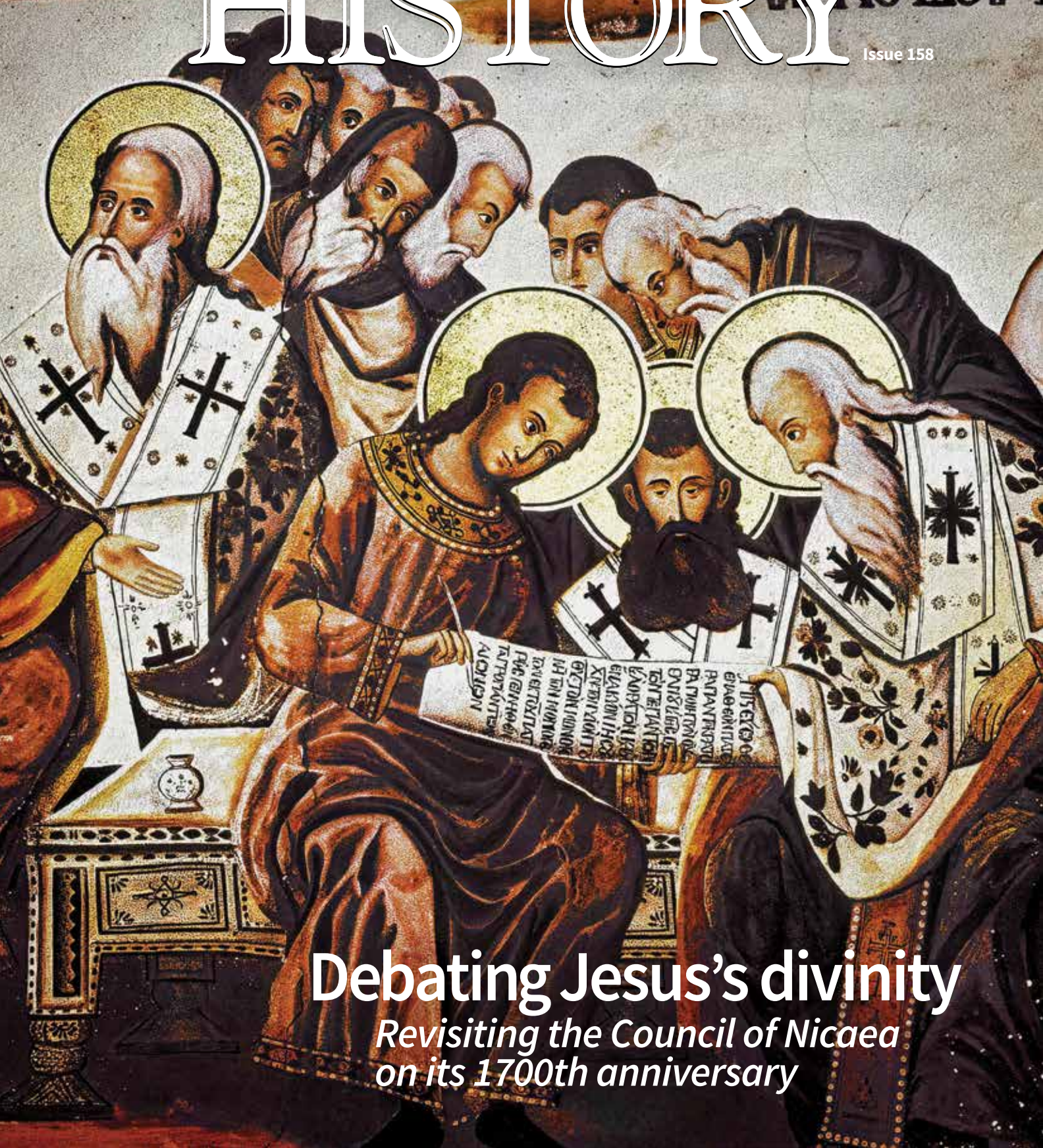


CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 158



Debating Jesus's divinity

*Revisiting the Council of Nicaea
on its 1700th anniversary*



ERASING ARIANISM. . . This mosaic commissioned by barbarian leader Theodoric the Great for his palace church was altered at the command of Emperor Justinian, removing Theodoric's family and Arian influence. You can see missed hands along the columns.

ARIAN BARBARIANS

Theodosius the Great may have dealt Roman Arians a death blow at the Council of Constantinople (381), but the heresy got a new lease on life among the barbarian Goths. Particularly influential was Theodoric the Great (d. 526), a ruthless military tactician who murdered his rival, he made Arianism his religion and built numerous Arian churches in Ravenna, Italy. When Byzantine emperor Justinian (482–565) recovered Ravenna in 535, he resolved to erase Arian influence from the city. One example

is a mosaic in the Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo, formerly Theodoric's palace church, that has obviously been altered—it likely displayed Theodoric with his family or court.

Did you know?

STORIES OF THE COUNCIL

A SHARED HERITAGE

Christians from vastly different traditions can agree on at least one thing: the importance of the Council of Nicaea. In 1925 the Church of England hosted a sixteenth centenary celebration of the council—an event that brought Orthodox patriarchs to Westminster Abbey for the first time in church history. That same year Pope Pius XI planned a party of his own in the Vatican basilica, declaring Nicaea a formative event for the Catholic understanding of the nature of Christ.

Many Protestants, such as Anglicans, recite the Nicene Creed in church every Sunday and celebrate Nicaea in their hymns. One of the most beloved is Reginald Heber's (1783–1826) "Holy, Holy, Holy," which ends with a rousing "God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity." Written for Trinity Sunday, the hymn was set to music by John B. Dykes (1823–1886), who named the tune NICAEA.



WHO STARTED IT?

Most council historians begin the story with the fiery exchange of words between Arius and Alexander. But the discussion of the nature of Christ has a much longer history in the church. Third-century theologian Origen (185–c. 254), for example, pressed a bishop named Heraclides to define the relationship of Christ to God the Father. After much careful questioning, Heraclides admitted to believing in two Gods but clarified that "the power is one." Origen reminded Heraclides that some Christians would "take offense at the statement that there are two Gods. We must express the doctrine carefully to show in what sense they are two, and in what sense the two are one God."

I BAPTIZE YOU WITH THE "CREED"

The earliest form of the Christian creed was a set of questions based on Jesus's command to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). As seen in the following example from the third-century Roman presbyter Hippolytus, the three baptismal questions follow a trinitarian pattern:

Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?

Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,

Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,

Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose the third day living from the dead and ascended into the heavens and sat down at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?

HONORING NICAEA TOGETHER In 1925 Russian Orthodox clergy joined with clergy from the Church of England to mark the 1,600th anniversary of the council.

NICAIA TODAY Nicaea is now Iznik, Turkey, which fell to the Ottoman Turks in the 14th c. The town is known for its Ottoman-influenced ceramic tiles (*right*).

Take each of these questions and turn them into “I believe” statements, and you have what is often called the Old Roman Creed, a text very similar to the fifth-century Apostles’ Creed. These early baptismal creeds focused on the work of Christ. The Nicene Creed added an emphasis on the person of Christ.

THE ANCYRAN CREED?

The Council of Nicaea had been originally planned to meet in the city of Ancyra (modern Ankara in central Turkey), but Constantine moved the location to Nicaea only a few months before the council’s opening meeting.

NICENE EXILES

Theognis, the bishop of Nicaea, did not support the creed that the council produced, even though he signed it. He argued that Arius’s views had been misrepresented and rejected the anathema attached to the creed. For this reason, he, along with Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341), was briefly exiled.

DID SOMEONE FORGET TO GET A COUNT?

How many bishops attended the Council of Nicaea? Unfortunately, no original authoritative list from the council survives. Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) says “more than 250” attended, whereas Athanasius (d. 373) claims there were “300 of them, more or less.” Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) later states 318, but he was erroneously inspired by a story in Genesis in which Abraham and his household of 318 routed the forces of four wicked kings (in the same way the council had exposed the evil errors of Arius).



... WELL, MOSTLY Justinian missed a mosaic in a baptistry in Ravenna, Italy, which depicts an Arian understanding of the baptism of Jesus.



HO HO HOMOOUSIOS Nicholas of Myra may not have hit Arius (*above*) over Christ’s divinity, but the debates about terms were real (see pp. 22–23 for more on *homoousios*).

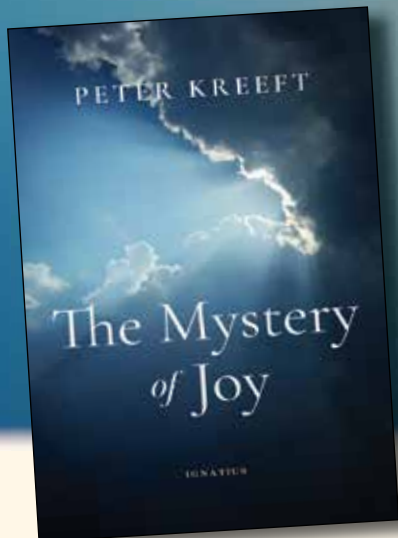
Most likely the actual figure was closer to 200. Also, bishops were accompanied by fellow clergy—both presbyters and deacons—placing the total number of attendees close to a thousand or more. The sheer size of the assembly had no precedent in church history.

ANGRY OLD SAINT NICHOLAS

Since we have no historical records of the council’s proceedings, a host of apocryphal stories about it have proliferated. In one legend, Saint Nicholas of Myra (270–343, the original Santa Claus) shows up at the council and becomes so angry with Arius that he punches him. Another tale has Nicholas proving the doctrine of the triune God at the council through a miracle—he changes brick into earth, fire, and water before the eyes of the astonished emperor. **CH**

Steven Gertz, D. H. Williams, and John Anthony McGuckin, adapted from issue #85: Debating Jesus’s Divinity

BRILLIANT NEW WORKS from PETER KREEFT



◆ THE MYSTERY OF JOY

Joy: we look for it, long for it and spend our lives chasing it. Yet do we really know what it is? Is it a feeling, a state of mind, or a reward for success? Do we know where to find it?

"Joy", says Kreeft, "is a mystery. It is bigger than we are." Joy's secret, however, is that it cannot be *reached* or *found*, but only *given*. True joy is God Himself, who, giving Himself, takes us outside of ourselves. This lucid, witty reflection on the true nature of joy convinces us that joy is very near at hand. Drawing from the wisdom of C. S. Lewis and St. Thomas Aquinas, Kreeft walks us through the long, beautiful task of surrendering to deep joy, the chief work of any life worth living. **MJOYP** . . . Sewn Softcover, \$18.95

"Many writers have the gift of irony, humor, or logic, or common sense. Very few combine all these gifts in one talent and put it at the service of truth. Kreeft is simply the best, the most engaging, Christian apologist at work today."

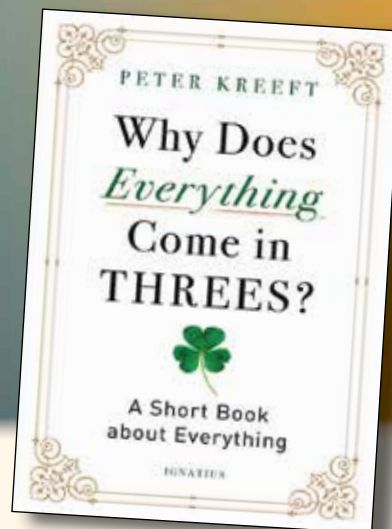
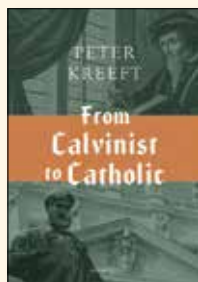
—**Francis X. Maier**, Author, *True Confessions: Voices of Faith from a Life in the Church*

Also by Peter Kreeft

◆ FROM CALVINIST TO CATHOLIC

In this new autobiography, Kreeft finally tells his own story, including the encounters, people, and ideas that led him to the Catholic Church. Replete with delightful anecdotes and Kreeft's wry sense of humor, this is a human look at one of the great Christian apologists: philosopher, man of letters, and a man of deep faith.

FCCH . . . Sewn Hardcover, \$21.95



◆ WHY DOES EVERYTHING COME IN THREES?

Since the beginning of the Church, much has been written about the Blessed Trinity in the Creator. In this accessible book for ordinary Christians, Peter Kreeft reflects on a different topic: the Trinity in the creation.

Because, as G. K. Chesterton put it, in creating us, God "broke His own law, and made a graven image of Himself", it comes as no surprise that we find a Trinitarian structure embedded in our lives—and in the universe itself. While the fact that so many things come in threes does not prove the dogma of the Trinity, it does give powerful clues to this truth about the nature of ultimate reality that reflects the Trinity. Join the exciting journey with Kreeft and explore the amazing threefold structure of everything.

WECTP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$16.95

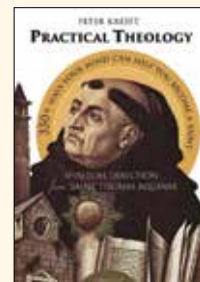
"Kreeft ingeniously unveils the triune dynamic in our universe, selves, souls, and stories—a dynamic that characterizes God. This is a true inspiration from one who has immersed himself in the heart of Christ."

—**Fr. Robert Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D.**,
Author, *Christ, Science and Reason*

◆ PRACTICAL THEOLOGY Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas

In this 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Thomas, be inspired by this brilliant combination of the wonderful insights of Peter Kreeft on the writings of the "Angelic Doctor".

PRTP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$23.95



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Letters to the editor

Readers respond to *Christian History*

FASTS, FEASTS, AND APOSTLES

I cannot commend you enough for your special issue, *Fasts and Feasts*. To have all of this information in one place is a gift. Kudos to Jennifer for making this happen. My church does not follow the church calendar unfortunately, but I have tried to incorporate it into my personal devotions. This issue will be most helpful. Again—I just can't thank you enough. God bless you all at CHI.—*Tom Edmunds, Washington, NJ*

I am a long-time reader of your outstanding publication, having accumulated a complete collection. I have a great interest in ecclesial history, especially worship and liturgical customs as they developed and were practiced through the almost two millennia story of the church militant. I was impressed—and I am continually impressed—by the deep research and the overall quality of each issue of your magazine. As a student—at times educator and planner of liturgy—I received your special issue, *Fasts and Feasts*. This issue will serve as a useful educational tool. The issue is extremely accurate, erudite, and readable. I shall share my copy with others who should peruse this treasure of knowledge. Thank you for your effort and energy publishing such an astute and valuable magazine.—*Joe Barnes, Moberly, MO*

I must say, issue 156, *What happened to the apostles?*, was definitely in the top five of all issues, and I have got and read almost all of them. My opinion: enough on C. S. Lewis, more on early church fathers, an issue on Josephus, Herod, Caiaphas, and John the Baptizer.—*James Turner, Madison, AL*

WHAT VATICAN II MEANT TO SOME OF YOU

In a recent letter to CH subscribers, we asked about readers' favorite issues of 2025. Many shared why issue #157 on *Vatican II* got their vote. Here are just a few responses.

Issue #157 on Vatican II was my favorite this year. I am not Catholic, but the history of Trent to Vatican I to Vatican II was super interesting.—*Gary Ries, Champlin, MN*

Roman Catholic history is part of Protestant history—especially the pre-Constantine history and the historic creeds. Ongoing reform is common to both Catholic and Protestant traditions.—*Thelma Spitzkopf, Souderton, PA*

Accurate information dispels myth and misunderstandings among Christians.—*Christian Williams, Coalinga, CA*

I liked #157 for its depth, thoroughness, quality, great reporting, and ecumenical perspective.—*David Hitt, Newberg, OR*

Issue #157 has helped me understand my friends' faith and what they believe.—*Robert Yarbrough, San Antonio, TX*



THE REAL WORK OF GOD

We also asked, "How does *Christian History* encourage you on your walk with Christ?" Here's what our readers said.

History confirms the real work of God through many lives and movements, including even those who are prone to be wrong and evil toward God's word and witness.—*Jerry Hopkins, Marshall, TX*

I am a pastor. I have gleaned SO MANY facts and illustrations through *Christian History* for messages. My daughter has all *Christian History* magazines for years and years. Thank you!—*Billie Friel, Mt. Juliet, TN*

Reading about what we've fought about through the centuries is teaching me not to argue doctrine with my brothers and sisters. Thank you!—*Steve Dinkowitz, Grants Pass, OR*

Today's struggles are not that far removed from those faced by our fathers in centuries past.—*Philip C. Smith, Athens, GA*

Christian History supports my vocation as a Religious Sister.—*Barbara Mueller, Sparkill, NY*

Seeing the faith of all the saints down through the centuries gives me the motivation to live a godly life.—*John King, New Waverly, TX*

Daily reminders of the many faithful believers in the past gives me hope and renewed commitment in following Jesus.—*Ruth Kaden, Redwood Falls, MN*

It is good to be reminded that the church is big and the gospel is powerful. Thank you.—*Brenda Schoolfield, Greenville, SC* **CH**

Editor's note



"I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

Jesus is God. I have believed this since I came to faith at nine years old. Though I have wondered what exactly that might mean and have certainly puzzled over that mystery, it's a truth I have never deeply interrogated. It hadn't occurred to me ask, "Well, how do you know that *really*?"

