

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 85: The Council of Nicaea: Debating Jesus' Divinity

Debating Jesus' Divinity: Did You Know?

Interesting and Unusual Facts about the Council of Nicaea

Compiled by Steven Gertz, D. H. Williams, and John Anthony McGuckin

All Aboard?

The Council of Nicaea lives on in the imagination of the Church, both East and West. In this photograph taken in 1925, Russian Orthodox patriarchs prepare to board a train for St. David's, Wales, to celebrate Nicaea's 16th centenary. In Rome 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.

Protestants too have honored Nicaea in their own way. Anglicans, among others, recite the Nicene Creed in church every Sunday, and many Protestants (perhaps unknowingly) celebrate Nicaea in their hymns. One of the most beloved is Reginald Heber's "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," 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, who named the tune "Nicaea."

Wipe Out Those Arian Barbarians

Theodosius the Great may have dealt a death blow to Arians in the Roman Empire 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 (he murdered his rival) who adopted Arianism as his religion and built numerous Arian churches in Ravenna, Italy. When the Byzantine Emperor Justinian recovered Ravenna in 535, he resolved to erase any 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—the mosaic likely originally displayed Theodoric with his family or members of his court. Look closely, and you can still see in the far left column a hand that Justinian's artists apparently missed.

It Didn't Start with Alexander and Arius

Most historians of the Council of Nicaea begin their 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. The great third-century theologian Origen, 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 what later became creeds was a set of questions based on Jesus' command to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). As in the following example from the third-century Roman presbyter Hippolytus, the early church asked candidates for baptism three questions following 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?***

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 later 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 Nicene Creed Isn't What You Think It Is

The creed you may recite in church each Sunday is not the original creed as crafted by the Council of Nicaea in 325. It is, in fact, a more developed version of the creed as issued by the Council of Constantinople in 381. The original Nicene creed had fewer clauses and a much simpler theology of the Holy Spirit. It also had an "anathema" or legal condemnation that directly attacked the Arian position. The later council dropped this to make the creed more universally applicable. To compare the two side-by-side, see ***Which Creed Is Which?***.

It's Not All About Doctrine

The bishops who met at Nicaea discussed other matter besides theological ones. They needed to decide on a universal date for Easter, as well as resolving such problem as what to do with Christians who had renounced their faith during the persecutions and what sort of marriage restrictions to place on clergy [see ***Taking Care of (Church) Business***].

It Could Have Been 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 two or three months before the council's opening meeting.

No Hometown Referee

The bishop of Nicaea, Theognis, was not a supporter of 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 [see ***Saints and Heretics***], 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 says "more than 250" were in attendance, whereas Athanasius claims there were "300 of them, more or less." Ambrose of Milan would later peg the number at 318, but that number was erroneously inspired by a story in Genesis in which Abraham and his household of 318 rout the forces of four wicked kings (in the same way, the Council exposed the evil errors of Arius).

More reliable are multiple medieval lists in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and Armenian that reflect

the names of that original list with varying accuracy. The earliest manuscripts list between 194 and 220 names, though the more probable figure is closer to 200.

We also know that most bishops were accompanied by fellow clergy, 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.

Santa Claus Is Comin' to Council

Since we have no historical records of the council, a host of apocryphal stories about it have grown unchecked. In one of these, Saint Nicholas of Myra (the original Santa Claus) shows up at the council and becomes so angry with Arius that he stands up, walks across the chamber, and 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.

The Ceramics Plant Next Door

On their way to the council, visitors to Nicaea would have encountered various businesses either producing or selling pottery. In the 16th century, under the influence of Ottoman Turks, the citizens of Nicaea began to specialize in making elaborate ceramic tiles. Today the town of Iznik (formerly Nicaea) has an international reputation for its square tiles with underglaze designs.

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How Arianism Almost Won

After Nicaea, the Real Fight Began

Christopher A. Hall

At the Council of Nicaea, Arius and his ideas lost. But for decades after the council, it appeared that an Arian perspective on the person of Christ would carry the day and the conclusions of Nicaea would disappear in a theological and ecclesial dustbin. Why? The Roman emperors were an important influence. A series of emperors (beginning with Constantine) understood their role to include the right to intervene in the affairs of the church, particularly when division within the church threatened the unity of the Roman Empire itself. Thus, if a Roman emperor was disposed favorably toward Arian ideas—as Constantius and Valens were—bishops supporting the creed formulated at Nicaea could be severely punished, most often by being deposed and exiled. If an emperor favoring Nicaea was in power, Arian believers would suffer.

Yes, the bishops of the church continued to play the major role in interpreting Scripture and constructing theology based on biblical exegesis. Yet behind the bishops and presbyters during and after the Council of Nicaea stood a series of Christian Roman emperors more than willing to intervene in the church's affairs and doctrine. When a series of pro-Arian emperors arrived on the scene, Arianism spread like wildfire.

Take the case of Constantine himself. Concerned over the growing rift within the church over Arius's ideas, Constantine both convened and intervened in the Council of Nicaea. Rowan Williams observes that when Constantine viewed Arius as a schismatic, the emperor penned a letter to Arius "and his supporters which is extraordinary in its venom and abusiveness, dubbing Arius an 'Ares,' a god of war, who seeks to create strife and violence."

Constantine was not averse to taking harsh legal steps to bring wayward theologians back in line. Williams notes that the emperor's acid reply to Arius grouped Arius and his supporters with Porphyry, "the great pagan critic of the church." Constantine ordered "that Arius's works be treated like those of Porphyry: they are to be burnt, and anyone who does not surrender copies in his possession is to be executed."

Within ten years of the Council of Nicaea, though, Constantine became convinced that Arius's ideas fell within the pale of orthodoxy, though the exact details of Arius's position—at least as represented to the emperor in the years following Nicaea—remain somewhat murky. What is clear, though, is that neither Constantine nor later sons such as Constans and Constantius were skilled biblical interpreters or theologians. These Roman emperors were more concerned to preserve the unity of the church than to engage in prolonged debates over what to them often seemed theological nitpicking. Manlio Simonetti, for instance, comments that Constantine was "convinced that religious peace could be assured only by a broad concentration of moderate elements" and "was as averse to some of Arius's more radical opponents as he had been to the radicalism of the Anans." Both Arius and Athanasius experienced Constantine's displeasure. It was Constantine who in A.D. 335 ordered the first of Athanasius's five exiles—the same year Arius regained the favor of the Roman emperor.