It also never occurred to me that what is a settled matter for the modern church was a conundrum for the ancient one. Early believers agreed that Jesus is God, yes—but how? What does it mean when the Bible says he is begotten? Are there degrees of divinity? How is Jesus both God and man?

DEBATING JESUS'S DIVINITY

These sorts of questions led to the historic council that took place at Nicaea 1,700 years ago. Its anniversary in 2025 led *Christian History* to revisit the story as captured in *CH* #85: *Debating Jesus's Divinity*—as well as add some new fascinating articles, images, and primary sources. (Yes, we're a little late, but we think the wait was worth it!)

In this refreshed issue of *Christian History*, you'll learn more about the discussions, debates, and outright conflict that reached a boiling point in the fourth century between church leaders, such as Alexander of Alexandria and Arius, concerning this all-important question of Jesus's divinity. You'll also meet other major players at the council and discover how their involvement led to the creation of the Nicene Creed—Roman emperor Constantine, Ossius of Cordoba, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Eusebius of Nicomedia, to name a few.

You'll also see how the Nicene Creed wasn't exactly the "be all, end all" of reflection on church doctrine at the time. In fact its application in the midst of an evolving state and church relationship created more councils, creeds, and conflicts in the decades afterward. But from this chaos emerged the clarifying theological work of church fathers such as Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—leading the church to a strongly trinitarian consensus and giving us the Nicene legacy we cherish today.

MESSY PEOPLE, SOVEREIGN GOD

Like all real history, the road that led to Nicaea was winding, arduous, and uncomfortably complicated. A consistent tension in Christian history (and one that *CH* highlights in every issue) is how the undeniable messiness of humanity and the limits of our human understanding operate alongside the sovereign hand and perfect revelation of God. The Council of Nicaea and all that happened before and after serve as a perfect example of that tension.

At the council human events took place at the behest of a questionable political power—people with personal failures and fallible motives were part of a crucial moment in the life of Christ's church. Some might look at the truths clarified at this council with suspicion, ascribing fault to the details because of the faults in the people involved.

And yet we trust the God in whose hand "the heart of the king is like a stream of water; he directs it wherever he chooses" (Prov. 21:1). At Nicaea he used the people and powers that were there to accomplish his righteous purposes—for his glory and our good. We can trust that in the messiness of the early church, the Spirit pointed us to Jesus and to all that God says about himself through Scripture.

Isn't this just like God's grace for each of us? Not one of us came to Christ with a perfect understanding of who he is, but through the Holy Spirit, God grew us—revealing himself to us in his Word progressively, guiding us to know and love him more deeply as we mature. And we have hope that one day, as Scripture promises, we will know him perfectly. As we remember the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, let us hold fast to that

comforting grace, trusting that the One who directs kings and councils directs our own hearts to know him better. **CH**



Kaylena Radcliff
Managing editor

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Be sure to receive our next issue #159 on faith at sea.

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State of emergency

HOW THE NEED FOR DOCTRINAL CLARITY PAVED THE ROAD TO NICAIA

John Anthony McGuckin

Graffiti emblazoned on walls, a vicious war of pamphlets, riots in the streets, lawsuits, catchy songs of ridicule—this was the tumultuous atmosphere in which fourth-century Christians found themselves. For modern believers (and those with a tendency to romanticize the early church as a picture of perfect unity), such public turmoil created by an argument between theologians can be difficult to imagine. Moreover, how could God work through the messiness of this human conflict to bring the church to an understanding of truth?

To us, in retrospect, the Council of Nicaea is a mountain in the landscape of the early church. For the participants themselves, it felt more like an emergency meeting forced on hostile parties by imperial powers and designed to stop an internal squabble. After the council, many of the same bishops who had signed its creed appeared at other councils, often reversing their previous decisions according to the way the winds of government or church preference were blowing. They found themselves less in a domain of monumental clarity and more in a swamp of confusing arguments and controversies that at times seemed to threaten the very continuity of the Christian church.

To understand the significance of the Council of Nicaea, we need to enter into the minds of the disputants and ask why so much bitterness and confusion had been caused by one apparently simple question: *In what way is Jesus divine?*

Of course, like many “simple” questions, this was actually a highly complex and provocative issue. Theologians were almost beside themselves when they

WHO IS THIS JESUS? A painting in the ancient catacombs beneath Rome pictures Jesus with his disciples at the Last Supper. Early Christians grappled with understanding both Jesus’s humanity and divinity. The big question of exactly *how* Jesus is divine led to the 4th-c. Council of Nicaea.

found that Scripture often gave very different-sounding notes when they applied to it for guidance. The disagreements this question provoked made many of the greatest minds of the era wonder to what extent the Christian doctrines of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit were coherent and even to what extent Christians could trust in the canon of sacred text (which had hitherto seemed to them sufficient as an exposition of the faith).

Rather than being a symbol of clarity, peace, and order, the council called for difficult and messy work: a focusing of Christian thought across a church often as muddled and confused as ours still seems to be.

THE LORD IS ONE

The argument began innocently enough with a regular seminar that Alexander, the archbishop of Alexandria (250–326; see pp. 36–39), was accustomed to hold with his senior clergy.

Alexander was a follower of Origen, who lived a century before him. Origen had laid the basis for a vast mystical understanding of the relationship of the divine Logos to the eternal Father. *Logos*, the word the Greek Bible had used to translate “divine wisdom,” was also widely used in Greek philosophical circles to signify the divine power immanent within the world. To many Christians it seemed



EGYPT'S OLDEST CHURCH Early church father Alexander (*middle*) was the archbishop of Alexandria. No ancient churches remain in Alexandria today, but archaeologists recently found these ruins (*above*) in nearby Marea. Experts believe it is the site of the oldest Christian church in Egypt.

A TIME WHEN HE WAS NOT? Alexander reasoned from Scripture that Jesus has always existed as God the Son and is eternally equal with the Father. One of Alexander's presbyters, Arius (*above right*), rejected this understanding and argued that Jesus was a lesser divinity, created by God the Father.

a marvelous way to talk about the eternal Son of God and became almost a synonym for the Son.

Like Origen, Alexander saw the Logos as sharing the divine attributes of the Father, especially that of eternity. The Logos, Alexander argued, had been "born of God before the ages." Since God the Father had decided to use the Logos as the medium and agent of all creation (e.g., John 1:1, Eph. 1:4, Col. 1:15–17), it follows that the Son-Logos must have preexisted creation. Since time is a consequence of creation, the Son preexisted all time and is thus eternal like the Father, and indeed his timelessness is one of the attributes that manifests him as the divine Son, worthy of the worship of the church. Since he is eternal, there could be no "before" or "after" in him. It is inappropriate, therefore, to suggest that there was ever a time when the Son did not exist.

God is eternally a Father of a Son, Alexander argued, and just as the Father had always existed, so too the Son had always existed and is thus known to be "God from God." The Christological confessions developed from Scripture about the Son (later to be inserted into the creed of Nicaea) make this all clear: "Born not created, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God." It is at once a high and refined scholarly confession of the faith and a popular prayer that sums up how Christians can be monotheists even as they worship the Son along with the Father.



ORIGEN'S PUPILS Many Christians learned from the early church scholar and theologian Origen. He was from Alexandria, where both Alexander and Arius would claim to be his posthumous followers.

Alexander knew he would face resistance from his church by saying that Christ's divinity could no longer be understood in the old simplistic ways of a "lesser divinity" alongside a "greater divinity." Alexander wanted to distinguish clearly between Christian and pagan theology by arguing that "divinity" is an absolute term (like pregnancy) that allows no degrees. One cannot say that the Son is "half God" or "part God" without making the very notion of deity into a mythical conception.

Given Alexander's clarification, many traditional Christian pieties would need to be reformed in the fourth



century. People sensed that they were on the cusp of a major new development—but they were not always quite sure what was happening, and more to the point, they lacked a precise or widely agreed-upon vocabulary to explain to themselves (and to others) what exactly was going on.

One of Alexander's senior priests, the presbyter Arius (256–336), was scandalized at the direction in which his bishop was taking theological language. Arius, who had charge of the large parish of Baucalis in the city's dockland, had also been an intellectual disciple of Origen, but had taken hold of a different strand of that early theologian's variegated legacy.

THEOLOGICAL NICETIES—OR THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY?

As was typical among third-century thinkers, Origen had a deeply ingrained sense of the absolute primacy of God over all other beings. This means that the Father is superior to the Son in all respects—in terms of essence, attributes, power, and quality. The Son might be called divine insofar as he represents the Father to the created world as the supreme agent of the creation (something like one of the greatest of all angelic powers), but he is decidedly inferior to the Father in all respects. This means that the Son



ORDAINED TO REIGN An 18th-c. painting imagines Constantine I as protector of the church, a role coinciding with his victory over co-emperor Licinius (left). He became Rome's sole emperor in 324. Some in the early church interpreted his rise to power as a result of his public conversion. For instance, when Eusebius of Caesarea saw Constantine's portrait on these coins (above), he wrote, "he appeared to look upwards in the manner of one reaching out to God in prayer."

does not possess absolute timelessness, a sole attribute of God the Father.

Thinking that he was defending traditional values, Arius pressed this view of Origen's even further. The Son-Logos, Arius allowed, might well have predated the rest of creation, but it is inappropriate to imagine that he shared the divine preexistence. Thus, Arius confessed the principle that "there was a time when he (the Logos) was not." Arius quickly put this axiom into a rhyme, which he taught his parishioners and so made it into a party cause. Soon slogans were ringing round the dockland, and the diocese of Alexandria was in serious disarray. Arius's supporters chanted, "*Een pote hote ouk een*" (there was a time when he was not) and wrote the slogan on the walls. Overnight Alexander's camp added a Greek negative to the beginning: "*Ouk een pote hote ouk een*" (There was never a time when he was not).

Everyone, skilled theologian or not, seemed to have been caught by surprise that a controversy over so basic a matter (is the Son of God divine? And how?) could have arisen in the church and even more surprised that recourse to Scripture was proving so problematic. For every text that shows the divine status of the Son ("I and the Father are One," John 10:30; "And the Word was God," John 1:1), another can be quoted back to suggest the subordinate, even the created, status of the Son ("In the beginning he created me [Wisdom]," Prov. 8:22; "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone," Mark 10:18). If Jesus is not fully God, he is not really God at all, and thus to worship him is not piety but simply idolatry.

Alexander (applying good pastoral sense) would not allow a theological dispute to mushroom out publicly in this alarming way, so he censured Arius for appearing to deny the Son's eternity and true divinity and deposed him from his priestly office. Arius immediately appealed against that disciplinary decision to one of the most powerful bishops of the era, Eusebius of Nicomedia, a kinsman by marriage to Constantine the emperor. Arius

ROLLING OUT THE RED CARPET Constantine not only invited bishops to his palace for the council, he also arranged and paid for their travel—an honor formerly persecuted Christians would not have expected to receive! The emperor's lakeside residence was in Nicaea, called Iznik today (right).

and Eusebius had been students together and shared a common theological view. Eusebius, the court theologian at the imperial capital, knew that if Arius was being attacked then so was he. From that moment onward, he was determined to squash what he regarded as a “foolish Egyptian piety.” By elevating the Son of God to the same status as God the Father, he argued, Christianity would compromise its claim to be a monotheist religion. Eusebius marshaled many supporters.

The bitterness of the dispute seemed remarkable to many observers, but what was at stake was no less than a major clash between two confessional traditions that had been uneasy companions in the church for generations. One tradition stressed the subordination of the Son (Christ the Servant of God). The other emphasized the salvific triumph of the Savior (Christ the Lord of Glory in his most intimate union with the Father).

So notorious had the falling out of Eastern bishops become over this matter that it was brought to the attention of Emperor Constantine (d. 337) who, in 324, had defeated his last rival to become sole monarch of all the Roman Empire. Constantine decided to use the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of his claiming of the throne in 306, which would be celebrated in 325, to help settle the embarrassing dispute among his allies, the bishops. He felt (rightly) that their disarray compromised his desire to demonstrate that he had effectively “brought peace” to the eastern territories.

THE ANNIVERSARY COUNCIL

So it was that he summoned bishops to his private lakeside palace at Nicaea (Victory City) in Asia Minor (now Iznik in Turkey), offering to pay all their expenses, to supply them with the traditional “gifts” that followed an invitation to the court, and even to afford them the prestigious use of the official transport system, a privilege that had always been strictly reserved for officers of state. The buzz this created was all the more remarkable among the bishops of the East, who only a year or so before had lived under a persecutor's oppression.

Though Constantine envisaged a truly international meeting of minds, in fact very few Latin bishops



DEBATING THE WORD Council fathers at Nicaea discussed Scriptures concerning Jesus, such as those found in John's Gospel. This fragile manuscript (left) dates to c. 200.



attended—only representative delegations from leading sees such as Rome.

Some sources say the council opened on June 19. Tradition has it that

318 clergy were in attendance, but many modern historians think that 250 is a more accurate figure (see “Did you know?”). As the meeting opened, Constantine took his place on the imperial throne and greeted his guests. He spent the opening session accepting scrolls (secret petitions for favors and for redress) from the many bishops in attendance and then startled them all the next day by bringing in a large brazier and burning the whole pile of scrolls before them—saying enigmatically that in this way the debts of all had been cancelled. By this he implied that most of the petitions from the bishops were aimed at one another, and rather than put many on trial, he gave a common amnesty.

The order of the day was to resolve the question about the eternity and divine status of the Son of God. Many of the bishops were not well educated, but a few of them were highly skilled rhetoricians and theologians, and they were determined that if anything theological was to be settled by the large council, it would be in favor of the pro-Alexander lobby.

PROPHETIC PETER? A dragon devours Arius in this rendering of a vision of Patriarch Peter I of Alexandria (*below*). He lived through the Meletian schism, but died before the Arian controversy in 311.



For this reason they pressed for a refinement of the baptismal creed of Jerusalem, which had been submitted by Eusebius of Caesarea as a blueprint for a “traditional statement of faith.” Eusebius had been deposed at an earlier synod for having publicly attacked Alexander’s theology. Under pressure from Constantine, the assembly at Nicaea pardoned him and restored him to office after he offered the creed of his own church as evidence of his change of heart.

All the bishops recognized how unarguably “authentic” this statement of faith was, but the Jerusalem creed did not really resolve the precise issue under consideration: that is, how the Son of God relates to the divine Father. To this end the bishops decided that extra clauses would be interpolated into the old creed as “commentary,” to amplify the bare statements about the mission of Christ and to show how Jesus could be confessed as God. Alexander’s party had originated these “confessional acclamations” of Christ (“God from God, Light from Light,” etc.), but since it had become clear that even their opponents could accept Christ’s title as “god from God” (as meaning a nominal, inferior deity from the superior, absolute deity), many of the Alexandrians demanded a firmer test of faith.

CREED AND CATCHWORD

It was possibly Ossius (256–359), the theological adviser of the emperor, who suggested that the magic word to nail the Arian party would be *homoousios*. The term means “of the same substance as,” and when applied to the Logos, it proclaims that the Logos is divine in the same way as God the Father is divine (not in an inferior, different, or nominal sense). In short, if the Logos is *homoousios* with the Father, he is truly God alongside the Father. The word pleased Constantine, who seems to have seen it as an ideal way to bring all the bishops back on board for a common vote. It was broad enough to suggest a



THAT’S NOT HOW I REMEMBER IT A 16th-c. icon shows council fathers with Constantine in stately agreement; Arius alone lies at the bottom covering his ears (*above*). The actual proceedings at Nicaea seem to have been less straightforward; dissenting bishops were excommunicated, and the years after Nicaea were turbulent (see pp. 24–26). In the end, however, the majority of attending bishops endorsed the Nicene Creed.

vote for the traditional Christian belief that Christ is divine, it was vague enough to mean that Christ is of the “same stuff” as God (no further debate necessary), and it was bland enough to be a reasonable basis for a majority vote.

It had everything going for it as far as the politically savvy Constantine was concerned, but for the die-hard Arian party, it was a word too far. They saw that it gave the Son equality with the Father without explaining how this relationship works. (In fact it would be another 60 years before anyone successfully articulated the doctrine of the Trinity.) Therefore they attacked it for undermining the biblical sense of the Son’s obedient mission. The intellectuals among the group (chiefly Eusebius of Nicomedia) also attacked *homoousios* for its crassness—it attributes “substance” (or material stuff) to God, who is beyond all materiality. Moreover the term is unsuitable because it is “not found in the Holy Scriptures,” and indeed this did disturb many of the bishops present for the occasion.