Over the 56 years separating the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople, Roman emperors frequently deposed and exiled bishops and presbyters they deemed schismatic and heretical. These actions created a long-lasting atmosphere of suspicion, intrigue, division, and hatred

within the church. Eastern bishops who supported Nicaea suffered severely during the reign of Constantius. After the murder of Constantius's brother Constans in 350, the empire was consolidated under the rule of Constantius. It appeared that the entire Christian world had fallen into Arian hands. Though Constantius died in 361, successors were more concerned with maintaining the unity of the empire than with pursuing theological clarity. When Valens took command in the East in 364, Simonetti says, he behaved "ferociously" against bishops who questioned the Arian position.

Rational, but wrong

In addition to the help they got from the emperors, Arius's ideas were deeply attractive because they offered a rationally satisfying model of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Arius began with the fundamental presupposition that the divine essence is an indivisible unity, not a substance that can be divided or distributed like helpings of mashed potatoes. If this was true, how could one argue coherently that God could be divided into persons? It was impossible for God to "beget" a divine Son, for such a begetting or generation would involve dividing the inherently indivisible.

Thus, the Son must be created rather than uncreated. If we were to draw a line between the uncreated divinity and all creatures—however exalted those creatures may be—the Son would necessarily be included with all other creatures. Though Arius did not question the Son's exalted status over all creation, he could not be eternal in the same sense as the Father. "There was a time when he was not," Arius said.

Nicaea's response to Arius was that the Son was of the same substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, a statement vigorously debated throughout the fourth century. The church needed these years to sort through and clarify what the creed meant by *homoousios*. Some Christians criticized the *homoousios* clause because they believed it led to the disturbing conclusion that there is no genuine distinction between the Father and the Son. That is, the Nicene Creed simply served as a disguise for Sabellianism (also called Modalism).

Some believers who firmly affirmed the deity of the Son advocated the idea that the Father and the Son share a similar nature, not the same nature. This formula seemed to avoid the confusion caused by *homoousios*, but it raised questions of its own. If the Son's essence is only similar to that of the Father's, in what way is it different?

Aggressive intelligence

The theological pressure cooker of the years between Nicaea and Constantinople revealed the hidden fault-lines in the Arian model. Nicene advocates such as Athanasius continued to think through the implications and underpinnings of the creed formulated at Nicaea. In Athanasius we perceive the power of personality in history. His bright mind was linked to an aggressive, contentious personality that drove his opponents crazy but strengthened him through years of conflict and exile. Perhaps only a person such as Athanasius possessed the intelligence, industriousness, and persistence to weather the theological warfare that dominated the fourth century. Robert Payne observes that "in the history of the early Church no one was ever so implacable, so urgent in his demands upon himself or so derisive of his enemies. There was something in him of the temper of the modern dogmatic revolutionary: nothing stopped him."

Athanasius saw that if the Arian belief in Christ as an exalted creature won the day, the gospel itself would be lost. Two of Athanasius's central points bear repeating:

- 1. Only God can save. A mere creature can save no one. While Arius worked hard to preserve an exalted status for the Son, picturing him as elevated above all other creatures, his understanding of Christ faltered at this strategic juncture. The Arian Christ, Athanasius**

insisted, was not a Savior, as an adolescent) No creature possessed the ability or prerogative to save from sin. Salvation was the prerogative, privilege, and potential act of God alone. "The maker must be greater than what he makes... and the giver has to bestow what is in his possession."

2. ***Christ was worshiped in Christian churches***, including churches that followed the teaching of Arius. Athanasius asked how a church could worship Christ if Christ were not God. To worship a creature is to commit blasphemy. In fact, Athanasius contended, Arius and his followers committed blasphemy on two counts: they worshiped a creature as God and called God incarnate a mere creature. Athanasius insisted that when we worship the Son we are rightfully worshiping one whose deity finds its source or fount in the deity of the Father. As the "offspring" of the Father, Athanasius wrote, the Son is indeed distinct. But we must not allow this fundamental distinction to blur "the identity of the one godhead." "For the radiance also is light, not a second light besides the sun, nor a different light, not a light by participation in the sun, but a whole proper offspring of it. No one would say that there are two lights, but that the sun and its radiance are two, while the light from the sun, which illuminates things everywhere, is one. In the same way the godhead of the Son is the Father's."

Like Father, like Son

The essential oneness of the Father and Son indicates, Athanasius argued, that whatever is predicated of the Father must be predicated of the Son, "except the title of 'Father.'" In short, if the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord. If the Father is light, the Son is light.

For many years in the fourth century the Arian cause appeared to have won the day. Arius's ideas offered a sensible rational approach to the relationship between the Father and the Son, while the Nicene Creed seemed confusing, nonbiblical, and provocative. In the end, however, the Nicene teaching won out.

Theodosius, the first emperor for many years to strongly oppose Arianism, affirmed the legitimacy and orthodoxy of bishops and priests who supported the Nicene Creed. Under his leadership and imperial authority the Council of Constantinople (381) reaffirmed and developed the statements made by the Nicene bishops some 56 years earlier.

It truly seemed for a time that it was Athanasius contra ***mundum***. C. S. Lewis wrote:

"We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same.

He 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."

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The Road to Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea Strove to Answer one of the Central Questions of the Christian Faith, but it also Proved that Theology is Never a Tidy Buisness

John Anthony McGuckin

Graffiti emblazoned on walls, a vicious war of pamphlets, riots in the streets, lawsuits, catchy songs of ridicule ... It's hard for modern Christians to imagine how such public turmoil could be created by an argument between theologians—or how God could work through the messiness of human conflict to bring the church to an understanding of truth.

To us, in retrospect, the Council of Nicaea is a veritable mountain in the landscape of the early church. For the protagonists themselves, it was more in the nature of an emergency meeting forced on hostile parties by imperial power and designed to stop an internal row. 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 preferment 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 a highly complex and provocative issue. Theologians of that era were almost beside themselves when they found that Scripture often gave very different-sounding notes when they applied to it for guidance. The disagreements this "simple" 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).

In many ways, therefore, Nicaea reminds us of the present era. Rather than being a symbol of clarity, peace, and order, it was a call to a difficult focusing of mind across a church that was often as muddled and confused as ours seems still to be.

How does "one God" fit with "Lord Jesus"?

The argument began innocently enough with a regular seminar that Alexander, the archbishop of Alexandria [see *Saints and Heretics*], was accustomed to hold with his senior clergy.

Alexander was a follower of Origen [see Issue #80: The First Bible Teachers] who, a century beforehand, had laid the basis for a vast mystical understanding of the relationship of the divine Logos to the Eternal Father. Logos was the word the Greek Bible had used to translate "Divine Wisdom," and it was also widely used in Greek philosophical circles to signify the divine power immanent within the world. To many Christians, it seemed 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, he 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, Ephesians 1:4, Colossians 1:15-17), it followed that the Son-Logos pre-existed creation. Since time was a consequence of creation, the Son pre-existed all time and was thus eternal like the Father, and indeed his

timelessness was one of the attributes that manifested him as the divine Son, worthy of the worship of the church. Since he was eternal there could be no "before" or "after" in him. It was inappropriate, therefore, to suggest that there was ever a time when the Son did not exist.

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

Alexander knew that he was pushing the envelope of the traditional "high Christology" of his church by explaining how 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 this development, many traditional Christian pieties would need to be re-forged 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 others) what exactly was going on.

Theological niceties—or the essence of Christianity?

One of Alexander's senior priests, the presbyter Arius [see *Saints and Heretics*], 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 dock-land, had also been an intellectual disciple of Origen but had taken a different strand of that early theologian's variegated legacy.

As was typical among third-century thinkers, Origen had a deeply ingrained sense of the absolute primacy of God over all other beings. This meant that the Father was superior to the Son in all respects—in terms of essence, attributes, power, and quality. The Son might be called divine in so far as he represented 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 was decidedly inferior to the Father in all respects. This meant that the Son did not possess absolute timelessness, which was a sole attribute of God the Father.

Thinking that he was defending "traditional values," Arius pressed that insight of Origen's even further. The Son-Logos, Arius allowed, might well have pre-dated the rest of creation, but it was inappropriate to imagine that he shared the divine pre-existence. Thus, it was important to confess 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 docklands, and the diocese of Alexandria was in serious disarray. Arius' supporters chanted, "Een pote hote ouk een," and wrote the slogan on the walls. Overnight Alexander's camp added a Greek negative to the beginning: "Ouk een pete 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 (was 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 showed the divine status of the Son ("1 and the Father are One," John 10:30; "And the Word was God," John 1:1), another could be quoted back to suggest the subordinate, even the created, status of the Son ("In the beginning he created me (Wisdom)," Proverbs 8:22; "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone," Mark 10:18). If Jesus was not fully God, he was not really God at all, and thus to worship him was not

piety but simply idolatry.

Alexander (applying good pastoral sense) would not allow a theologian's 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 [see Saints and Heretics], a kinsman by marriage to Constantine the emperor. Arius 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 onwards 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. He marshaled many supporters.

The Anniversary Council

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. In one, the subordination of the Son was stressed (Christ the Servant of God). In the other, the salvific triumph of the Saviour was tantamount (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 [see Saints and Heretics] 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 20th anniversary of his claiming of the throne (an event that sparked a civil war), which would be celebrated in 325, to help settle the embarrassing dispute among his allies, the bishops. He felt (rightly) that their disarray was compromising his desire to demonstrate that he had effectively "brought peace" to the eastern territories.

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

The council opened on June 19. Tradition has it that 318 clergy were in attendance (a Greek number-cipher for the cross), but many modern historians think that 250 is a more accurate figure. 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 had been aimed at one another, and rather than put many on trial he had given 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. So 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 [see Saints and Heretics] 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 related to the divine Father. To this end, the bishops decided that extra clauses would be interpolated into the old creed as "commentary," in order to amplify the bare statements about the mission of Christ and show how Jesus could be confessed as God.

Creed and Catchword

The origin of these "confessional acclamations" of Christ ("God from God, Light from Light" etc.) was Alexander's party, but since it had become clear in years of wrangling 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.

It was possibly Ossius [see *Saints and Heretics*], the theological adviser of the emperor, who suggested that the magic word to nail the Arian party would be **homoousios**. The term meant "of the same substance as," and when applied to the Logos it proclaimed that the Logos was divine in the same way as God the Father was divine (not in an inferior, different, or nominal sense). In short, if the Logos was **homoousios** with the Father, he was 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 vote for the traditional Christian belief that Christ was divine, it was vague enough to mean that Christ was 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 worked. (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 it for its crassness—it attributed "substance" (or material stuff) to God, who was beyond all materiality. Moreover, the term was unsuitable because it was "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 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 of 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 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.

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 that they had achieved a lasting settlement. As we shall see, however, the controversy was far from over.

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Changes and Challenges

David Neff

I grew up in a church that frowned on creeds, so it was as a musician that I learned the Nicene Creed. And I learned it in the fractured, phrase by phrase way it appears in the great concert masses, with several minutes of music devoted to each segment.

I can still remember the first time I heard the creed sung as part of Bach's magnificent Mass in B-Minor. It was nearly 40 years ago at UCLA under the baton of Roger Wagner. The pain of Bach's descending line in the *Crucifixus* (He was crucified) nearly moved me to tears, and then I wept with joy at the giddy shock of the brilliantly ascending *Et Resurrexit* (And rose again).

Bach knew how to make theology sing. And the Nicene Creed still sings for me.

This issue of *Christian History & Biography* is about things eternal and things that change. At the Council of Nicaea the church affirmed the eternal equality of God the Son with God the Father. But at that same council, the church found itself coping with a brand new situation.

From the beginning, the church wanted to be in universal agreement on its teachings. The New Testament is, in part, the story of the church sorting out divisive issues.

But with the legalization of Christianity after Constantine's vision, the unity of the church took on political significance. Constantine expected the church to be a force for unity rather than division. Shortly after he issued the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313), which extended religious freedom to Christians, he became embroiled in a long and messy controversy between rival church factions in North Africa. When the Roman bishop failed to solve the problem, Constantine became angry and intervened.

By 325, when the Council of Nicaea met, the bishops had only had a dozen years in which to work out their relationship with the Emperor. Constantine had given Christianity preferential treatment, but his rival Licinius had reneged on an earlier agreement and began persecuting Christians once again. Constantine finally beat Licinius into submission and secured full freedom for Christians only a year before the council met.

Thus the situation was fresh, and the majority of Christians were deeply indebted to Constantine for their freedom. And it is in this context of change that we read about the efforts of the bishops at Nicaea to discover doctrinal unity.

In a recent newsletter, Martin Marty quoted the title of H. M. Kuitert's book, [*Everything Is Politics but Politics Is Not Everything*](#). That sentence could have been written about Nicaea. And knowing how to sort out the politics of Nicaea is tricky. Everyone writing in this issue affirms the doctrinal decisions of Nicaea, but given the limited sources and the chronological and cultural distance, they will naturally view these events through different windows.

We are indebted to D. H. Williams, professor of historical theology at Baylor University in Waco, TX, for lending us his expertise during the planning and shaping of this issue.

Change is also afoot at ***Christian History & Biography***, as with this issue we welcome associate editor Jennifer Trafton and say goodbye to managing editor Chris Armstrong.

As issue 85 goes to press, Chris is in his first month of teaching at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, having just joined the faculty as associate professor of church history. Chris has seen the magazine through an interesting evolution, broadening the scope of each issue while retaining our fundamental strength as a theme magazine. We're grateful to Chris for his excellent work. Chris is a man of many gifts editorial, entrepreneurial, and educational and we wish him the best as he begins a new life chapter at Bethel.