The great majority of bishops still endorsed the idea, however, and so with Constantine pressing for a consensus



HEIRS OF THE APOSTLES An early Byzantine plate depicts the apostles serving and receiving Communion (above). The bishops who attended the Council of Nicaea believed they were the heirs of the apostles, led by the Holy Spirit to discern truth.

GETTING IT JUST RIGHT Ossius of Cordoba (pointing at right) is credited with guiding the council to language that preserved the Son's divinity and equality with the Father. You can learn more about Ossius on page 38.

vote, the word entered into the creed they published. It was not that the bishops at Nicaea were themselves simply looking for a convenient consensus in the synod's vote. Many synods had been held before this extraordinarily large one at Nicaea, and ancient bishops predominantly worked on the premise that decisions of the church's leadership required unanimity. Their task was to proclaim the ancient Christian faith against all attacks, and this was not something they felt they had to seek out or worry over—they simply had to state among themselves a common and clear heritage, one that could be proclaimed by universal acclamation. They believed that they were the direct continuance of the first apostolic gathering at Jerusalem, when the Holy Spirit led all the apostles to the realization of the gospel truth.

Because of this, when a few bishops dissented and refused their vote, the remaining bishops excommunicated and deposed them, accusing them of having refused to be part of the family of faith. Among this group was Eusebius of Nicomedia. All the deposed bishops received harsh sentences from the emperor (although Eusebius was confident he could wiggle out of his disgrace, as soon he did).



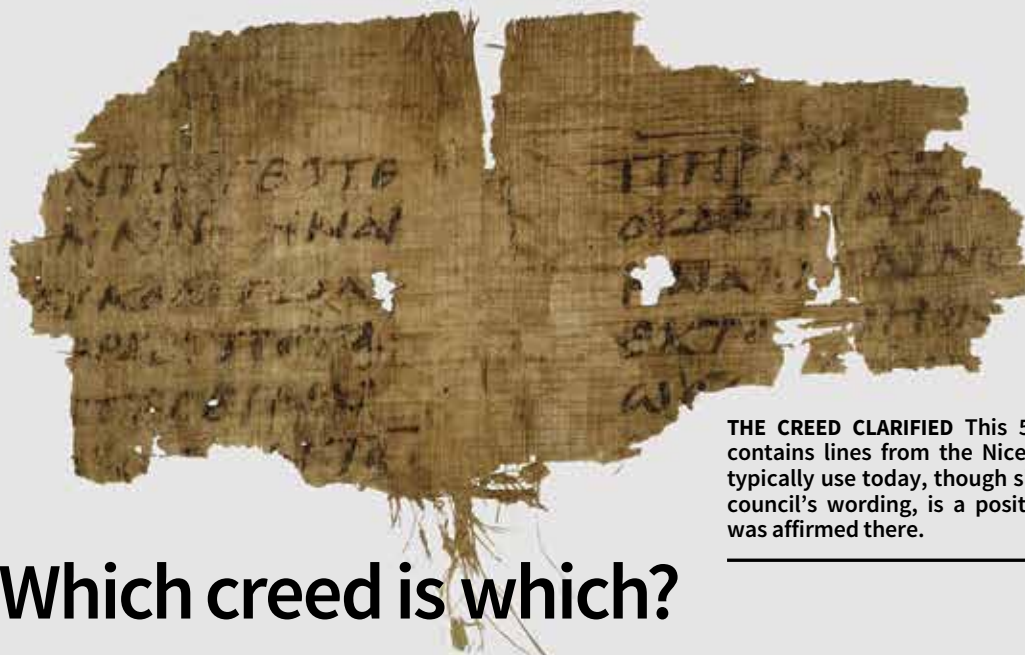
THE END? NOT QUITE

Once the main item of controversy was settled (the acceptance of Alexander's clauses and the admittance of the word *homoousios*), the other items fell into place quickly. The newly amplified creed was given a set of six legal "threats" attached to it (named *anathemas*), which spelled out in great detail all the classic marks of Arian philosophy and threatened with excommunication any who maintained them thereafter.

The meeting then turned its attention to what most bishops had originally wanted to do anyway—set up reforms to consolidate a church in the East that had long been torn apart by oppressors and had not been able to regulate its affairs on the larger front for many years. To resolve such problems, the bishops drew up a list of laws (named *canons*, from the Greek word for "rule" or "normative measure"). These 20 canons have never attracted as much attention as the doctrines of Nicaea, but actually had immense importance, as they were the reference point around which all future collections of church law were modeled and collated (see pp. 18–20).

After all doctrinal and canonical work was finished, the emperor concluded the council with great festivities. Hardly was the council closed when the old party factions broke out with as much rancor as before. Even stalwart advocates of the Nicene council—men like Athanasius the Great, Eustathius of Antioch, and Ossius of Cordoba—wondered, as the fourth century progressed, whether this had been a good idea or not. Those who attended the Council of Nicaea might well have felt at first that they had achieved a lasting settlement. As we shall see, however, the controversy was far from over. **CH**

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THE CREED CLARIFIED This 5th-c. papyrus fragment contains lines from the Nicene Creed. The creed we typically use today, though slightly different from the council's wording, is a positive clarification of what was affirmed there.

Which creed is which?

In one of the quirks of church history, the “Nicene Creed” used in church hymnals and liturgies is a different creed from the one accepted at Nicaea in 325.

In 381 the Council of Constantinople affirmed the Nicene Creed and condemned heresies that had since arisen against Nicaea. But from later records (preserved at the Council of Chalcedon, 70 years later), we know the wider church also used another creed, now known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. This creed is more strictly trinitarian than the Nicene, describing each member of the Trinity in relation to the other members. The creed of 325 says less about the Father and only mentions the Holy Spirit with no description at all, since the council’s attention was fixed on how the Son is no less divine than the Father.

Below are the original Nicene Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The second is the version used in worship in the Western church; the Eastern version does not include the phrases in brackets. In particular, the statement that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son,” which arose in the West in the sixth century, is still opposed by the Eastern Orthodox Church as an unwarranted addition to Nicene theology. —D. H. Williams, *issue advisor*; adapted from *issue #85*

THE ORIGINAL NICENE CREED

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 from 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, becoming man, suffered

and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead;

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, there was when he was not, and, before being born he was not, and he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the son of God is a different hypostasis or substance, or is subject to change or alteration—these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

THE NICENO-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED (The “Nicene Creed” used in worship)

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; [God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.



Do you know whom you worship?

HOW THE NICENE CREED SHARPENED UNDERSTANDING AND CONFESSION OF THE FAITH

D. H. Williams

*In Dorothy Sayers's imaginative play *The Emperor Constantine*, the defining role of the Nicene Creed is put into words when Constantine criticizes a group of bishops for their indecision:*

Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you know not, but we know whom we worship." Do you know whom you worship? It would seem you do not. And it matters now that you should.

The question, "Do you know whom you worship?" has been a perennial one for Christians, but it came to the forefront at the beginning of the fourth century when there was as yet no doctrinal consensus about the divinity of Christ.

KNOWING GOD BETTER

All Christians asserted that Jesus is God and worshiped him as such, following the understanding laid down in an early second-century sermon known as II Clement: "brethren, we ought to think of Jesus as we do of God." However, the baptismal creeds of local churches said very little beyond the basic wording: "of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary" (*Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus).

Such confessional statements left many questions unanswered. How could the Son—who was born a human being, suffered, and died—also be God in relation to God the Father? Which Bible passages were speaking about the Son's divinity and which were about the Son's humanity? When Jesus declared his dread of the "cup" before him (Matt. 26:39) or displayed ignorance about the time of his second return (Mk. 13:32), surely these experiences were applicable to his human self, but what did that mean for his divinity? If Christ suffered on our behalf, did that mean he was different from God who, by virtue of his immutability and eternity, cannot suffer? Christians had no formal agreement about Bible teaching on these issues.

THE GOD MAN On the vaulted ceiling of St. George Church in Kosovo are three icons of Jesus that depict him as Emmanuel, Ancient of Days, and Pantocrator. Through titles given to Jesus in Scripture, the early church sought to understand whom they worshiped.



Inevitably members of the early church needed to prayerfully concur on a statement of faith to ensure they knew whom they worshiped and that they worshiped in unity. As the church grew in numbers, geographical distance, and theological sophistication, the need for a comprehensive explanation of the Christian faith grew as well. The interchurch crisis between Arius and Alexander erupted and spread throughout the East so quickly precisely because Christian teaching was unsettled on these matters. As this crisis took hold of churches in Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor, and even Greece, local baptismal confessions were insufficient to address the widespread nature of the conflict. While these confessions would continue to be regarded as authoritative throughout the fourth century, their wording was not exact enough to ensure future doctrinal orthodoxy.

This is what later prompted Augustine (in *On Faith and the Creed*) to use the Nicene faith as the lens for interpreting the older church creed of North Africa. When the believer professed, “I believe . . . in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, only-begotten of the Father, our Lord, who was born through the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,” all believed this true, but debated how it should be interpreted, so that “under color of the few words found in the [North African] creed, many heretics have attempted to conceal their poison.”

It was just a matter of time, therefore, that a formal statement about the identity of Christ in relation to the Father should be debated and endorsed by an official body. Not only would error have to be ruled out, but it first had to be redefined, as would the parameters for a proper scriptural interpretation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ONLY A POWER PLAY?

At the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, some Protestant historians regarded the Council of

EAR OF THE EMPEROR In this modern icon (*above*), Constantine the Great stands at the forefront among council fathers, holding up the creed. He burns Arian books in a 9th-c. depiction at *left*. Some have interpreted Nicaea as an imperial power struggle that compromised Christianity. However, council consensus represented common Christian belief, which attending bishops sought to uphold.

Nicaea and its creed with the same suspicion as they did the church of Rome. The esteemed German scholar Eduard Schwarz, for example, depicted the conflicts between pro-Nicene and Arian opponents as in reality a struggle for power within the church that was disguised as a theological dispute. The council’s decisions represented a victory for those who wielded the most influence over the emperor. This meant that the creed was seen as an unfortunate capitulation of the church to imperial politics and an emblem of the new merger between the Roman Empire and Christianity.

To this day some churches and denominations see creeds, ancient or modern, as little more than legislated statements of power used for manipulating the faithful. Such a view is often built on the assumption that the church by the time of Nicaea had compromised its original biblical standards, replacing principles of Scripture with the authoritarianism of a new imperial and episcopal establishment.

While the council did involve interchurch politics with dissenting groups trying to obtain the emperor’s ear, the Nicene Creed had its origin in the worshiping life of the church. A mere collective of bishops could not make for sound Christian doctrine. We are mistaken to cast the early bishops into the role of power brokers and political schemers, rather than the pastors and preachers that most of them were. Interpreting and proclaiming the true faith to their

CREED IN CONTEXT Athanasius (*right*), Alexandria's often-exiled patriarch from 328 to 373, defended the Nicene Creed as a fitting summary of biblical teaching about God that addressed the church's current theological challenges.

congregations was a major preoccupation for nearly every one of the early church theologians.

Likewise creedal statements had to represent the common mind of the church or else they would not have been accepted and employed by the larger body of believing Christians. The vigilance of bishops in upholding and preserving Christian truth is exemplified in the opening words of the Council of Antioch (which met in the early months of 325) when it declared that its statement of faith was "the faith that was set forth by spiritual men . . . always formed and trained in the spirit by means of the holy writings of the inspired books." At the councils at Antioch and Nicaea, both of which formulated creeds, the concern was the same: articulating a theological vision that emerged from the church's faith. In effect the creed was a statement *ex corde ecclesiae*—out of the heart of the church.

TRADITIONAL AND SCRIPTURAL ROOTS

However council members came to agreement on the creed, its final form had clear roots in local baptismal creeds Christians were already using. After all a creed was supposed to be exactly what the word meant: a confession of the faith by the people of God, thus reflecting what the churches were confessing.

While no exact parallels can be made, the Nicene formulation seems most closely related to the baptismal declarations used in the churches of Caesarea and Jerusalem. In a letter written to his congregation just after the close of the Nicene council, Eusebius of Caesarea explained that though he was reluctant to sign the Nicene Creed, he would never have done so had that formula contradicted the faith of the Caesarean church. After making every inquiry into the meaning of the creed's wording, Eusebius wrote, "it appeared to us to coincide with what we ourselves have professed in the faith which we have previously preached."

None of the preceding is meant to imply the church faced no immediate difficulties with the creed that the bishops at Nicaea produced. Many bishops were concerned that the creed failed to distinguish sufficiently the being of the Son from the Father. Describing the Son as "from the substance of the Father" or of "the same substance" (*homoousios*) as the Father made it seem as if the Father and Son were really identical, separated only by their names. Church fathers in the second century had condemned this view (later known as "modalism") as heretical because it stressed



COMING TO THE CROSS Constantine prays facing the cross in this 17th-c. tapestry (*above*). Much can be said about the emperor's expression of faith, but undoubtedly the Spirit used imperfect means to guide the early church.

the monotheistic character of Christianity at the cost of upholding a substantial trinitarianism (see "Doctrinal dysfunction," p. 23). Suspicions were further aroused by the fact that two strong supporters of the Nicene Creed, Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra, were known advocates of a modalist-type view of God.

Moreover the words "of the same substance" were not found anywhere in Scripture. Prior to and throughout the fourth century, all creedal terminology was drawn from the very words of the Bible. Not a few bishops in the East



opposed the new creed in the years after 325 because it seemed to introduce unscripural terms.

Nevertheless proponents of Nicaea argued that the creed and its controversial terms were a theological extension of New Testament teaching about Christ. This is exactly the point Athanasius made in *On the Definition of the Nicene Creed* (c. 350), which he wrote in defense of the creed a quarter of a century after the council met. New theological language was necessary to meet the theological needs brought about by the recent challenges to the church's faith. Despite some of the terms used, Athanasius declared, the final creed was the natural outcome of the church's preaching, reflection, and biblical exegesis. Even if we allow for special pleading on Athanasius's part, we may safely assume that those bishops who signed the creed believed it was a fitting summary of biblical teaching.

The charge laid against Nicaea by later theologians that the creed was more the product of philosophical influence or "Hellenization" than of Scripture is misconstrued for two reasons. First, all Christian thinkers of the time—both "orthodox" and "heretical"—were drawing on contemporary philosophical language to frame theological truths. Terms such as *person*, *substance*, *essence*, and many others all had a philosophical background that predated Christianity but were borrowed permanently for Christian purposes. Where the Bible and Greek philosophy were in conflict, the Bible took precedence for even the most erudite Christians.

Second, one of the lessons learned during the Arian controversy was that to achieve doctrinal orthodoxy, you cannot interpret the Bible from the Bible alone. That is, the church needed a vocabulary and a conceptual framework that stemmed from the Bible but were also outside of the Bible. Sooner or later some means of interpreting the scriptural text would be required.

LOGOS, LAW, AND LORD A church wall relief shows a personified New Testament held aloft (*middle*), displaying its God-breathed inspiration. The early church understood Christ as the Word: both the giver and fulfiller of the law (*left*). Though the passage generated much discussion at Nicaea, Philippians 2:5–11 shows Christ's redemptive sacrifice, relationship to the Father, and right title of "Lord," which this Italian mosaic affirms (*above*).

Whatever else may be said of the ancient creeds, it cannot be denied that they were deliberately constructed to be the epitome of the biblical message. When instructing new converts, Augustine taught, "For whatever you hear in the Creed is contained in the inspired books of Holy Scripture." It was the task of these creeds not merely to reproduce the Bible but to enable Christians to understand what the Bible, both Old and New Testament, means.

In the end the Nicene Creed represented a large-scale attempt to answer the question, "Do you know whom you worship?" Christianity's central convictions—that God is one and Christ is God—had to be put into a cohesive statement that preserved the integrity of both. This was the burden of the fourth century. The Council of Nicaea responded with a creed that was new to church history and was not immediately accepted, but, as time would tell, it was crafted well, agreeing with the intention of church tradition and biblical principles. As Charles Williams once said of the Christian faith encapsulated by the Nicene Creed, "It had become a Creed, and it remained a Gospel." **CH**

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“And in one Lord Jesus Christ”

Arguments on the relationship of Father and Son

Rather, therefore, as an act of the will proceeds from the understanding, and neither cuts off any part nor is separated or divided from it, so after some such fashion is the Father to be supposed as having begotten the Son, His own image; namely, so that, as He is Himself invisible by nature, He also begot an image that was invisible. For the Son is the Word, and therefore we are not to understand that anything in Him is cognizable by the senses. He is wisdom, and in wisdom there can be no suspicion of anything corporeal. He is the true light, which enlightens every man that comes into this world; but He has nothing in common with the light of this sun.

Our Savior, therefore, is the image of the invisible God, inasmuch as compared with the Father Himself He is the truth: and as compared with us, to whom He reveals the Father, He is the image by which we come to the knowledge of the Father, whom no one knows save the Son, and he to whom the Son is pleased to reveal Him.