Chris did most of the planning for issue 85, but Jennifer Trafton has had the task of pulling together its various strands and working with the authors to shoehorn their contributions into the space available.

Jennifer and Chris have much in common, since they both earned degrees at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and both studied under Grant Wacker at Duke University. While at Duke, Jennifer and Chris participated in two small groups together: one that read the writings of the Inklings, and another that discussed issues of faith and learning. (This magazine's Duke connection goes further: Former managing editor Elesha Coffman is currently engaged in graduate study there.)

Jennifer adds to her passion for church history an interest in literature, art history, and the Christian imagination. Her thesis at Gordon-Conwell dealt with George MacDonald's theology of the atonement. And she'll be bringing that knowledge to bear in assembling issue 86. MacDonald, the writer who influenced C. S. Lewis more than any other, typifies the Victorians' struggle for faith and sheds light on movements and thinkers that still shape us.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 85: The Council of Nicaea: Debating Jesus' Divinity

Dogs, Missions, and Holy Relics

Compiled by Ted Olsen

Monastery's Famed Rescue Dogs Rescued

Many animals have been associated with theology the lamb, the lion, the fish, the pelican (believed to feed its young with its own blood) but one of the most prominent pets with roots in church history is the Saint Bernard. Reportedly bred first around 1660 as guard dogs for the monastery and hospice founded six centuries earlier by Bernard of Menthon (Monthen/ Montjou/ Aotha/ Montjoux), they gained a reputation as rescuers, credited with more than 2,000 saves over the past two centuries. One dog saved more than 40 people between 1800 and 1812.

Recently, however, the dogs (now 18 adults and 16 pups) themselves needed rescue: "We no longer have the money to breed and care for these marvelous dogs," the monastery's Father Ilario told ***The Times of London*** last year. The animals eat more than four pounds of meat a day, and helicopters and other technology have put them out of the rescue business since 1975. So in January, Swiss philanthropists announced that they would grant the monks more than \$4 million to care for the animals and to build a museum honoring them and the monastery's longtime hospitality.

Such tourism with a spiritual twist is consistent with Bernard's history: after his appointment as Archdeacon of Aosta, Italy, Bernard was largely focused on converting Alpine people. He soon became concerned about reports of French and German pilgrims trapped by avalanches as they traveled to Rome. The four monks who remain at the monastery he founded for their safety say their pleas for help were largely driven by a desire to spend more time ministering to modern-day pilgrims and less to the canines.

Attack on the Missions

A suit from Americans United for Separation of Church and State challenges a \$10 million federal matching grant to rehabilitate the deteriorating buildings of California's 21 Spanish missions, 19 of which still have active congregations. In unrelated news, Los Angeles County redesigned its seal to remove a cross from the mission depicted on it. But church and state have been intertwined with the missions since their founding.

Spread along 600 miles of what was then El Camino Real, the missions from Mission San Diego de Alcalá (founded by Junípero Serra in 1769) to Sonoma's Mission San Francisco Solano (1823) are set about 30 miles apart, "a stiff day's march," for the benefit of Spain's colonizers, not the native Americans. There's no doubt, though, that Serra's foremost concerns were for conversion not colonization. "It seemed to me that [the native residents] would fall shortly into the apostolic and evangelic net," he wrote. After 65 years, when the missions were ordered to secularize, 31,000 converts were living among the missions, along with fewer than 60 padres and 300 soldiers.

Bernardino, Naturally

That painting you've seen of Augustine or Patrick may be beautiful, but it's probably not very accurate: imagination and devotion, not historical fidelity, were foremost in artists' minds. Many saints weren't

depicted until centuries after their deaths. But one anonymous engraving from the 1400s took a decidedly different turn. An unknown German engraver shows Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444), the Franciscan "Apostle of Italy," as he appeared in life and Bernardino's death mask proves it. The engraving is the first known Western artwork to take such care in portraying its subject as he appeared, Andrew Robison told the Associated Press. Robison is senior curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, where the print is on display through May. Another item in the "Six Centuries of Prints and Drawings" exhibit has a similar place in history: a 1486 book from Mainz, Germany, has the first-known realistic print of an identifiable building. ***A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land***'s image of Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher looks much as it did in the 15th century.

John and Gregory Go Home

Just months after returning a revered icon to the Russian Orthodox Church (see issue 84, p. 9), Pope John Paul II has made a return on a much larger scale, handing over the relics of John Chrysostom (347-407) and Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, leader of the Eastern Orthodox churches. Both saints, predecessors to Bartholomew as leader of the church in Constantinople, are considered among the best preachers and theologians of the early church (See Issue 44: John Chrysostom).

As with the return of the Kazan Madonna icon to Moscow, what was intended to repair relations between East and West became instead a point of contention. The Eastern Orthodox say that both relics were stolen during the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204. The Vatican acknowledges that "in the time of the Latin Empire of Constantinople (1204-1258), the venerated relics were brought to Rome," but papal spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls says that Gregory's remains were taken to Rome by Byzantine nuns "in the 8th century, at the time of the Iconoclastic persecution, so that they could be kept safe." While the Pope apologized for the sack of Constantinople in 2001, Navarro-Valls says the relic handover should be seen as a "return, not restitution."

Britain, Bibleland?

Travel to the Holy Land is slowly picking up again, but those still skittish about going there have a backup opportunity: London. Specifically, the British Museum, with two 2004 books highlighting special Bible-related artifacts among its massive holdings. ***The Bible in the British Museum: Interpreting the Evidence***, by the museum's former keeper of western Asiatic antiquities, T. C. Mitchell, is for scholars and those with a serious interest in the museum's literary holdings. The book, recently published in a new, illustrated edition by Paulist Press, includes translations of 72 documents, from the Patriarchs to the early church. More casual visitors will be well served by Day One's ***Through the British Museum with the Bible*** (dayone.co.uk/travel-guides.htm, 1-866-732-6657). The illustrated volume serves as guide and souvenir akin to DK's Eyewitness Travel Guides. And if you're heading across the Atlantic, note that Day One has seven other excellent "in the footsteps" travel guides/biographies that steer visitors through the locations and lives of William Carey, John Knox, John Bunyan, C.H. Spurgeon, William Booth, William Grimshaw, and even Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

New Roman Font

Gary Lee and Jim Wilkinson were metal detecting in a farmer's field in Lincolnshire, England, when they picked up the weak signal of what turned out to be a Christian baptismal font from the Constantinian period. Only 18 such fonts have been discovered in Britain, and this one, probably made in the East Midlands between 300 and 350, is among the oldest. Little is known for certain about the prevalence of Christianity in Britain at the time, but there was enough of a presence for at least three British bishops to attend the Council of Arles in 314.

The real significance of the font find, however, lies not in how it was made, but in how it was destroyed.

The lead font is cut in two, suggesting that it was destroyed in a pagan revival during the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363).

"It is likely the fonts were destroyed by the barbarians to mask the memory, power, and symbolism of Christianity," Adam Daubney, Finds Liaison Officer for the Lincolnshire County Council, told ***The Lincolnshire Echo***. "However, the pagans would not have wanted to annihilate the artifacts. It would be much better to cut them up and re-melt them." Daubney postulates that the pagans hid it but never got a chance to reclaim it once the Barbarian Conspiracy (367-379) was quelled and Christianity grew.

Marsden, Pelikan Honored

Two of the most prominent historians of Christianity received top honors in December 2004. Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and the University of Louisville awarded University of Notre Dame professor George Marsden its \$200,000 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his 2003 biography, ***Jonathan Edwards: A Life*** (Yale University Press). "Marsden draws one into a fascinating and conflict-ridden world that seems, at once, both distant and not so very different from our own," award coordinator Susan R. Garrett said in a press release.

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan was awarded an even larger prize: the Library of Congress's second John W. Kluge Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Human Sciences. He shares the \$1 million award, which honors academic disciplines not covered by the Nobel Prizes, with French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

"Pelikan single-handedly brought the Eastern or Orthodox tradition into the hitherto largely Western story of Christian tradition," Librarian of Congress James H. Billington said. He also quoted one of Pelikan's colleagues saying he "provides a supremely effective antidote to the temptation to murder our own past."

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The Dead Sea Scrolls Unrolled

Joseph L. Trafton

All John Trever intended to do was to study and photograph the plants of the Holy Land.

But a telephone call on February 18, 1948, changed the young Methodist scholar's life and the course of biblical studies forever. The next day Butrus Sowmy of St. Mark's Syrian Orthodox Monastery in Jerusalem brought Trever a scroll that the monastery had acquired. Could he identify the manuscript and determine its age?

"Laying the heavy document on my bed, slowly I began to open it. A sheet of leather, containing two columns of text, had become detached from the rest of the document. The linen thread used to bind the sheets together had disintegrated. On the left edge the text was badly blurred by someone who had attempted to re-ink many letters which had been worn away by handling. Obviously this was the end of the scroll. It had been rolled backwards, with the last column on the outside. I continued to unroll another six to eight columns.

"Here was not what I had expected! The script was puzzling to eyes more accustomed to Kittel's ***Biblia Hebraica*** in modern printed Hebrew and a few relatively modern Torah and Esther scrolls. I had expected the identification to be easy, but this scroll was different. It fired my imagination.)

"The form of the script was intriguing, and it was soon apparent that it was the only clue for dating the document.) I went over to my desk and found a box of 2" x 2" color slides on the history of the Bible text, and began to thumb through the section on the Hebrew text. . . . The British Museum Torah Codex, I recalled, had been considered one of the oldest extant Hebrew Bible manuscripts. A mere glance at the photograph of it in my magnifier was convincing enough that the manuscript on my bed belonged to a different category and age." Further study convinced Trever that the scroll probably dated to the first or second century B.C. "My heart began to pound," he wrote.

Trever copied a few lines from the scroll. Later, he encountered a surprise while checking some of the words in a Hebrew concordance to the Old Testament.

"The next reference showed two occurrences in Isaiah 65:1. With growing expectancy, I hastily turned to it. There word for word, and almost letter for letter, was exactly what I had copied from the manuscript! It was a scroll of Isaiah, without a doubt!" A complete scroll of Isaiah dating from the last centuries prior to the birth of Jesus seemed too good to be true. That would make it a thousand years older than any other Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament currently known.

Over the next eight years, 11 caves along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea would yield more than 800 manuscripts, about a quarter of them copies of Old Testament books. Others would include a vast array of stories about Old Testament figures, hymns and psalms, wisdom poems, biblical commentaries, and books outlining the distinctive practices and beliefs of a Jewish sect that existed prior to, and contemporary with, Jesus. But Trever knew none of that at the time. After photographing the scroll, he sent a set of prints to the eminent American archaeologist William Foxwell Albright.

On March 8, Albright air-mailed this response: "I repeat that in my opinion you have made the greatest

MS [manuscript] discovery of modern times certainly the greatest biblical manuscript find.) What an absolutely incredible find!"

The saga of the Dead Sea Scrolls had begun.

Not bad for a plant enthusiast.

Quotations from John C. Trever, The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Personal Account (rev. ed.; Upland, CA: Upland Commercial Printers, 1977). Used with permission.

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New wine, new wineskins

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

Do this in remembrance of me." Jesus' command to his disciples as they ate their last meal together has undergirded Christian worship and theology for more than two millennia. At the original Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples would have partaken of wine from a common cup and unleavened bread. How did portions of Protestantism arrive at the modern practice of receiving grape juice in individual cups and leavened bread?

The early Western church maintained the custom of wine and unleavened bread. The Eastern church soon began to use leavened bread, seeing the leaven as a symbol of new life in Christ. In the West, the unleavened bread became thinner and more stylized until it assumed the form of a thin wafer. By the high Middle Ages, amid growing concerns about reverence toward the bread and wine as Christ's actual body and blood, the church ceased to offer laity the cup. The Protestant Reformation urged more frequent reception of Communion by the laity "in both kinds" (bread and wine), as well as emphasizing "real" bread. From the 16th until the 19th century, the majority of Protestants communed using wine from a common cup and leavened bread.

Leaders of the 18th-century "evangelical revival" in Britain and America, though concerned about the immoderate use of alcohol, did not see wine, cider, and beer as alcoholic in the same way as distilled spirits (such as gin and brandy). However, in the 19th century, temperance became "teetotalism" or "total abstinence," moving all alcohol (wine included) into the list of forbidden beverages. Many began to question why a beverage considered dangerous to drink was still used on the Communion table.

Believing both in the authority of Scripture and the scientific proof of alcohol's poisonous nature, Protestant theologians and exegetes tried to explain the Bible's positive use of the word *wine*, not least Jesus' command to his disciples to remember him by consuming it. Led by biblical commentator Frederic Lees, they theorized that several Hebrew and Greek words used to mean *wine* in the Bible actually referred to grape juice. Jesus had instituted the Eucharist with the unfermented "fruit of the vine," whereas the ferment of intoxication represented "the leaven of the Pharisees," symbolizing corruption and decay.

Motivated by these arguments, Protestant churchgoers and clergy sought a way to make unfermented grape juice. An American Methodist dentist, Thomas Bramwell Welch, and his son Charles were the first to succeed in this on a large scale. Charles Welch was a skilled marketer, and "Welch's grape juice" became a popular beverage among total abstainers and the replacement for fermented wine on most American Protestant Communion tables (except in Lutheran and Episcopal churches).