—Origen, *De Principiis* (c. 220–230), chapter 2, translated by Frederick Crombie

The bishop [Alexander] greatly wastes and persecutes us, and leaves no stone unturned against us. He has driven us out of the city as atheists, because we do not concur in what he publicly preaches, namely, God always, the Son always; as the Father so the Son; the Son co-exists unbegotten with God; He is everlasting; neither by thought nor by any interval does God precede the Son; always God, always Son; he is begotten of the unbegotten; the Son is of God Himself...

We say and believe, and have taught, and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; and that He does not derive His subsistence from any matter; but that by His own will and counsel He has subsisted before time, and before ages, as perfect God, only begotten and unchangeable, and that before He was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, He was not. For He was not unbegotten.

—Arius, “Letter to Bishop Eusebius” (c. 318), preserved in book I, chapter 4 of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoret (c. 450), translated by Blomfield Jackson

Now... it is an insane thing to think that the Son was made from things which are not, and was in being in time, the expression, “from things which are not,” itself shows, although these stupid men understand not the insanity of their own words... [The Lord] concerning whom we thus believe, even as the Apostolic Church believes. In one Father unbegotten, who has from no one the cause of His being, who is unchangeable and immutable, who is always the same, and admits of no increase or diminution; who gave to us the Law, the prophets, and



LIGHT FROM LIGHT? A 20th-c. mosaic depicts God the Father traditionally—as a hand from heaven. At Nicaea, those present debated how the Father and Son relate.

the Gospels; who is Lord of the patriarchs and apostles, and all the saints. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; not begotten of things which are not, but of Him who is the Father; not in a corporeal manner, by excision or division as Sabellius and Valentinus thought, but in a certain inexplicable and unspeakable manner, according to the words of the prophet cited above: Who shall declare His generation?

—Alexander of Alexandria, “Letter to Alexander of Constantinople” (324), translated by James B. H. Hawkins

For who can even imagine that the radiance of light ever was not, so that he should dare to say that the Son was not always, or that the Son was not before His generation? Or who is capable of separating the radiance from the sun, or to conceive of the fountain as ever void of life, that he should madly say, “The Son is from nothing,” who says, “I am the life,” or “alien to the Father’s essence,” who says, “He that has seen Me, has seen the Father?” For the sacred writers wishing us thus to understand, have given these illustrations; and it is unseemly and most irreligious, when Scripture contains such images, to form ideas concerning our Lord from others which are neither in Scripture, nor have any religious bearing.

—Athanasius, *De Decretis* (c. 350–356), chapter 3, translated by John Henry Newman



AN EASTERN AFFAIR? This painting shows Rome's Bishop Sylvester preparing for the Council of Nicaea, though too aged to attend. Most council fathers were Easterners from areas such as Jericho (Byzantine mosaic map at bottom right).

Gregorian calendar (see bonus guide of *CH*, *Fasts and Feasts* for more).

Another significant issue at Nicaea was a proposal for clerical celibacy, probably introduced by Ossius of Cordoba (pp. 36–39). But this proposal was vigorously opposed by the bachelor bishop Paphnutius. He urged that “too heavy a yoke ought not to be laid upon the clergy” and that “marriage and married intercourse are of themselves honorable and undefiled.” Such a statement coming from a celibate carried the day, and the council stopped all discussion on the matter. (Clerical celibacy was eventually enforced in the 11th century by Pope Gregory VII.)

NICAEA'S RULES TO LIVE BY

Twenty formal *canons* (rules, standards) were also passed at Nicaea. These canons, in contrast to the great theological debates over the person of Christ, are extremely practical rulings—some very minor—on problems in the early church. Many of them resulted from the recent persecution of Christians as well as challenges to episcopal authority:

Taking care of (church) business

THE 20 CANONS OF THE COUNCIL AND OTHER CHURCH ISSUES

Paul L. Maier

One of the most vexing problems in the early church concerned when to celebrate Easter. The Greek-speaking Eastern church insisted that it had to be on the date of Jesus's Crucifixion—Nisan 14, the Jewish Passover—regardless of the day of the week. The Western, Latin-speaking church, on the other hand, decreed that it had to be on the day of the Resurrection—Sunday—regardless of the date. The Council of Nicaea decided that Easter should be celebrated on a Sunday after the Jewish Passover, but the problem did not disappear entirely. Even today the Eastern Orthodox Church, which uses the old Julian calendar, often observes Easter on a different Sunday from the Western church, which uses the

1. Eunuchs may become clergymen, unless their condition was self-imposed.
2. A period of probation is required before converts can hold church office.
3. No woman is to live in the home of unmarried clergy, except for a mother, sister, or aunt.
4. A bishop must be chosen by all colleague bishops, or at least by three in person, the others agreeing by letter.
5. Anyone excommunicated by a given bishop shall not be restored by others, unless the excommunication was unjust. There will be two synods a year in a given province to determine this.
6. The bishop of Alexandria is in charge of Egypt, Libya, and the Pentapolis, much as the bishops of Rome and Antioch have authority in their domains. Any “bishop” opposed to them is no bishop, according to a majority vote of area bishops.
7. Let the bishop of Aelia (Jerusalem) have the place of honor next after the metropolitan (the bishop of Caesarea. Ever since its destruction in AD 70, Jerusalem was in decline.)
8. Sectarian Cathari (also known as Novatians—they adamantly denied forgiveness to those who fell away during persecution, a position that caused a major church schism) wishing to return to the church must state in writing that they will pardon the penitential lapsed, their



PRACTICAL PASTORING Nicaea dealt with several practical concerns, some regarding church authority (deacon above) and celibacy. Paphnutius (pictured above right) fought against enforced clerical celibacy.



offices remaining the same except where the local bishop remains in charge.

9. Whoever are ordained without examination are deposed if later found guilty.
10. Whoever was ordained but had lapsed (earlier, in persecution) shall be deposed.
11. Those who lapsed in persecution without duress but wish readmission and genuinely repent must undergo a 12-year probation (not able to fully participate in the body of Christ, such as in taking Communion).
12. Those who endured violence, then lapsed, are excommunicated for 10 years, but may be readmitted depending on their penitence.
13. The dying (who are not yet communicants) are to receive the Eucharist (on their deathbed), but if they recover, they are to share only in the prayers of the church.
14. If a catechumen has lapsed, he is demoted to hearer status for three years, after which he may pray again with (i.e., rejoin) the catechumens.

15. No bishop, presbyter, or deacon shall “pass from city to city” exercising official authority but shall be returned to the church in which he was ordained.
16. Any presbyters or deacons who desert their own churches are not to be admitted into another but must be returned to their own parishes. If a bishop ordains



anyone belonging to another (church) without the consent of that bishop, the ordination is void.

17. Any clergyman lending his money at interest, such as 1 percent (per month) or 150 percent usury for the loan shall be deposed from office.
18. Deacons are to know the limitations of their rank and not administer the Eucharist to presbyters, nor touch it before them.
19. Paulianists (followers of the heretic Paul of Samosata) must be rebaptized, and their clergy reordained if blameless or deposed if not. Their deaconesses are laicized.

FAMOUS FAITHFUL Notable council attendees included Spyridon of Cyprus (*above*), known for miracles and asceticism, and Eusebius of Caesarea, the author of a fundamental work on early church history (*left*).

20. For the sake of uniformity in the church, on the Lord's Day and Pentecost all should pray standing rather than kneeling. **CH**

Paul L. Maier (1930–2025) was the Russell H. Seibert Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, third vice president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and an author. This article is adapted from CH #85.

Who came to the Council of Nicaea?

Judging from what little we know about the identity of those who attended, the council was overwhelmingly Eastern. Only six or seven bishops are recorded as having come from Western churches; among them were Ossius (or Hosius) of Cordoba, Caecilianus of Carthage, and two representatives from the church of Rome. The small number of bishops from the West reflected the general ignorance among Western churches of the theological issues that had embroiled the East.

Of the bishops from the East, Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were best represented. Several came from Arabia, Persia, Libya, and Greece. One even came from Armenia.

Bishops from almost all of the oldest and major sees of the East were present: Alexander of Alexandria,

Antiochus of Memphis (Egypt), Macanus of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Caesarea, Eustathius of Antioch (Syria), Magnus of Damascus, Januarius of Jericho, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eutychius of Smyrna, Menophantes of Ephesus, Artemidorus of Sardis and, of course, Theognis of Nicaea.

But the most esteemed personalities at the council were Paphnutius of Upper Thebes and Spyridon of Cyprus. Paphnutius was a confessor, whose eyes had been gouged out for confessing the faith during the last persecution of Christians, and Spyridon was well known for his life of self-denial and miracle working. The emperor himself was said to have greeted them personally and sought their prayers. —D. H. Williams, *issue advisor*; adapted from CH #85.

Against the world and for the Trinity

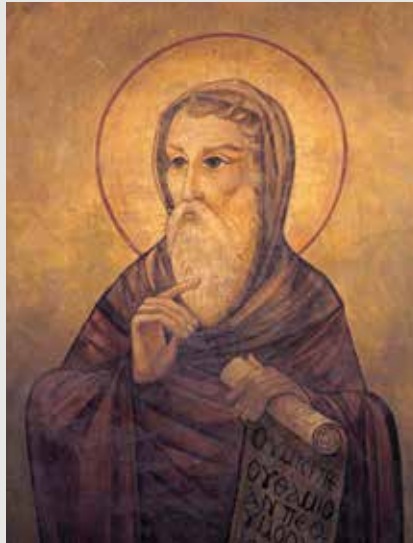
Born to a Christian family in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, almost two generations younger than Arius, a 27-year-old named Athanasius served as Bishop Alexander's secretary at Nicaea. Already a bit of a prodigy—having written two books in his early twenties, *Against the Heathen* (318) and *On the Incarnation* (c. 320), and having been ordained a deacon in 319—Athanasius would have even more impact than this in the generations following the council. Indeed he became one of orthodox trinitarian Christianity's most controversial and consequential defenders.

ON AGAIN, OFF AGAIN BISHOP

Beyond the fact that his parents were believers and that his writings show him to be well educated, we know almost nothing of Athanasius's early life. One apocryphal story has Alexander noticing him and other boys pretending to baptize each other on the beach. We do have several detailed descriptions of his physical appearance and personality; he was apparently short and spare with a small mouth, a large nose, and auburn hair. He was energetic and dryly humorous. At Nicaea, where he was later said to have made a memorable impression, he sided with Alexander and the *homoousian* position. He never appears to have confronted his main opponent, Arius, in person.

Alexander, so prominent in the early Arian debates, died soon after the council—probably in 328—and his protégé, now roughly 30, was chosen unanimously as his successor as bishop of Alexandria, one of the most powerful and influential sees in the early church. The gifted and argumentative Athanasius would serve in this role off and on for the next 45 years until his death in 373. The off times incorporated five different banishments into exile by four different emperors who favored the Arians and Eusebians (and may also have found Athanasius's personality abrasive), adding up to a total of 17 years.

During his times of exile, Athanasius traveled, spreading the message of trinitarian orthodoxy. He also continued sending out what were known as "Easter Letters" or "Paschal Letters"—letters that the bishop of Alexandria customarily sent yearly after determining that year's date of Easter astronomically, with assistance from the scholars of Alexandria. Naturally Athanasius snuck a great deal of advice and argumentation into these. He also wrote a number of theological and pastoral works, mostly while exiled. The most famous of these was the *Life of Anthony* (360),



CONFESSOR AND CONTRARIAN
An Egyptian icon depicts the controversial Athanasius as a *confessor*—a saint who suffered for the gospel.

a biography of the great desert ascetic and a perennial best-seller (then and now).

ORTHODOXY'S CHAMPION

Nobody was neutral about Athanasius; people nicknamed him both the "Father of Orthodoxy" and "Athanasius Contra Mundum" (Athanasius Against the World). After his death Gregory Nazianzus (329–390)

eulogized him as the "Pillar of the Church." Despite political and theological controversy, he remained dedicated to the message of a redeemer who is both God and man, which he had first penned around age 21 in *On the Incarnation*:

For he [Jesus Christ] was made man that we might be made God; and he showed himself in the body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.

In his old age, he wrote to a friend, "Let what was confessed by the Fathers of Nicaea prevail." Surprisingly Athanasius died peacefully at age 75, surrounded by his clergy and able to name and consecrate his successor, Peter II, before he died.

Athanasius has gone down through history as one of trinitarian orthodoxy's greatest champions. Gregory Nazianzus described one of his returns from exile thus: "[Athanasius] restored too the teaching which had been overthrown: the Trinity was once more boldly spoken of, and set upon the lampstand, flashing with the brilliant light of the One Godhead into the souls of all." Sixteen hundred years later, C. S. Lewis wrote in a 1944 introduction to a translation of *On the Incarnation* that Athanasius

stood for the trinitarian doctrine, "whole and undefiled," when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius—into one of those "sensible" synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.

—Jennifer Woodruff Tait, senior editor of Christian History

DEBATING JESUS'S DIVINITY

Events that led to the Council of Nicaea and the controversies that came after



The Council of Nicaea, 18th-c. icon

303 The “Great Persecution” begins under Emperor Diocletian.

313 The Edict of Milan, issued by Roman emperors Constantine I and Licinius, extends religious freedom to all, including Christians.

c. 318 A theological dispute between Bishop Alexander of Alexandria and

one of his presbyters, Arius, sparks a storm of correspondence and public controversy.

c. 320 Athanasius, a student of Alexander, writes *On the Incarnation*.

324 Constantine defeats Licinius and becomes the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. He sends a letter to Alexander and Arius pleading with them to set aside their differences.

condemns the teaching of Arius. Eusebius of Caesarea is reinstated. Arius and his supporters are exiled.

326 Alexander selects Athanasius as his successor before he dies.



Basil of Caesarea, 17th-c. fresco

325 The Council of Antioch supports Alexander's views against Arius, deposes Eusebius of Caesarea, and plans a general council to be held in Ancyra. Constantine moves the council to his palace in Nicaea.

325 The Council of Nicaea produces a creed affirming that Christ is of the same substance as the Father and

Canonical Conundrum

The Council of Nicaea's attempt to appeal to Scripture revealed a fundamental difference between Alexander and Arius: how they believed Christians should interpret biblical statements about Christ. Alexander and Athanasius appealed to scriptural texts that speak of the Son's generation from the Father or that declare the unity of Father and Son:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. (Col. 1:15)

I and the Father are one. (John 10:30)

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb. 1:3–4)

Arius drew upon Scripture passages that speak of the Son being distinct from the Father, particularly texts that speak of profound differences between the two:

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old. (Prov. 8:22)

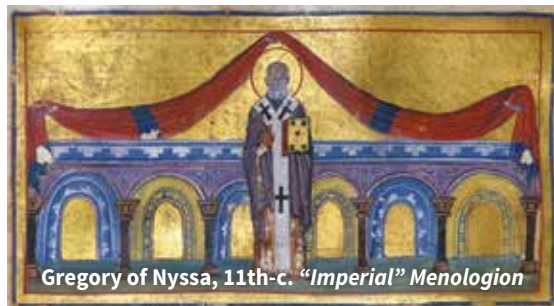
... for the Father is greater than I. (John 14:28)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)

According to Athanasius, the council's endeavor to settle upon the right terminology to describe Jesus's relationship to God the Father began with the many different scriptural titles for Christ. How were they all to be read? *Word, Power, Wisdom, Angel of the Lord, Servant, Morningstar, Son of David, and Son of Man* are some of the important Old Testament titles given to the Son. *Son, Word, Lord, Power,*

Light, Shepherd, Imprint of God's Nature, Life, Rock, and Door are some of the important New Testament titles given to the Son. Were all of these titles given in the same way or in the same sense? Was Jesus the “Word” in the same way he was the “Door”? Furthermore, were these titles given in a unique way to Jesus? Was Jesus called the “Son of God” as the Israelites were called sons of God and those who believed in Jesus were now the sons and daughters of God? Was God Jesus's “father” in just the same way he is “our father”?

—Michel Rene Barnes, Associate Professor of Theology Emeritus, Marquette University



328 Athanasius becomes bishop of Alexandria. Over the next 17 years, Athanasius faces periods of exile and controversy.

336 Constantine attempts to reinstate Arius. Arius dies before he is received back into fellowship.

337 Constantine is baptized on his deathbed by Eusebius of Nicomedia.

337 Constantius II, one of three coemperors after Constantine's death, embraces Arianism. The Nicene Creed is nearly eclipsed amid a dizzying array of councils and creeds for several decades.

c. 340 The Arian missionary Ulphilas evangelizes the Goths.

350–53 After a civil war, Constantius becomes sole ruler of the empire.

350s Tensions build between heterousian and homoiousian theologians (defined *below* in "Doctrinal Dysfunction").

359–360 Emperor Constantius calls two councils that promulgate a homoian creed.

361 Constantius dies; Julian the Apostate becomes emperor.



360–380 Pro-Nicene theologians rally around the Nicene Creed as an orthodox alternative to Arian creeds.