Meanwhile, science was teaching new theories about the spread of disease through germs, sweeping late 19th-century America with a hygiene movement. The common cup came under fire. Methodist pastor R. W. Ryan, who owned an individual-cup-making company, led an argument for individual cups in the religious press. Debates raged, but by the early 20th century most Protestants adopted individual Communion cups originally glass, and designed so as not to resemble whiskey shot glasses. Individual cubes of bread also became common.

In the 1960s and 1970s, liturgical reforms resulting from Vatican II spread from Catholic into Protestant churches, questioning both the grape juice and individual cup practices. Many mainline

Protestants have returned to the use of a common cup which may contain either wine or juice and a single loaf of bread. Conversely, some marketers to evangelical churches have developed disposable individual Communion cups which contain both wafer and grape juice in separate hermetically sealed compartments.

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Why a Creed?

A Conversation with Robert Louis Wilken

Robert Louis Wilken

CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY: Why should we care about the early councils today—or even recite a creed? Aren't the gospel accounts in the New Testament 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 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.

Before the Council of Nicaea, there were plenty of local baptismal "creeds" that 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?

Christians are reflective people. They think about what they believe. In my recent 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 Apostle's 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 twofold (the debate about the Holy Spirit will 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.

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

It's very clear that from the beginning the church is not simply a collection of individuals. It's a community. And a community needs leadership, persons in authority to whom people could look for direction, someone to teach and to preside at worship.

We know that from early on 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. And 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 focal point of the community. Ignatius of Antioch says, "Where the bishop is, there the church is."

Twice in 1 Corinthians, Saint 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, then, that the bishops are going to be the decision-makers at the council. It was a gathering of those who were most responsible for the church's teaching.

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 Anus?

Anus 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 most 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.

***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?**

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, 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 referred to Christ. But Proverbs says, "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 great 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 everything 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.

There is 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?

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 [Galatians 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.

In the council, the bishops cooperated with—some would say, were co-opted by—the state. Was the die cast at the council for the state church model that would dominate the church for 1200 years and more?

The simple answer is this: what does the church do when it winds up convincing most of the 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

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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 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 that another creed was also used, 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.

The version below is the one used 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" is still contested by the Eastern Orthodox Church as an unwarranted addition to Nicene theology.

D.H. Williams

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 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, thee Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe 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.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Who Came to the Council of Nicaea?

D. H. Williams

Judging from what little we know about the identity of those who attended, the council was overwhelming 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 those 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 [see p. 46]. 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, having had his eyes put 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.

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Taking Care of (Church) Business

More was decided at the Council of Nicaea than the nature of Christ.

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' 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, 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 Gregorian calendar.

Another significant issue at Nicaea was a proposal for clerical celibacy, probably introduced by Ossius of Cordoba. 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.)

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 resulting from the last great persecution of Christians as well as intramural challenges to episcopal authority.

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 A.D. 70, Jerusalem was in decline].
8. Sectarian Cathari [rigorist Novatians who denied forgiveness to those who lapsed in persecution] wishing to return to the church must state in writing that they will pardon the penitential lapsed, their 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.
12. Those who endured violence, then lapsed, are excommunicated for 10 years, but may be readmitted depending on the degree of their penitence.
13. The dying are to receive the Eucharist, but if they recover [and are not yet communicants], 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.
20. For the sake of uniformity in the church, on the Lord's Day and Pentecost all should pray standing rather than kneeling.

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Do You Know Whom You Worship?

Did the Nicene Creed distort the pure gospel, or did it embody and protect it?

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 indecisiveness: "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.

All Christians asserted that Jesus was God and worshipped Him as such, following the understanding laid down in an early second-century sermon known as I Clement: "brethren, we ought to think of Jesus as we do of God." However, those baptismal creeds which have come down to us from 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. 26:37-38), 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 eternality, cannot suffer? There was no agreement among Christians about the Bible's teaching on these issues.

It was inevitable, therefore, that the early church would eventually require a more universal statement of faith like the Nicene Creed. 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 obviously 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 insure 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," there was no dispute about its truth, but "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.

Out of the heart of the church

At the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, some Protestant historians regarded the Council of 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 which 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 too that the creed was 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 worshipping 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 congregations was a major preoccupation with 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.

Rooted in tradition

However the members of the council derived the creed that they finally issued—and no minutes from the proceedings are ever cited by later church historians or have otherwise been discovered—local baptismal creeds were actively sought and used. 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 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."

Scripturally Based

None of the preceding is meant to imply there were 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. Later known as "modalism," this was a heretical view that had been condemned in the previous century because it stressed the monotheist character of Christianity at the cost of upholding a substantial Trinitarianism. 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 of view about God.

Moreover, these same words 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 unscriptural 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 his ***On the Definition of the Nicene Creed***, which he wrote in defense of the creed a quarter of a century after the council met. New theological language was necessary in order 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' 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—"orthodox" and "heretical"—were drawing on contemporary philosophical language in order to frame theological truths. Terms such as **person, substance, essence**, and many others all had a philosophical background that pre-dated Christianity but were borrowed permanently for Christian purposes. Where there was obvious conflict between the Bible and Greek philosophy, the Bible took precedent for even the most erudite Christians.

Second, one of the lessons learned during the "Arian controversy" was that in order to achieve doctrinal orthodoxy you cannot interpret the Bible from the Bible alone. 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.

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" (***Sermon 212. 2***). 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 according to 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."

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Debating Jesus' Divinity: Christian History Timeline

The Trials and Triumphs of Nicaea



Christian History magazine

"Now because it was agreed formerly that the Synod of Bishops should meet at Ancyra of Galatia, it hath seemed to us on many accounts that it would be well for a Synod to assemble at Nicaea, a city of Bithynia, both because the Bishops from Italy and the rest of the countries of Europe are coming, and because of the excellent temperature of the air, and in order that I

may be present as a spectator and participator in those things which will be done. Wherefore I signify to you, my beloved brethren, that all of you promptly assemble at the said city, that is at Nicaea."

Constantine

303 The "Great Persecution" begins under **Emperor Diocletian**.

313 The **Edict of Milan** 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.

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.

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 (moved to Nicaea by Constantine).

325 The **Council of Nicaea** produces a creed affirming that Christ is of the same substance as the Father and condemns the teaching of Arius. Eusebius of Caesarea is reinstated. Arius and his supporters are exiled.

328 **Athanasius** succeeds Alexander as bishop of Alexandria.

337 Constantine's son **Constantius** embraces Arianism. The Nicene Creed is nearly eclipsed amidst a dizzying array of councils and creeds for several decades.

c. **340** The Arian missionary Ulphilas evangelizes the Goths.

350-3 After a civil war, **Constantius II** becomes sole ruler of the Empire.

350s Tensions build between **heterousian** and **homoiousian** theologians.

359 and 360 Constantius calls two councils that promulgate a **homoian** creed.

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

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.

Canonical Conundrum

The Council of Nicaea's attempt to appeal to Scripture ended up revealing the fundamental difference between Alexander and Arius: how are Christians to understand the biblical statements about Christ? Alexander and Athanasius appealed to scriptural texts that spoke of the Son's generation from the Father or that declared 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." (from Hebrews 1:1-6)

Arius drew upon Scripture passages that spoke of the Son being distinct from the Father, particularly texts that spoke 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)
- "I 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' 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, Stamp of God's substance, 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' "father" in just the same way he was "our father"?

Michel Rene Barnes

Doctrinal Dysfunction

Modalists (or Sabellians): 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.

Eusebians: There is a closeness between the Father and Son, but they are distinct beings (see p. 40).

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

Heterousians (or Eunomians): The Father and the Son are unlike in essence.

Homoiousians: The Son is like the Father in essence; he differs from the Father only in not being unbegotten.

Nicene orthodoxy: The Father and Son are of the same essence, but they are not different "parts" of God. God is indivisibly One yet Three.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Saints and Heretics

Key players in a high-stakes game of politics and theology.

Elesha Coffman

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 him different 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 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 different 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* to describe the Father and the Son but, contrary to some accounts, did not ram it down anyone's throat. He lacked the passion or 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 (-328)

The Gatekeeper

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, in 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. He enlisted the support of Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, and many 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. Upon Alexander's death, on April 17, 328, Melitians resisted Athanasius's election and ultimately elected their own bishop.

Arius (250-336) **Crowd-pleasing heretic**

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 documented regarding Arius's wardrobe, he certainly was popular—and unpopular.

Originally from Libya, Arius began his church career as a priest in Alexandria, a city with an abundance of pulpits and ideas. 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. Origen, the third-century "father of speculative theology," came closest in his estimation to determining the truth about God as Trinity.

Arius lost out at Nicaea, but he quickly bounced back. In 327, he and two of his supporters petitioned Constantine for re-acceptance 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 the great consternation of the Arians—Arius died en route to the church. He never got his moment of triumph.

We should recognize that records from the fourth century are scant and that stories sometimes conflict. According to Rowan Williams in his book Arius: Heresy & Tradition (Eerdmans, 2001), we can thank Athanasius for the description 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 en route to the church.

Ossius (or Hosius) of Cordoba (c. 256-357/358)
Court referee

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 importantly, 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 an Alexandrian creed 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 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 (-c. 341)

The Gambler

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 of these potentially fatal missteps, Eusebius survived. He retained his bishopric in a major city of western Asia Minor even after Licinius' 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 Arians, but the bishop 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)

Historian Who Saw it All

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 in-fighting in 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 the theology of Origen. This sympathy led him to reject strongly anti-Arian statements, such as the declaration of the council at Antioch in 325, and briefly got him 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 impressed by the emperor's vote of confidence, Eusebius's opponents kept trying to edge him out, even interpreting the creed in a way they thought he (and other like-minded bishops) would not be able to endorse. Eventually, however, Eusebius signed on.

Back in Caesarea, Eusebius devoted much of his time to writing. He is best known for his ***Ecclesiastical History***.

Marcellus of Ancyra (-374) **Extreme critic**

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, Son, and Holy Spirit as different modes of the same being. 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.

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Athanasius

Pugnacious Defender of Orthodoxy

A modern biographer of Athanasius of Alexandria speaks of "the predominantly polemical nature of most of his dogmatic works" and "the lack of serenity in his argumentation." Understandably so! In all of Christian history, it is safe to say, few churchmen have been so entirely embroiled in doctrinal and ecclesiastical disputes as Athanasius. In comparison with him, one ventures that even so controversial a figure as Martin Luther lived out a relatively quiet and uneventful life.

Born into a Christian family in Alexandria in 295, Athanasius was an infant during the persecution of Diocletian and barely more than a boy when the Edict of Milan legalized the church in 313. He was ordained a deacon five years later at age 23. The most indubitable claim we can make for Athanasius is that his entire life was absorbed in the service of the church.

The event that most marked the destiny of this ardent churchman was, of course, the Council of Nicaea in 325. Although there is perhaps no other name more closely identified with Nicaea than Athanasius, this close identification had more to do with the aftermath of the council than with the event itself. Three facts conspired to make this so.

First, the fathers at Nicaea had formalized in the church a ranking patriarchal structure, according to which the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch would exercise general oversight of the other churches in their respective regions. Thus, when Athanasius was made Bishop of Alexandria in 328, just three years after Nicaea, he suddenly found himself in one of the most influential and prestigious positions in the whole church.

Second, Nicaea had also determined that the church at Alexandria, because of the superior records and resources of astronomy available in that city, would be charged with establishing the proper date of Easter each year, and so informing the rest of the church by an annual notice. This arrangement afforded Athanasius an official opportunity to send an annual letter to all of the other major ecclesiastical centers, and until his death in 373 he used these "Paschal Letters" as opportunities to teach and admonish Christians far beyond the borders of Alexandria. Because many successors of Athanasius followed his example in this respect, the bishopric of Alexandria became one of the most influential teaching authorities in the whole church, second only to Rome.

Third, because Nicaea had implicitly granted the Roman emperors an authority over the affairs of the church that they had never had before, the next several decades (even centuries!) would see many instances of direct imperial interference with the church's teaching ministry itself, including the office of bishop. As various emperors exercised this interference, Athanasius was forced into exile from Alexandria no fewer than five times.

Athanasius spent these extended periods of banishment chiefly doing two things. First, he traveled extensively to far-off places, where he conferred with churchmen regarding the Arian heresy and other ecclesiastical matters, including imperial interference. These consultations greatly extended the reputation of Athanasius as a universal Christian teacher. Second, these periods of exile afforded him ample time to write the lengthy theological treatises that caused him to be ranked, even today, among the greatest exponents of Christian doctrine.

—Patrick Henry Reardon

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Athanasius

Pugnacious Defender of Orthodoxy

Patrick Henry Rardon

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A Marriage Made in Byzantium

When it came to determining doctrine, there were limits to an emperor's power.

Bradley Nassif

The Council of Nicaea is often misrepresented. Jehovah's Witnesses and modern critics of the divinity of Christ allege that the council was merely a tool of imperial manipulation. They point to Nicaea, not the Bible, as the source of the doctrine of the Trinity, and interpret the Council as the triumph of heresy over orthodoxy, rather than the reverse. They argue that Emperor Constantine "forced" the Council to adopt the crucial word ***consubstantial (homoousios)*** to describe the equal divinity of the Father and the Son.