370 Basil becomes bishop of Caesarea and repudiates "fighters against the Holy Spirit."

373 Athanasius dies.

378 Basil dies.

379 Theodosius the Great becomes Roman emperor.

380 Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa, refutes the heterousian writings of



Eunomius. Gregory of Nazianzus preaches a series of protrinitarian sermons in Constantinople.

381 The Council of Constantinople, summoned by Emperor Theodosius, reaffirms and expands the Nicene Creed.

451 The Council of Chalcedon proclaims the two natures of Christ. After this, the church looks to the Council of Nicaea as the beginning point for establishing orthodoxy.



Doctrinal Dysfunction

Nicene orthodoxy was defined in this way: the Father and the Son are of the *same* essence (*homoousios*); but they are not different "parts" of God. God is indivisible One yet Three. Here are definitions of positions that differ from Nicene orthodoxy and are considered heresy, or

a departure from biblical Christianity. Pay close attention to the seemingly small but crucially significant differences in the Greek words:

Homoiousian: The Son is *like* the Father in essence (*homoiousios*); he *differs* from the Father only in not being unbegotten.

Homoian: The Son is *like* the Father, but he is a *distinct* and *inferior* being.

Heterousian (or Eunomian): The Father and the Son are *unlike* in essence.

Eusebian: There is a *closeness* between the Father and the Son, but they are *distinct* beings.

Modalist (or Sabellian): God's names (*Father, Son, Holy Spirit*) *change* with his role or "modes of being" (like a chameleon). When God is the Son, he is not the Father. There is *no permanent distinction* between the three "persons" of the Trinity, otherwise you have three gods. —*By the editors*

Creed, chaos, and consensus

THE RISE OF THE PRO-NICENE ALLIANCE AND TRINITARIAN UNDERSTANDING

Mark DelCogliano



CREED COMPANIONS In the years after Nicaea, Bishops Athanasius and Basil led the way for the creed's acceptance.

aim, for nearly 20 years in the East it was the basis for other conciliar creeds. Early attempts sought wider acceptability by using a minimal number of “anti” statements within the creed; but then they supplemented the creed with detailed explanations and anathemas (formal curses that denounced false doctrine) to ensure interpretation in a particular (anti-Arian and anti-Marcellan) manner.

In 353, after Constantius II (317–361), son of Constantine, became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, he convened a series of synods, trying to collect episcopal agreement to a creed based on the minimalistic fourth creed of Antioch with supplemental anathemas. But he made a strategic mistake with his support

In the 15 or so years following the council, the Nicene Creed seemed to bring up more questions than it initially answered. Division festered within the church. Trinitarian controversies continued. But out of these divisions, theological debates, and a series of catalyzing events, an alliance of prominent pro-Nicene bishops emerged. It would take over 50 years after Nicaea, but this alliance would achieve lasting ascendancy for the Nicene position, solidified at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

THE “FOURTH CREED”

Forging a consensus, however, was more easily said than done. As the focus of controversy shifted from Arius to Eustathius of Antioch (died c. 337), Marcellus of Ancyra (died c. 374), and Athanasius of Alexandria, fracture lines within the church deepened (see pp. 32–35). Eusebius of Caesarea accused the first two of Sabellianism (see p. 23) and orchestrated their deposition and exile (Eustathius in 327 and Marcellus in 336). Some also targeted Athanasius, who had been convicted of church misconduct in 335, making him suspect to many Eastern bishops. In the decade after Nicaea, Eastern bishops came to view Western support for Marcellus and Athanasius as tolerance of Sabellianism, while Western bishops increasingly viewed Eastern bishops as harboring Arian views.

The Dedication Council of Antioch in 341 became the first major attempt to work for a new consensus. The bishops there positioned orthodoxy as the center between the extremes of Arianism and Sabellianism and hoped to garner widespread support with a minimalist creed. While this so-called fourth creed of Antioch failed to achieve its immediate

of the Second Sirmium Formula of 357, which condemned all *ousia* terminology for God and explicitly prohibited, for the first time, the terms *homoousios* (same-in-substance) and *homoiousios* (like-in-substance).

Later called the Blasphemy of Sirmium, the Second Sirmium Formula's stark subordinationist agenda was a rejection of the centrist approach of the fourth creed of Antioch and provoked widespread unease among all participants in the trinitarian debates. Yet even prior to this, Constantius's heavy-handedness in promoting his imperially endorsed creed had generated opposition and began a drive toward accepting Nicaea. Western bishops such as Eusebius of Vercelli (283–371) and Phoebadius of Agen (died c. 392) promoted the Nicene Creed as the basis for consensus, and Athanasius attempted to refute objections to key Nicene phrases in his *On the Decrees of the Council of Nicaea* written from 353 to 356.

The Blasphemy of Sirmium sparked the emergence of new theological approaches, such as the heteroousian theology of Aetius and Eunomius—which emphasized that the Son was “different in substance” (*heteroousios*) from the Father—and their opponents, the homoiousians led by Basil of Ancyra and George of Laodicea, who preferred to say that the Son was “like the Father in substance.” Others endorsed a theology called “homoian,” because it ambiguously affirmed that the Father and the Son are “alike” (*homoios*) without much further specification.

Eventually Constantius convened two councils that promulgated a homoian creed, and in early 360 it was imposed across the empire. Yet the settlement was fragile. Constantius died in 361, and with his death the politico-theological



NICAIA: THE NEXT GENERATION A 17-c. painting by Peter Paul Rubens shows Gregory of Nazianzus, a Nicaea proponent, symbolically defeating heresy (*above*). Another Nicaea defender was Emperor Theodosius I (*above right*), who convened the Council of Constantinople.

machinery that had sustained the creed collapsed. This crisis proved decisive: it transformed scattered sympathies into a coherent movement and made Nicaea a rallying point for those seeking stability in doctrine, despite real differences. Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea represented the most important figures in this shift.

NICENE RENEWAL

In his treatise *On the Councils* (359), Athanasius engaged directly with the Homoiousians, showing that “like according to substance” need not conflict with the Nicene *homoousion*. He argued that the latter term did not imply materialistic conceptions of divinity but safeguarded the biblical teaching of the Son’s true divinity. In the Antiochene Tome of 362, Athanasius proposed a way to reconcile two apparently contradictory traditions: those confessing that God had “one hypostasis” and those confessing that he had “three hypostases.” Athanasius argued that three-hypostases language could be used in an orthodox, non-Arian manner; likewise, one-hypostasis language could be used in an orthodox, non-Sabellian manner. In his view these seemingly opposed terminologies could actually express compatible theologies.

He also advanced the earlier strategy of supplementing a creed with authoritative interpretation; just as earlier consensus formulas had been accompanied by explanatory anathemas, so Nicaea, he argued, should be received with its true meaning clarified. His insistence on interpretive supplementation laid a foundation for later pro-Nicene theology. It also helped to disarm the suspicion that Nicaea was inherently Sabellian, and managed to create space for the incorporation of Homoiousians into the pro-Nicene alliance.



Basil, meanwhile, emerged onto the theological stage from a roughly homoiousian milieu. In his anti-heteroousian *Contra Eunomium* (364–365), Basil articulated a theology of God’s unitary substance and the distinctive features that characterize the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit without appeal to technical terms. At first he was cautious about the *homoousios* and preferred formulations such as “exactly and indistinguishably alike according to substance,” which seemed a more accurate way of expressing the relation between the *ousiai* of the Father and the Son. But in time Basil came to view *homoousios* as the better term.

In the 370s as bishop, Basil ceaselessly promoted confession of the Nicene Creed as the means to unity, as long as it was interpreted soundly—the creed, he believed, required some supplementation to ensure correct understanding. This included refusing to call the Holy Spirit a creature and anathematizing those who did.

Athanasius required a similar anathema in the Antiochene Tome. Both theologians were responding to Pneumatomachians, or “fighters against the Spirit,” who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Writings from both Athanasius and Basil, as well as Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Holy Spirit Against the Macedonians* from the early 380s, represent early attempts to argue systematically for the Spirit’s full divinity. Affirmation of this understanding of the Spirit became a key element of pro-Nicene theology.

IMPERIAL MUSCLE

Athanasius died in 373 and Basil on January 1, 379, with hopes for a lasting pro-Nicene alliance still unrealized. Heteroousian theology resurged when Eunomius at long last decided to respond to the now-dead Basil with his *Apology for the Apology*, issued between late 378 and the early 380s. Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa, circulated his own *Contra Eunomium*, a refutation of Eunomius, between 380 and 383. In 379 Gregory of Nazianzus was summoned to minister to



the embattled pro-Nicenes in Constantinople. Here in the summer of 380, he preached a famous series of five theological orations in which he boldly articulated an anti-Arian, anti-Eunomian, anti-Marcellan, and anti-Pneumatomachian, pro-Nicene theology of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that emphasized the paradox of divine unity and multiplicity. Unlike Basil he even called the Holy Spirit “God” and extended the *homoousios* to the Holy Spirit as well as to the Son, insisting thus that the Holy Spirit is from the substance of the Father as much as the Son is. Gregory solidified the distinction between the way Son and Spirit are *from* the Father—the Son by “begetting” and the Spirit by “procession.”

The final breakthrough for the pro-Nicene alliance came with the accession of Theodosius I. In late 380 Theodosius entered Constantinople, expelled the homoian bishop there, and installed Gregory of Nazianzus in his place. Then in 381 the emperor convened the Council of Constantinople. Initially presided over by Meletius of Antioch, and later by Gregory himself, the council reaffirmed the faith of Nicaea, condemned the Pneumatomachians, and issued a new creed. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed did not reject the Nicene faith but instead restated it in the current context, which required a fuller affirmation of the Spirit’s divinity.

WALKING THE TRINITARIAN LINE Visualizing the Trinity has always been tricky. Two early-modern depictions contrast the clarity of the early council’s careful vocabulary of orthodoxy (*left*) versus the strangeness of novel attempts to imagine the trinitarian mystery (*above left*). Its three-faced image borders on modalism.

CLARIFYING COUNCIL The Council of Constantinople (*above*) produced a detailed statement of faith that did not survive, but a letter from a smaller council in 382 showed its pro-Nicene logic, summarizing the trine God as “one divinity, power, and substance in three perfect hypostases.”

Theodosius ensured this creed’s enforcement through legislation summarizing the trinitarian logic according to which the creed should be understood. For example his decree *All the Peoples* (February 380) announced: “We shall believe in the single deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity.” Neither *All the Peoples* nor *No Place for the Heretics* (January 380) nor *Handed Over to the Bishops* (July 381) put forth the *homoousios* as a key marker of pro-Nicene orthodoxy; rather, the emphasis was on articulating the logic of three divine persons within the unitary divinity, without any insistence on particular technical terminology. Through these measures, the creed became entrenched as the empire’s official religion.

Like previous movements, the pro-Nicene alliance sought to occupy the center between extremes, to craft a creed minimalist enough for broad assent but substantive enough to exclude heresy, and to supplement that creed with authoritative interpretation. Unlike earlier creeds it possessed a theological synthesis capable of resolving earlier ambiguities, bishops of intellectual stature able to articulate its logic, and an emperor willing and able to enforce its decisions. By the close of the fourth century, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed had secured its place as the measure of orthodoxy. **CH**

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Why a creed?

Christian History spoke with Robert Louis Wilken to learn more about early church councils and why they matter today. Wilken is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of History of Christianity emeritus at the University of Virginia, elected fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and past president of the American Academy of Religion, the North American Patristics Society, and the Academy of Catholic Theology. The interview is adapted from issue #85.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY: Why should we care about the early councils today—or even recite a creed? Aren't the New Testament Gospel accounts enough for today's church?

ROBERT LOUIS WILKEN: One begins with the simple and inescapable fact that the Scriptures need to be interpreted. The Bible is not a doctrinal treatise. It's not a catechism. It's not a set of well-defined teachings. It's basically a narrative, a story about what God has done in the coming of Christ. So from the beginning, how to understand the various parts of the Scripture in relation one to another was an enormous challenge for Christians.

Take, side by side, two portions of Scripture: First, the great passage in Colossians 1 about Christ being the image of the invisible God in whom all things consist. Second, the narrative in Mark of Christ as a preacher, prophet, and healer. In one passage all things come into being through Christ. In the other, you've got someone

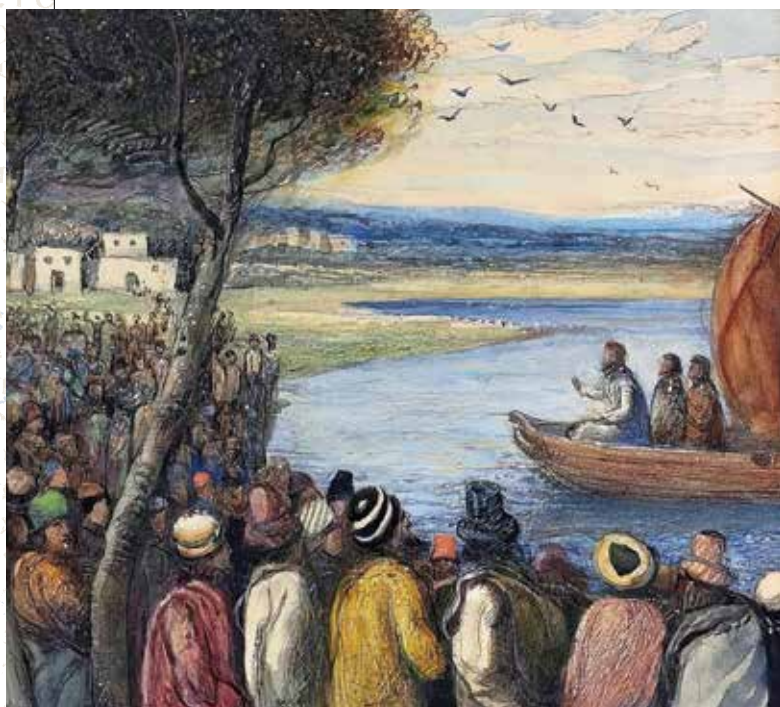
UNDERSTANDING THE FULL COUNSEL OF GOD Scripture writers such as Paul knew the Bible told one story. Inspired by the Spirit, his writings helped the fledgling church understand God's revelation.

who looks very much like a preacher in the style of John the Baptist. The conviction of the early church was that the Bible was one book. It had one story. So one had to try to find a way to bring what was read in Paul into relation to what was read in Mark. And this was not a simple matter of quoting biblical verses; there were honest differences of opinion as to how they were to be understood.

The basic problem was that Christians began, as Jews, with the belief that God is one. On the basis of his teachings and miracles, the kind of person Jesus was, and because he rose from the dead, Christians said, "This man is not like any other man"—he is in some sense divine, or God. But how do you say that God is one when you've got two identifiable realities—God the Father and God the Son—and claim they're God? That's the problem. And it's not an easy problem to solve.

CH: Before the Council of Nicaea, plenty of local baptismal "creeds" agreed in essentials while varying in details. Why coerce the whole church into accepting a single, rigidly defined creed promulgated by a single council? Was this really necessary?

RLW: Christians are reflective people. They think about what they believe. In my book *The Spirit of Early*



Christian Thought, I quote a passage from Augustine. He says,

No one believes anything unless one first thought it believable. . . . Not everyone who thinks believes, since many think in order not to believe; but everyone who believes thinks, thinks in believing and believes in thinking.

The church very early on attracted well-educated people, and they began to think about what they confessed, what they believed, and to say, “Well, what does this mean?” or “How can this be, in light of what is said elsewhere in Scripture?” And eventually the problem emerged that I just outlined, namely, “How can we believe in one God and claim that Jesus, a human being, is also God?” That led to the controversy.

The Nicene Creed is different from the Apostles’ Creed. The Nicene Creed is a creed that tries to define, to use more precise language for the church’s faith, to set boundaries. It even introduces a word that is not in the Bible, *homoousios* (of one substance or being) because the bishops felt that it helped explain how God could be one yet two persons (the debate about the Holy Spirit would follow two generations later). With that term the council fathers wished to say that in whatever way God is God, Christ also is God. The term “begotten” (which is biblical) means that he comes into being eternally from the Father—he is not made like human beings.

CH: What were bishops doing at the Council of Nicaea? Who were these bishops, and why should they have anything to say to the church?

RLW: It’s very clear that from the beginning that the church is not simply a collection of individuals. It’s a



PREACHER AND PROPHET, CREATOR AND KING The Bible paints a multifaceted picture of Jesus, with some Gospel accounts stressing his humanity (*left*) and others pointing to his divinity (*above*). At its core the Nicene Creed sought to make sense of these paradoxical realities.

community. And a community needs leadership, those in authority to whom people could look for direction, someone to teach and to preside at worship.

We know that early in the church’s history, these figures were called bishops. “Bishop” simply means “overseer.” They were charged to teach what they had received from the apostles. So by the end of the first century, anywhere you would look in the church, the primary leader was the bishop, and he was the community’s focal point. Ignatius of Antioch says, “Where the bishop is, there the church is.”

Twice in 1 Corinthians, Paul says, “That which I have received I have handed on to you.” The leaders of the churches understood themselves as teachers who had received something from those who had preceded. This is in contrast to the way we think as Americans. When we have an issue before us, we gather different opinions, we consult this and we consult that and try to come to an agreement. But the early church always asked the question, “What have we received?” Then it asked, “How can we understand what we have received in light of this new situation?” Many had a say in the deliberations, but in the end, someone finally had to be responsible, and that was the bishop.

By the time you get to the third century, then, it is understood that the bishop is the guarantor of the apostolic tradition and is charged to teach what has been received. So it’s natural that the bishops are going to be the decision-makers at the council. It was a gathering of

A THINKING FAITH The ruins of an ancient baptismal font in Tuscany, Italy (*right*), attest to the vibrant and thoughtful belief of early Christians, who would often study for years as catechumens before being baptized.

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY? As council fathers (*below right*) wrestled with the meaning of God's Word, they came to a deeper understanding of its truths.

those who were most responsible for the church's teaching.

CH: *Wasn't the idea that Jesus is in some way subordinate to God the Father a pretty standard view in the church before Nicaea? Why pick on Arius?*

RLW: Arius was representing what many of the bishops believed. They had relatively inchoate, unformed ideas about Christ's relation to the Father. Because they believed that the church's central teaching was belief in one God, they were reluctant to make the claim that Christ was fully God. It seemed to compromise what Christians believed—that God is one. In the early centuries many Christians, even bishops, were in some vague sense subordinationists—that is, they believed that Christ was divine but not quite in the same way that God the Father was divine.

What was finally affirmed at Nicaea after much debate was based on the Scriptures, but the precise formulations are not found in the apostolic writings. As the church deliberated, it came to a deeper understanding of what was believed. In other words, the fullness of the revelation and the depth of its meaning were not as clear to the earlier generations as to later believers.

CH: Ousia, hypostasis, persona. . . . *Don't we have, in this conciliar process, a situation in which philosophy with its terms and rationales begins to overshadow the simple, powerful gospel?*

RLW: These terms are attempts to express what the gospel means. To appreciate them you have to study the biblical passages the early Christians were trying to understand and how the language that they eventually agreed on (two natures and one person of Christ, for example, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451) helped them to make sense out of very, very deep matters.

Look at one of the texts that caused difficulties: Luke 2:52. "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature." Everyone was willing to say Christ advanced in stature. But if he's a human being, then he's got to be someone who grows in knowledge. Few were willing to say that because it meant that Jesus was "ignorant" of certain things. Hence the difficulty of explaining what Luke meant.

Or take another one: Proverbs 8:22. Because Christ is identified as Wisdom in the New Testament, it was taken



as referring to Christ. But Proverbs says [in some versions], "He created me [wisdom] at the beginning of his work."

Well, what does it mean to say that Christ is created? Does that mean that he came into being like humans and that there was a time when he did not exist? That's a very, very big issue in the fourth century.

Or take the hymn in Philippians 2:6–11. The passage talks at first about Christ being in the form of God, and it says in the central section that he has taken on human form and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. And then Paul sticks, right in the middle of the text, a great big "therefore"—"Therefore God has highly exalted him." This makes it sound as though Christ's exaltation is because of what he has done. Critics of Nicaea appealed to this "therefore" to say that Christ had become divine and was not always divine.



The thing that many people don't realize is that in the early church, in all of these debates, the issue always centered on how one was to interpret specific passages from the Bible. They were not soaring to lofty theological and philosophical heights; they were trying to understand the book they heard read each Sunday in church and recited in their prayers.

CH: We see a sobering level of politicking involved in the whole process of the Council of Nicaea—before, during, and after—and quite apart from Constantine's role. There is "blood on the floor," so to speak. What are faithful Christians to make of this politically "dirty" process? Doesn't this taint the council and its resulting creed?

RLW: I doubt whether anybody involved in leadership in the churches today would claim that the debates they're involved in are not political. Politics has to do with people living together in a community—dealing with people who have different ideas and different agendas. It has to do with persuasion and compromise. The church is a human community, which means it's a political community.

Even the apostles disagreed with each other. In Antioch, for example, there was a clash between Paul and Peter (Gal. 2:11–21). I think we should be very grateful that we've got a record of the differences between the two foundational apostles in the New Testament, that they had a face-off with each other and one said to the other, "You're wrong." We should notice that this clash had consequences that seem now to have been Spirit-guided: the flourishing of the Gentile mission.

CH: In the council, the bishops cooperated with—some would say, were co-opted by—the state. Was the die cast at the

A CHANGED MAN? Constantine (left), for all his flaws, did seem to truly believe the gospel. He sought to Christianize the Roman Empire and was eventually baptized just before he died (above).

council for the state church model that would dominate the church for 1,200 years and more?

RLW: The simple answer is this: what does the church do when it winds up convincing most of a society to become Christian? That's what was happening by the fourth century. I don't think the church was co-opted by the state. It was the other way around: It's Constantine who changes. And once that happens, it means that the church assumes responsibility for forming the society—a task it didn't have before.

At the Council of Nicaea, called by the emperor Constantine, the bishops confessed the triune God, the God of the Bible, the Creator who sent Christ into the world to save sinners, in a very public forum. It meant that the biblical God displaced the gods of Rome.

Constantine built churches, not temples to the Roman gods. So at the end of the fourth century, when the emperor Theodosius proclaims that the empire is now going to be officially under God, it's the God of Nicaea, it's the God of the Bible, it's the trinitarian God he affirms.

The Nicene Creed is a way of proclaiming that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, that is, the biblical God, is the God to whom we as a society are now beholden. Now we will give this God our worship and adoration. **CH**

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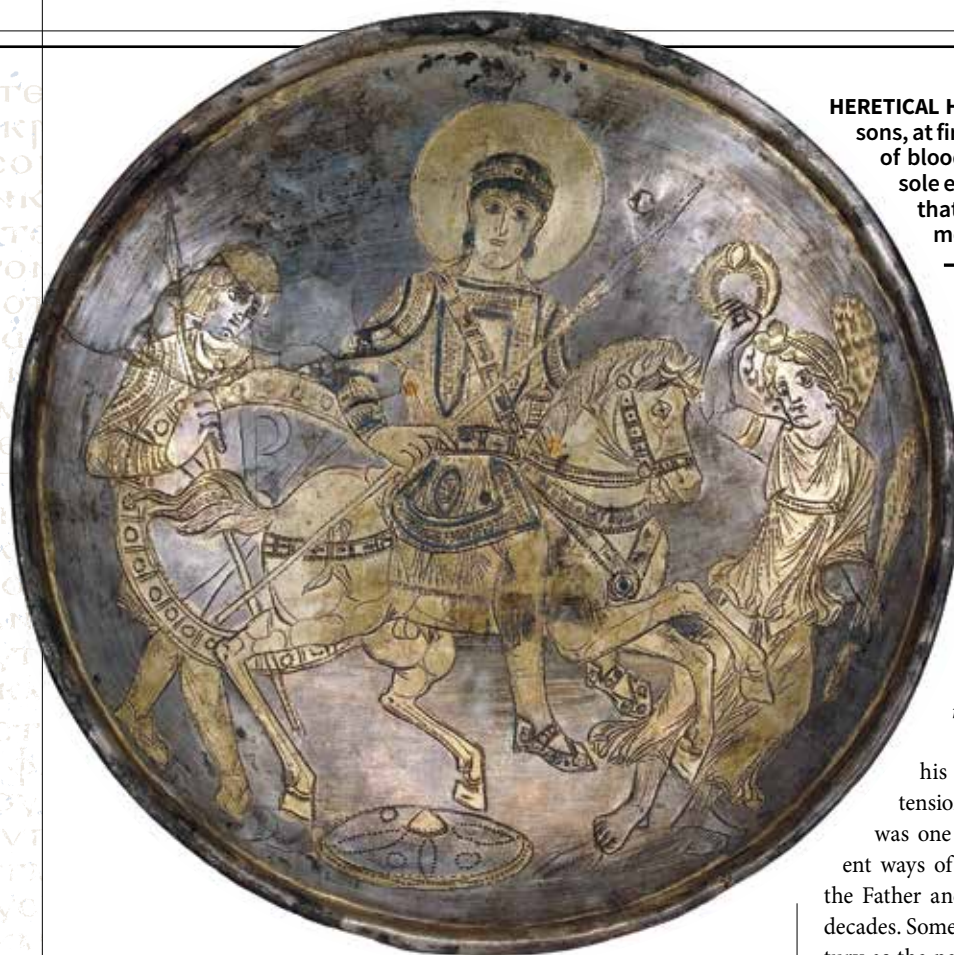
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HERETICAL HEIR Constantius II, one of Constantine I's sons, at first shared power with his brothers. A series of bloody revolts and wars led to him becoming sole emperor in 353. After this he called councils that contradicted the Nicene Creed and promoted a homoian one.

After Nicaea

THE COUNCIL'S REAL IMPACT CAME DECADES LATER AND THROUGH NEW VOICES

Lewis Ayres

For many modern Christians, the Council of Nicaea marks a basic decision of the church about its faith. After that crucial event, all who disagree with Nicaea's insistence that the Son is one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father could only be considered heretics.

But that is not how people saw it at the time. The idea that Nicaea was a fundamental turning point developed gradually over the decades that followed. Modern Christians should certainly accept the church's decision at Nicaea for the trinitarian faith, but they should know that the Spirit only slowly led Christians to this consensus on the true reading of Scripture.

Scholars count two reasons Nicaea was not originally regarded as the decisive moment that many textbooks assume. First, the idea that a creed with fixed wording might serve as a universal standard of belief had not yet developed. The council made an ad hoc decision, and it stated its faith in terms that clearly differentiated its beliefs from those of

Arius. But nobody at Nicaea assumed that this particular wording would stand as the fundamental Christian confession for centuries to come. Local creeds continued to be used for teaching converts and children until the next century. (One of the best examples is the Apostles' Creed, which originated as the local creed of the Roman church.) The Council of Nicaea was well known (because of its size and its association with Emperor Constantine), but no one regarded its confession as a universal marker of orthodoxy. At that point in history, *no* creed was treated that way.

Second, the controversy between Arius and his bishop Alexander was the product of wider tensions in the early fourth-century church. Nicaea was one battle in a much wider war between different ways of interpreting what the Scriptures said about the Father and the Son. The wider conflict continued for decades. Some popular books have presented the fourth century as the period in which "Jesus became God." The idea that Christians did not previously consider Jesus divine is, however, unfounded nonsense. But Christians clearly differed considerably over what *God* meant. Many assumed that there could be degrees of God: Christ was God, but not the one God, the Father (such people often appealed to 1 Timothy 6:16).

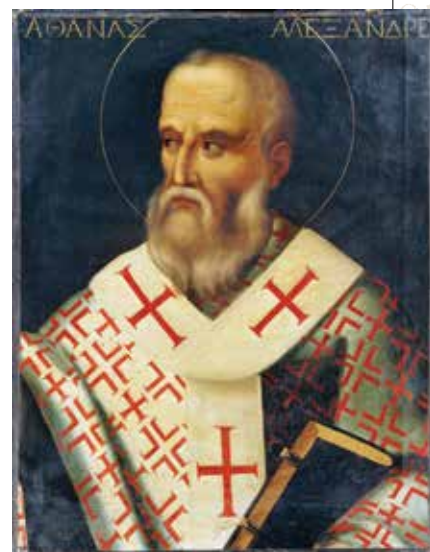
A NEW CAST OF OPPONENTS

Arius played a key part in the events that led up to the Council of Nicaea, but he did not have a role in the controversies that raged between 325 and 381. After the council many bishops readmitted Arius to communion after he placated them with a somewhat bland confession of faith. Then in 337 he died.

Here are the main players in the controversy that erupted in the years after Nicaea:

Marcellus of Ancyra: one of the most important leaders of Nicaea itself, but one who had strongly unitarian tendencies (see pp. 36–39).

Athanasius: bishop of Alexandria from 328 (p. 21). In 336 and 339, he was exiled for maladministration, including charges that he had been violent toward his opponents. Some who had also opposed his predecessor Alexander were delighted to be able to remove one of their theological opponents. Athanasius's exile was not purely a matter of theology, but he hoped to present



COUNCIL CONTINUITY During post-Nicaea controversy, Athanasius (*right*) emerged as an influential council defender. Gregory of Nyssa (*middle*), a Cappadocian father, articulated pro-Nicene theology, and Western theologians Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo (*above*) also used the Nicene Creed as a lens through which to correctly understand earlier Christian creeds.

the conflict that way. In a rhetorical masterstroke, he presented his enemies as “Arians” rather than “Christians.” Many Western theologians accepted this terminology, and in the later decades so did some Easterners.

The Eusebians: a large group of Eastern bishops who stood in a broad tradition that encompassed both the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea and the slightly lesser-known Eusebius of Nicomedia. They insisted that there existed a basic ontological distinction between Father and Son. But they insisted just as strongly on an ineffable closeness between Father and Son, such that the Son’s being can be said to be from the Father in some indescribable sense, and that the Son is “the exact image of the Father’s substance” (Heb. 1:3). Such theologians found Athanasius’s insistence that the Son is the “proper wisdom of the Father” too unitarian. Comparing the relationship between the Son and the Father to the relationship between a human person and his or her wisdom was too simplistic, they felt. In such a picture, God was truly one, but was the Word of God really distinct from God the Father? Arius himself may be considered slightly Eusebian, but the other members of this tradition were not in any way dependent on Arius, and they knew little of his particular theology.

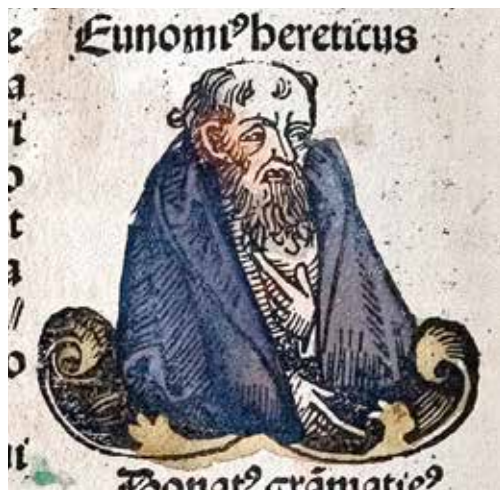
LIKE, UNLIKE, OR ONE

During the 350s the controversy shifted considerably. This was partly because of the emperor Constantius and partly because new heterousian theologies emerged.

Constantius II was the most successful of Constantine’s three sons, and during a complex civil war between 350 and 353, he came to control the whole empire. Constantius was a strong opponent of Athanasius, whom he considered a danger to the unity of his realm. He supported a group of “Eusebian” leaders who strongly opposed Marcellus’s theology and distinguished clearly and hierarchically between Father and Son. Scholars now term this theology “homoian.” Homoians argued that the Son is “like” (*homoios*) the Father, although a distinct and inferior being. They also rejected any use of being or essence (*ousia*) terminology, saying it was unscriptural and implied that God was materially divided in generating the Son.

The most radical wing of this movement (represented by Aetius and his disciple Eunomius) insisted that Father and Son were unlike in being. Their teaching provoked a strong reaction and seems to have affected public perception of the homoian movement. During the 370s and 380s, Eunomians or Heterousians (*heteros* = other; *ousia* = being) increasingly became a distinct church group. (In older accounts these are referred to as “extreme Arians” or “neo-Arians.”) One of their homoian associates, Eudoxius, became bishop of Antioch from 357 and promoted Aetius, to the disgust of many who would previously have been in broad agreement with a “Eusebian” theology.

One group of Eusebian proponents—who strongly opposed the homoian radicals and the homoian attempt to prevent the use of essence language—focused around Basil of Ancyra (who had replaced Marcellus in that bishopric). They described the Son as “like the Father according to essence” and were known as Homoiousians (*homoios* = like; which is easy to mix up with the orthodox *homoousios*, meaning “same” or “one”). Many people sympathized with their approach because they seemed to uphold Eusebian principles. They believed it was necessary to talk about essence or being to preserve and emphasize the unique closeness between Father and Son. Homoiousians taught that the Son was from the Father in a unique sense: his essence differed



from the Father's only in not being unbegotten. The language of "likeness in essence" thus seemed to uphold the balance they desired in theology.

The homoiousian approach was very different from that of the heterousian theologians, who could describe the Son as a creation: unique indeed, but still a created product of the divine will. During the 350s these tensions among the Eusebians could not be easily contained.

THE EMPEROR STRIKES BACK

In 359 and 360, Constantius called two councils that, under pressure from him, promulgated a homoian creed (see pp. 24–26). This was of immense importance. Before Constantius's councils, the wording of the Nicene Creed was becoming an increasingly important point of reference for some, but historically a creed functioning as a universal marker of Christian identity did not yet exist. But by the councils of 359 and 360, Constantius and his advisors had come to see the logical end of the gradual rise in the use of creeds over the previous 20 years. Forcing provincial councils and individual bishops to agree to one creed seemed an obvious way to ensure uniformity.

In the face of this new policy, only one creed—the Nicene—could stand as a clear alternative. Between 360 and 380, the policies of Constantius and the rise of heterousian theologies prompted a variety of groups to coalesce around the Nicene Creed as a standard of faith. Scholars now call these theologians pro-Nicene. This coalescing of different groups was made possible in part by the death of Constantius in 361. His sudden death and the antipathy of his successor Julian "the Apostate" toward any kind of Christianity meant that the homoian creed never had the chance to gain a firm foothold.

This rapprochement between these previously opposing groups involved a slow and often difficult negotiation toward a shared sense of the core faith for which they agreed Nicaea would be a symbol. The theologies of Basil



APOSTATES AND HERETICS Eunomius (*far left*) was a radical representative of the heterousian heresy, an extreme form of Arianism. Emperor Julian (*left*), cousin of Constantius, rejected Christianity and tried to purge it from the empire, earning the moniker, "Julian the Apostate."

of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus are three key examples of pro-Nicene theologies. So are the Western theologies of Athanasius, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, and later Didymus the Blind and Cyril of Alexandria.

THE MYSTERY OF THREE IN ONE

Two key themes united pro-Nicene theologians. First, and most important, pro-Nicenes agreed that God's being is not divided and that the persons of the Godhead are truly distinct from each other. Pro-Nicenes were prepared to accept a wide variety of terms for unity and distinction in God: what mattered was that God is undividedly one and yet irreducibly three. How this is so is

a mystery. In this context it seemed much more possible to say that Father and Son are of one "essence" or "being" without implying that God is material or that Father and Son are "parts" of God.

This sense of the incomprehensible divine unity and distinction provided the context in which to understand the earlier Nicene insistence that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. It was also the context in which they understood the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son. These later decades saw pro-Nicenes clearly state that the Spirit is one with Father and Son against those who still maintained earlier beliefs that the Spirit is subordinate to Father and Son (often misunderstood as the greatest of the angels).

An important corollary of the divine unity was the doctrine of inseparable operation: all three persons are present in each and every divine action. While we easily attribute particular roles to each person, calling the Spirit "sanctifier" or the Son "redeemer," Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine showed how Scripture encourages us to speak of the persons in this way because of the weakness of our human intellects: we must realize that Scripture also tells us that, in the divine unity, God, Word, and Spirit all sanctify.

Second, pro-Nicenes emphasized that human beings would always fail to comprehend God and that one could only make progress toward knowledge and love of God through discipline and practices that would reshape the imagination. Increasingly pro-Nicenes emphasized the



FATHER, SON, AND HOLY GHOST A 6th-c. codex depicts the Trinity (Father as the hand, Spirit as the dove) at the baptism of Jesus (*above*). The road to complete acceptance of trinitarian theology was forged in the 4th c.

RETURN OF NICAEEA After decades of doctrinal turmoil, the Council of Constantinople (*right*) convened in 381, producing the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Non-Nicene sects did continue in some places but declined significantly in the next centuries.



He is worshiped and glorified.” Groups of non-Nicene Christians continued to be a real force within the Christian world through the next century, but increasingly they became distinct and isolated ecclesial groups. Homoian theology survived among many of the German tribes who came to rule over the western half of the Roman Empire, but over the centuries that followed, even they gradually came to accept the Nicene faith.

Christians believe that in Christ, the Word of God who is eternally one with the Father, is at work. They believe that the Spirit who is one with Father and Son filled the earliest Christian community at Pentecost. Christians should also never forget that the Spirit is the Spirit of truth who dwells in the Christian community, leading it into truth (John 14: 17, 26).

The story of the fourth century is one of the most important examples of this leading. The emergence of classical trinitarian theology was a slow and complex process, the culmination of Christian reflection and argument that had begun at Pentecost. But we should not hide from the messiness of this process: it is always real human beings that the Spirit leads. Thus the faith of Nicaea is the true faith of Christians, but it was drawn out of the community’s reading of Scripture: it was found not only by human effort but by the inspiration of the Spirit shaping and guiding, leading a real human community into the truth. **CH**

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importance of the joint purification of the soul and the body as a precondition for attention to the divine mystery. The fallen mind had lost its natural attention to God and become obsessed with material imagery.

This sense that the human intellect needed to be purified was the context for their understanding of Scripture as a divinely revealed and always trustworthy resource for the Christian imagination. Scripture resulted from a divine act of love: God spoke in human words, but of realities that lie beyond our comprehension. Recognition and exploration of the mystery at the heart of Christian faith is at the heart of pro-Nicene theology.

TO CONSTANTINOPLE AND BEYOND

In 381 the reconciliation of the previous two decades resulted in the Council of Constantinople, through the help of the pro-Nicene emperor Theodosius. This council promulgated a revised version of Nicaea’s creed that is still used by Christians today. The council added clauses on the Spirit to insist that “with the Father and the Son



MAYBE ALEXANDER? Early portraits of certain church fathers do not really exist, but this ancient mural gives us an idea of how Alexander and other bishops may have looked.

Saints and heretics

THE COUNCIL'S MAIN FIGURES

Elesha Coffman and editors

CONSTANTINE (c. 273–337) IMPERIAL PEACEMAKER

Like the king in chess, Constantine occupied a prominent position at the Council of Nicaea, but he did not actually do very much. Generations of critics have accused him of manipulating the proceedings, jamming words into the creed, and generally trumping theology with politics, but in fact he mainly sat and listened.

An ambitious politician and effective propagandist, Constantine had come to power in the usual swirl of conflict and intrigue. He waged war on barbarians and other Roman factions. He formed and broke alliances, as with Augustus Licinius, who married Constantine's sister, fought alongside him, allegedly turned traitor, and was murdered at Constantine's request. What made Constantine different from previous Roman emperors was his belief that the Christian God had given him a mandate to unify the administratively divided empire under the sign of the cross.

Rome's first Christian emperor did not forswear ungodly behavior at his 312 "conversion" on the Milvian Bridge. The arranged murders of Licinius, Constantine's wife Fausta, and his son Crispus, for example, occurred long afterward. He did, however, immediately begin to institute pro-Christian policies in territories he controlled. These policies, including return of property and status lost in persecutions, government funding for church construction, and restrictions on

pagan worship, broadened and strengthened as Constantine solidified his power.

With the empire stabilized under his leadership, Constantine wanted the church to be stabilized too. Unfortunately the church had emerged from persecution beset by heresies and schisms. Constantine saw no problem with the idea of disagreeing politely about theological views. He urged church leaders to settle their differences for the sake of the empire and of the gospel, which lost some of its attraction when pagans saw Christians bickering. Only when these appeals failed, as they did with Arius and Alexander, did the emperor order a council.

At the Council of Nicaea itself, Constantine repeated his pleas for peace and harmony. He supported the use of the contentious term *homoousios* (see "Doctrinal dysfunction" on p. 23) to describe the Father and the Son but, contrary to some accounts, did not ram it down anyone's throat. He lacked the

passion and the theological acumen for such a battle. His primary concern was for the church to establish a formula of faith to which all major players could and would subscribe.

ALEXANDER OF ALEXANDRIA (d. 328) DECISIVE LEADER

Alexander could hardly have become bishop of Alexandria at a worse time. Harsh persecutions had taken many lives in Egypt between 303 and 311. Persecution also had caused a schism between Bishop Peter of Alexandria, who urged gentle treatment for those who fled or bribed officials to escape punishment, and Melitius of nearby Lycopolis, who took a stricter line. A surprising late round of violence resulted in Peter's death on November 26, 311, and complicated the search for a successor. When Alexander finally stepped in during the summer of 313, the terror had subsided, but the Melitian schism raged on.

Just five years later, Alexander began to receive complaints about the teachings of one of his own priests, Arius. Melitius led the grumblers. Alexander attempted to handle the matter in-house, calling Arius before a meeting of local clergy and insisting that he change his message. When Arius refused, Alexander assembled about 100 bishops from Egypt and Libya to denounce the renegade. The council banished Arius, but he did not give up. Arius enlisted the support of Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, and many



HOW TO RULE THE WORLD A regal statue of Constantine in York Minster, England (*above*), marks where he was crowned in his extensive empire. Constantine's main concern at Nicaea was keeping that empire together.

A REAL CHARMER Arius (*right*) was popular with crowds and known for his “charming manners.”

other Eastern bishops. Alexander clearly could not keep a lid on the conflict, so Constantine eventually stepped in.

In spite of his gentle and quiet manner, Alexander was unflinching in his theological convictions. He resolutely rejected all attempts, even those spearheaded by Constantine, to reinstate Arius to Christian communion. Upon Alexander's death on April 17, 328, Melitians resisted Athanasius's election as successor and ultimately elected their own bishop.

ARIUS (250–336) CHARISMATIC CROWD-PLEASER

A 1925 history of the Council of Nicaea describes Arius as “a man of tall stature, of austere countenance and ascetic life. He had charming manners and went about from house to house, with his sleeveless tunic and scanty cloak, popular especially among women.” Though little can be proven regarding Arius's wardrobe, he certainly was popular—and unpopular.

Originally from Libya, Arius began his church career as a priest in Alexandria, an intellectual hub of the ancient world. His preaching attracted crowds to the church of Baucalis. His theology attracted widespread interest from friends and foes alike.

Like many heretics Arius began by trying not to be one. On one side he disagreed with Valentinus, who asserted that the Son was merely an emanation from the Father. On the

other, he sought to distance himself from Mani, founder of the Manichees, who declared the Son to be part of the Father. In fact Arius did not find any previous attempts to explain the relationship of the Son and the Father entirely satisfactory. In his estimation Origen, the third-century “father of speculative theology,” came closest to determining the truth about God as Trinity. Wanting to preserve the Son's distinct identity from the Father, Arius eventually defined Jesus as like God yet created (begotten) and with a beginning (see p. 17).

Arius lost out at Nicaea, but he quickly bounced back. In 327 he and two of his supporters petitioned Constantine for reacceptance into the church. Constantine summoned Arius to court and requested a statement of his beliefs. In direct questioning and on paper, he gave a very brief and bland statement of faith that made no mention of the terms used at Nicaea. Arius's answers pleased Constantine but failed to convince Alexander, Athanasius, and many other opponents.

Both sides continued to press their cases in various venues until 336, when, with Constantine's support, Arius planned to forcibly enter Hagia Eirene, the most prominent church in the new capital of the empire, and participate in a Sunday service. To the great relief of Constantinople's bishop (and to the great consternation of the Arians), Arius died en route to the church.

Stories about the circumstances of Arius's death—some gorier than others—persist, but records from the fourth century itself are scant and sometimes conflicting. We can thank Athanasius for descriptions of Arius's attempt to enter Hagia Eirene. Rufinus, writing toward the end of the fourth century, later improved on the story by having Arius die on the way to the church. Either way Arius never got his moment of triumph.





OSSIUS (OR HOSIUS) OF CORDOBA (c. 256–357/358) COURT CONFESSOR

Ossius had two claims to fame prior to the Council of Nicaea. Briefly imprisoned in Spain during the Diocletian persecution, he had earned the title “confessor.” (Persecution survivors, especially those bearing physical scars, had immediate credibility in church circles.) More important he enjoyed an exceptionally close relationship with Constantine, having resided at court since 312. Ossius probably helped Constantine interpret his vision at the Milvian Bridge in Christian terms.

So, when Constantine needed someone to take a letter to Alexander and Arius, beseeching them to end their quarrel, he naturally picked Ossius. Ossius tried to smooth things over, but the combatants would not relent. On his way back to court, he stopped by Antioch, where the church had descended into chaos following the 324 death of its bishop, Philogonius. Ossius participated in a council there that selected Eustathius as Philogonius’s successor. The council also adopted a creed stemming from Alexandria that three bishops present—Theodotus of Laodicea, Narcissus of Neronias, and Eusebius of Caesarea—refused to endorse. Ossius interrogated the recusants, and the council excommunicated them, contingent on the decision of a forthcoming council at Ancyra (relocated at the last minute to Nicaea).

Constantine tapped Ossius again to preside over the ecumenical council. As no contemporaneous record of the council’s proceedings survives, it is difficult to gauge the scope of Ossius’s participation. He did promulgate the creed, sign it, and have notaries send it around for the other bishops’ signatures. Not long after the council, the Arians regrouped in the eastern part of the empire and moved toward Constantinople. Ossius left, or lost, his court position and returned to Spain.

Ossius does not seem to have married himself to the Nicene Creed. In 341 he signed the creed of Sardica once



WHO BAPTIZED CONSTANTINE? A fresco (left) shows Sylvester baptizing Constantine, but historians actually credit Eusebius of Nicomedia with that honor.

COUNCIL REFEREE Bishop Ossius (above) seems to have served as the main moderator at the Nicene council.

it became apparent that Nicaea was not providing ecclesial unity. Ossius also signed, under some coercion, other statements of faith including one that ruled out all “substance” language found in the Nicene Creed.

EUSEBIUS OF NICOMEDIA (died c. 341) SURPRISING SURVIVOR

Eusebius seemed to have a knack for picking the losing side of every battle. He supported Constantine’s rival Licinius before the latter was defeated in 324. He was an early supporter of the Arian cause and held his ground throughout the Council of Nicaea. Under pressure he eventually accepted the council’s creed but not the anathema that went with it. He thought this move would shield him from further fallout. Three months after the council, however, he was exiled for his support of Arius. A few years later he returned to Nicomedia and responded to his exile by ratcheting up his pamphlet war with champions of *homoousios* and reaching out to schismatics.

Despite all these potentially fatal missteps, Eusebius survived. He retained his bishopric in a major city of western Asia Minor even after Licinius’s defeat. In 327 he joined Arius’s petition for reinstatement, which Constantine was only too happy to grant. Eusebius then pressed his advantage, casting those who refused to accept Arians back into the fold as the true obstacles to unity and asking Constantine to deal with them. In 332 he persuaded four witnesses to accuse Athanasius of extortion, destroying sacred property, treason, and other offenses. Constantine acquitted Athanasius and lashed out at the



HISTORY KEEPER Though Eusebius of Caesarea (*above*) had a checkered role in council dynamics, he is positively remembered for recording early church history.

FROM ONE HERESY TO ANOTHER Instead of seeing Jesus as lesser than the Father, modalists believed the Trinity simply represented different faces of the same being (*right*). Bishop Marcellus was deposed for this error.

Arians, but Athanasius knew he could never rest easy as long as Eusebius had the emperor's ear.

By exercising consummate political skills, Eusebius remained Constantine's confidant to the end. He had the honor of baptizing the first Christian emperor and was afterward installed as bishop of Constantine's new city, Constantinople.

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA (260–339) SUSPECTED ARIAN

Christians enjoyed relative security in Caesarea of Palestine during Eusebius's youth. Then came the Diocletian persecution. Then the conversion of Constantine and Christianity's rise to favor. Then strife within the church. Then councils and more councils. No wonder Eusebius, though offered the prominent see of Antioch, elected to finish out his career as bishop of quiet little Caesarea.

Though Eusebius witnessed atrocities during persecution, he apparently escaped personal suffering. He was not so fortunate in later doctrinal disputes. Like Arius, Eusebius admired Origen's theology. This sympathy led him to reject strongly anti-Arian statements, such as the declaration of the council at Antioch in 325, which got him briefly condemned.

He was given another chance to prove his orthodoxy at the Council of Nicaea. He arrived with a prepared statement of beliefs, which his enemies accepted and Constantine heartily commended, though some continued opposition to Eusebius created friction and more back-and-forth on his interpretation of the creed. Eventually, however, Eusebius signed on. Back in Caesarea, Eusebius devoted much of his time to writing. He is best known for his *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 300s).



MARCELLUS OF ANCYRA (d. 374) MANIC MODALIST

Of the bishops who opposed Arius, Marcellus was one of the most fanatical. Unfortunately his aversion to one strand of heresy pushed him into another.

Marcellus did not need to get so embroiled in the Arian controversy. That problem erupted far from his see of Ancyra, in Galatia, where he enjoyed a long and stable tenure. He did not have to fight to prove his own orthodoxy at Nicaea or for many years afterward. If he had just stayed home, he probably would have served out his days in peace.

His passion to see Arianism crushed, however, led him to attend the Councils of Jerusalem and Tyre in 335. At these councils called to mop up Nicaea's unfinished business, Marcellus perceived the balance of imperial favor swinging toward the Arians, who were having success painting Athanasius and his friends as hate-mongers. Marcellus responded by dashing off a tract to Constantine that mixed maudlin praise for the emperor with intemperate criticism of Arius's primary supporters.

In the course of this attack, Marcellus spelled out his own beliefs in greater detail than he had previously. It turned out that Marcellus's views echoed those of Sabellius and Paul of Samosata, who had described the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as different modes of the same being (also known as modalism). On the basis of this tract, Marcellus was declared a heretic and deposed in 336.

Marcellus had made another tactical error along the way by antagonizing the prolific writer Eusebius of Caesarea. When Marcellus tried to reclaim his see in 337, Eusebius weighed in with a damning work, *Against Marcellus*, and later *The Ecclesiastical Theology*. As Marcellus wandered around in exile, he found his way to Rome, where the bishop of Rome and a small council exonerated him of heresy. This decision had no impact on Eastern affairs, however, and Marcellus was never reinstated. In his lifetime, and in posterity, Marcellus's enemies retained the upper hand. **CH**

Elesha Coffman is professor of history at Baylor University and was managing editor of Christian History from 2000 to 2002. This article is adapted from issue #85.



Really God, really human

A REFLECTION ON AND A CELEBRATION OF WHO CHRISTIANS WORSHIP, BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

Jennifer Woodruff Tait is senior editor of CH, editor for the Theology of Work Project, and an episcopal priest in the Diocese of Lexington. This reflection, originally featured in Anglican and Episcopal History 94.3 (June 2025), is reprinted with permission.

If you grew up, as I did, in the 1970s mainline, you may not have thought a lot about creeds. I vaguely remember saying the Apostles' Creed in the United Methodist church I attended. I also remember saying "A Modern Affirmation" equally as often and sometimes using what is usually referred to as the "Statement of Faith of the Korean Methodist Church." It was Anglicanism that taught me the creeds—though at that point, no one talked about them any more than the Methodists had.

When I began attending Episcopal churches off and on in the late 1990s, I realized that creeds were part of every worship service I attended—the Apostles' Creed at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer and the Nicene Creed at Holy Eucharist. While no one knows the exact date the Apostles' Creed came into use in something resembling its current form (the best we can do is the early Middle Ages, see "Did you know?"), we have a date and place for the Nicene Creed. It is named after the city where the council that produced its initial form took place: Nicaea. It was there that it was also adopted in 325.

The version we say today is not exactly that one. It was officially altered at some length at the Council of Constantinople in 381, mainly by adding much more material on the Holy Spirit, and—in the West—it was changed in a shorter but more controversial way during the High Middle Ages with the addition of the phrase *filioque* (and the Son) to the description of the Spirit's procession from the Father (p. 12).

Nevertheless, what Anglicans worldwide recite in church every Sunday, allowing for translation into local

WE BELIEVE A medieval manuscript imagines the Spirit-inspired apostles composing the Apostles' Creed (left). Creeds have helped Christians express biblical truths since the very early church.



CREEDS OVER THE CENTURIES From the ancient world all the way to the modern era, the creeds have persisted as consistent and unifying markers of Christendom.

languages, is visibly and unbrokenly still, basically, the same thing agreed on in council 1,700 years ago. For some, that fact—the 1,700 years separating us from people who were, after all, fallible human beings and who lacked the hindsight of all those centuries of enlightening history that we now possess—is enough to cast doubt on the significance of this anniversary. How can anything that old, that supposedly narrow-minded, that entwined with the



IN TRUE COMMUNITY An Italian fresco imagines all the faithful at the Last Judgment. The Nicene Creed has served to connect Christians in broad, eternal community throughout the ages.

Kentucky with an average Sunday attendance of 22 people. People had even died for them sometimes.

The Nicene Creed is not inspired Scripture. Only Scripture is Scripture. But the creed represents what the best theological minds of the early 300s came up with when they wrestled with seemingly irreconcilable things the inspired Scriptures told them about: a God who is powerfully and ineffably One, yet a God who became utterly and completely human. Somehow, Jesus of Nazareth is both “Light of Light, very God of very God,” and a human being who “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” He is the one “by whom all things were made” and yet also the one “who came down from heaven . . . and was made man.” As Jane Williams said in *Seen & Unseen*, an online cultural and theological journal:

There are not many 1,700-year-old documents that are read out loud every week and known by heart by millions of people across the world. . . . The radical suggestion of the Nicene Creed, trying to be faithful to the witness of the Bible, is that Jesus is really God, living among us, but also really a human being, born into a particular time and place in history and dying a real, historical death. And that must mean that the Almighty God doesn’t think it compromises God’s power and majesty to come and share our lives.

Yes, those best theological minds were quite possibly only sitting in council there in Nicaea in the first place because an autocratic emperor told them to get their theological messaging in order

because their infighting was interfering with Christianity’s usefulness to empire. God has worked with less, sometimes. Yes, occasionally individual lines in the Nicene Creed strike me (and other modern people) as funny, and we wonder if we still believe them. While we’re wondering, the universal church still believes them for us. You can wander a lot of places in your life and think a lot of things. The Nicene Creed will still be there when you get back.

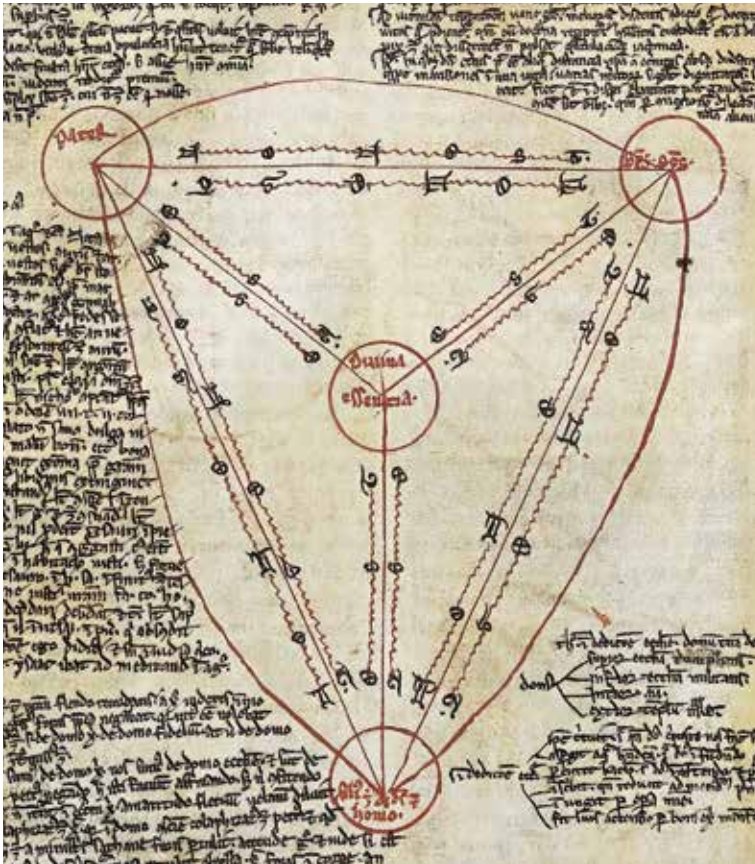
So, on this anniversary, I urge you to think about the Nicene Creed not as narrow-minded but broad, speaking to us of grace and Christian community. The creed reaches backward in time over millennia and goes all the way around the globe. It testifies to a God who walks beside us into an unknown future—both as the One who will finally set all things to rights and as our friend and brother. And that, I think, is well worth celebrating. **CH**

realpolitik of its age (and it *was* entwined, as this issue has shown), possibly speak to the problems of the twenty-first century? For others—and I will lay my cards down on the table and admit that I am in this camp—the 1,700 years are the feature, not the bug.

SO GREAT A CLOUD OF WITNESSES

What began to move me through those steady decades-long series of Eucharists, as I repeated the creed over and over, was the fact that I was rehearsing words said by so many others throughout the world and down through the ages to testify to their faith in the Christian God, and to describe—insofar as such a thing is even possible—what the Christian God is like. People had said these words in sadness and joy, wealth and poverty, on the decks of ships and in hidden upstairs rooms, in beautiful cathedrals, and at my church in rural

The Council of Nicaea: 1,700 years later



KNOWING THE TRIUNE GOD This Trinity shield is from a 13th-c. manuscript of Robert Grosseteste. Thanks to the theological wrestlings that took place in early church councils, the medieval church was strongly trinitarian.

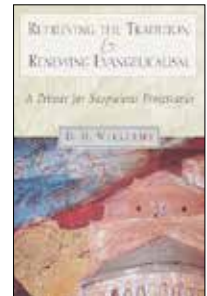
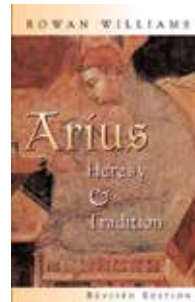
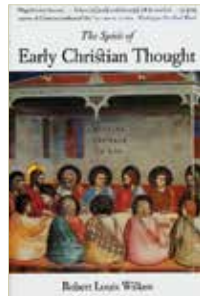
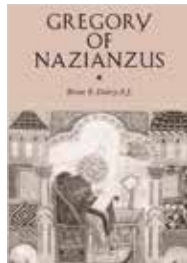
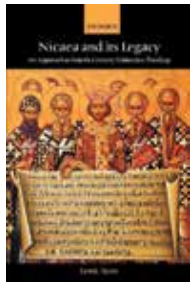
2025 marked the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. With a group or on your own, use these questions to guide reflection on this historic council.

1. What did you know about the Council of Nicaea before reading this issue? In what ways is the Nicene Creed (or its theological ideas) used in your faith tradition?
2. What were the circumstances that led to the need for a council (pp. 6–11)? Describe the major conflicts and the people involved.
3. What is the difference between the original Nicene Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (p. 12)? What does your faith tradition say about the “and the Son” statement?
4. Of the excerpted quotations on the relationship of God the Father and God the Son (p. 17), which one most resonated with you? Why?

5. In “Taking care of (church) business” (pp. 18–20), we learned that the council also had other matters it needed to address. Are any of the canons listed here relevant to the church today? Why or why not?
6. Why was Athanasius a controversial figure in the fourth-century church (p. 21)? How did he defend trinitarian orthodoxy?
7. A number of theological terms appear throughout the issue. What is the difference between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*? Why is this so important? (See pages 22–23, 24–26, and 32–35 for more.)
8. How did the pro-Nicene alliance (pp. 24–26) form? Why wasn’t a consensus found immediately after the Council of Nicaea?
9. What were some things you learned about the council from the interview (pp. 27–30)? What surprised you about the process?
10. How did the Nicene Creed lead church leaders to a better understanding of the Trinity (pp. 32–35)? What aspects of trinitarian theology did pro-Nicene theologians flesh out for the church?
11. Of the figures mentioned in “Saints and heretics” (pp. 36–39), which do you think was most influential at the Council of Nicaea? Why?
12. Consider the reflection on pages 41–42. What are some ways the Nicene Creed connects the worldwide church today? **CI**

Recommended resources

STUDY THE NICENE COUNCIL, ITS CREED, AND THE FIGURES AROUND IT WITH THESE RESOURCES WRITTEN AND RECOMMENDED BY OUR AUTHORS AND EDITORS.



BOOKS

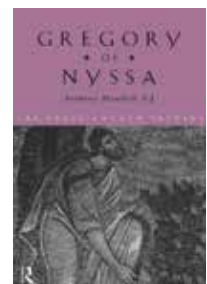
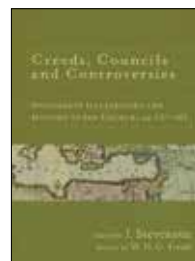
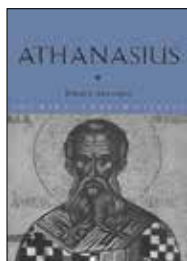
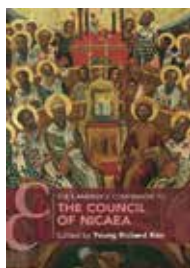
Discover an in-depth history of the **Council of Nicaea** with Y. R. Kim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to The Council of Nicaea* (2021). For more on the **Nicene Creed** itself, its implications and legacy, and how Christians have understood it over the subsequent centuries, see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (1999); Christopher Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (2001); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (2003); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (2004); John Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Parts 1 and 2* (2004); Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Discourse* (2011); and Philip Cary, *The Nicene Creed* (2023).

You can also read about **heresies and theological conflicts** after Nicaea with Michael Barnes and D. H. Williams, eds., *Arianism After Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts* (1993); D. H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts* (1995); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (2006); and coming in November, Mark DelCogliano, *The Arians: Traditions of Non-Nicene Theology* (2026).

Dig deeper into the lives of some of the **major players at Nicaea** mentioned in this issue with these particular sources.

For **Origen** see Joseph Trigg, *Origen* (1998); and Jean Daniélou, *Origen* (2016). On **Arius**, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy & Tradition* (2001). Read about **Athanasius** in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004); and John Tyson, *The Great Athanasius: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (2017). On **Constantine** see Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981); Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times* (1994); and Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (2010). Discover more on **Basil of Caesarea** in Stephen Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea* (2014); **Gregory of Nyssa** with Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (1999); and **Gregory of Nazianzus** in Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (2006). Church events as documented by the early church historian **Eusebius** can be read in the modern English edition of his famous work, *The History of the Church: From Christ to Constantine* (1990). Some of the works mentioned above are a part of a larger series on the early church fathers released by the publisher Routledge—there are currently 23 books in the series.

Learn more about Christian **creeds** and the **practice of the early church** in general in W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (1982); Stuart Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (1991); E. Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (1997); Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (2003); and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (2006).



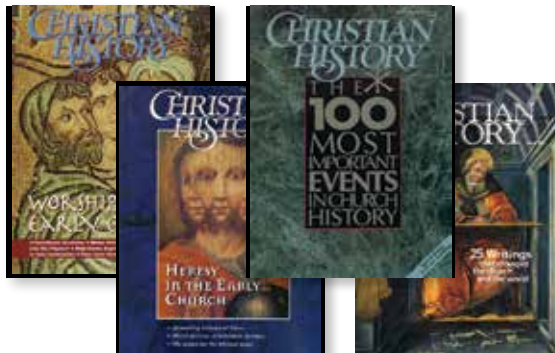
While primary sources for many **early church documents** are public domain and available at the usual online collections (under “Websites”), see W. H. C. Frend and J. Stevenson, eds., *A New Eusebius* (2013) for a fabulous collection of 319 early church documents. Pay special attention to Alexander’s encyclical letter warning against the Arian heresy, Arius’s letters to Eusebius of Nicomedia and Alexander, Constantine’s initial letter to Alexander and Arius urging reconciliation, the Canons of Nicaea, Eusebius’s guarded letter to his church in Caesarea following the council, and Constantine’s denunciation of Arius in his observations of the council (as narrated by the church historian Socrates).

Also of interest is Stevenson’s companion volume, *Creeds, Councils, and Controversies* (2012), which includes excerpts from 236 fourth- and fifth-century documents and follows Athanasius’s battle with Arian emperors (such as Constantius II) until the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy under the emperor Theodosius.

For a helpful companion to church documents from the third through fifth centuries, see Frances Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (2010).

And just for fun, check out *I Believe* (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2003), an illustrated version of the Nicene Creed by Pauline Baynes, who did the original illustrations for C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

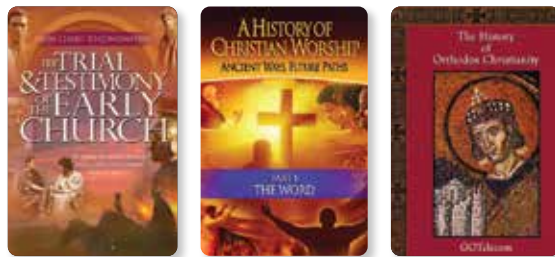
PAST CH ISSUES



This issue is largely adapted from *CH* #85: *Debating Jesus’s Divinity*. Other relevant issues include:

- 28: *100 Most Important Events in Christian History*
- 37: *Worship in the Early Church*
- 51: *Heresy in the Early Church*
- 57: *Converting the Empire*
- 64: *Saint Antony and the Desert Fathers*
- 80: *The First Bible Teachers*
- 116: *25 Writings That Changed the Church and the World*

VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO



Videos that cover the Nicene Creed include *The History of Orthodox Christianity* and *A History of Christian Worship: Part 1, The Word*. You can find out more about Christianity before and during Constantine’s reign in *Trial and Testimony of the Early Church* and *History of Christianity Part I*.

WEBSITES



See the usual collections at [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#), [Gutenberg.org](#), and [Internet Modern Sourcebook](#) for access to primary sources. A curated list of Nicene documents with some commentary can be found at [Christian History for Everyman](#).

Many Christian traditions around the world are celebrating the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea



with a dedicated online presence, including the [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America](#), the [Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church](#), the [World Council of Churches](#), and many more. Along with other study modules on the early church, our own [Christian History Institute](#) offers an online study module on the Council of Nicaea. **CH**



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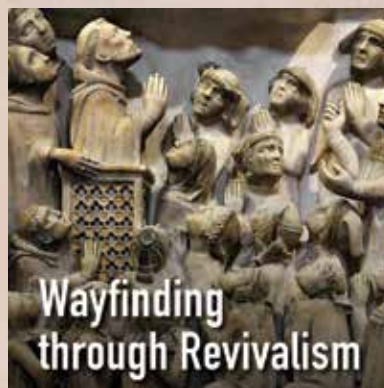
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