But did Constantine really run the show at Nicaea?

The relationship between the church and the emperors starting with Constantine to the end of the Roman Empire in the East (also known as the Byzantine Empire, A.D. 330-1453) worked much like a marriage. Much of it was improvised, and the lovers quarreled at times and manipulated each other to get what they wanted. When it came to matters of faith, however, the boundaries of their relationship left no uncertainty about where the power of one left off and the other began.

Defender of the Faith

In 336, the 30th year of Constantine's reign, Eusebius of Caesarea gave a speech in honor of the emperor. His talk provided an official statement of the imperial image and political theory that would define the role of the emperor until the fall of the Byzantine Empire: "Thus invested with the image of the kingship of heaven, he [the emperor] pilots affairs on earth while looking upward in order to steer according to the pattern of his archetype ... He [God] has modeled the kingdom on earth into an image of that in heaven, and he urges all men to strive toward it."

Eusebius affirmed Constantine as God's anointed one, an earthly reflection of the image of Christ in heaven—one God, one emperor, one kingdom, and one faith. Eusebius did not believe Constantine was divine, but he did see him as God's representative over the Christian empire. Elsewhere he spoke of Constantine as the "supervisor of the people outside [the church]," which meant that Constantine had an apostolic mission to spread the gospel among the pagans. He was also the divinely appointed defender of the faith, the "pontifex maximus"—a Christianized pagan title for the supreme leader of religion which effectively made the church a department of the state. This meant that heresy and treason were equated. In the sixth century, Emperor Justinian described the relationship between church and empire as a harmonious "symphony."

What happened at Nicaea is true of all the ecumenical councils (A.D. 325-787) as they confessed the Trinity, the divine and human natures of Christ, and the justification of icons in worship and devotion. Four points summarize the relationship between church and emperor at all the ecumenical councils.

Who's in charge here?

First, the ecumenical councils were ***imperial*** councils. The emperors convened them and their proceedings were patterned after those of the Roman Senate. The emperors also confirmed the election

of bishops, convened or prevented church councils, presided over them to some extent along with the bishops, maintained order and security, and closed the councils by ratifying their decisions and enforcing them as law.

The emperors could manipulate the outcome of a council convened by selecting which bishops would be invited, even though in theory it was to be open to all the bishops in the empire. The false council of Hieria in A.D. 754, which supported the destruction of icons, is a case in point.

At the Council of Nicaea, Constantine "pushed" the bishops to adopt the crucial term ***homoousios*** that was most likely suggested to him by his theological advisor, Bishop Ossius of Cordoba. Constantine was not a theologian—in fact, at the time, he was technically not even a Christian! But his push for closure resulted in consensus after only one day. His main goal was imperial unity, not theological accuracy. If the emperor had actually forced orthodoxy on the council, there would not have been the protracted debates and proliferation of theological parties in the decades that followed. (A similar controversy erupted in the aftermath of Chalcedon in 451).

Constantine was not the source of the term ***homoousios*** (it had been circulating among theologians for at least a century), nor did the council accept it at his command. He and subsequent Christian emperors could control the machinery of church affairs, but they could not decide matters of faith, which belonged to the bishops and their churches.

Innovation not a virtue

Second, the ecumenical councils were ***conservative***. Doctrinal innovation was not a virtue in the minds of the emperors or early church fathers. Their task was not to invent doctrine, but to confess it. In so doing they characteristically appealed to "following the Holy Fathers" so that what had been believed would also be passed on. Hence the very words, phrases and sentences of the "holy and God-bearing Fathers" were endlessly collected and cited throughout the documents of the period.

Third, the councils functioned as ***witnesses to the truth***. The councils were intended to be a manifestation of the church, not merely a forum to clarify differences. Their purpose was to take the consensus of what the bishops believed, not to determine truth through argumentation. The imperial council could not be a place to debate heretics who, by definition, could not even participate since they were in principle not members of the church. But the problem, of course, was to decide ahead of time who was a heretic, and that was seldom clear at the time. The emperors were only too eager to help clarify that issue.

Finally, the ecumenical councils were viewed as ***Spirit-inspired events***, not as legal institutions that would guarantee the truthfulness of their decisions. This view limited imperial power. Constantine and his successors learned from the church's response that there was no guarantee a council's decisions would be accepted as representing the mind of the universal church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Nicaea was a witness to the truth, in conformity with the Scripture as handed down in apostolic tradition. But its ecumenicity and authority would be determined only by whether the church received it. The ultimate authority of all the ecumenical councils was not the emperor, but the witness of the Holy Spirit among the faithful and their bishops.

Unlike the doctrinal certainty which Rome later claimed to secure through the Pope, the Fathers of the ecumenical councils maintained that authority was to be found through the life of the Holy Spirit in the church. Thus the final authority was God himself, mediated through the body of Christ and its interpretation of the Bible. And thus the authority of the council was derived from its fidelity to Scripture. As Orthodox historian George Florovsky observed, "[T]he main, if not also the only, written manual of faith and doctrine, was in the ancient church, precisely Holy Scripture."

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The Final Act

It took almost 60 years for the church to make Nicaea its standard of faith.

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 for Nicaea and the Trinitarian faith, but they should know that the Spirit only slowly led Christians to the true reading of Scripture.

There are 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 Arius's. 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 also 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 it is clear that Christians 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, Arius was readmitted to communion by many bishops 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 p. 32].

Athanasius: bishop of Alexandria from 328. In 336 and 339 he was exiled for maladministration, including charges that he had been violent towards 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 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 is a basic ontological distinction between Father and Son. But they insisted just as strongly that there is 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" (cf. Wisd. 7:25-26; 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 a slightly idiosyncratic "Eusebian," but the other members of this tradition were not in any way dependent on Arius, and they knew little of his particular theology.

Heterophobia

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

Constantius was the most successful of Constantine's three sons, and during a complex civil war between 350-353, 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 who strongly opposed the Homoian radicals and the Homoian attempt to prevent the use of essence language focused for a while 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). Many people sympathized with their approach because they seemed to uphold "Eusebian" principles. They believed it was necessary to talk about essence or being in order 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. 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 there was still no history of a creed functioning as a universal marker of Christian identity. 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 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" towards Christianity meant that the Homoian creed never had the chance to gain a firm foothold.

The mystery of Three in One

This rapprochement between these previously opposing groups involved a slow and often difficult negotiation towards a shared sense of the core faith for which they agreed Nicaea would be a symbol. The theologies of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus are three key examples of pro-Nicene theologies. So are the western theologies of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo, and the theologies of the later Athanasius, Didymus the Blind, and Cyril of Alexandria.

Two key themes united pro-Nicene theologians. First, and most important, pro-Nicenes agreed that God's being was not divided, and that the persons of the Godhead were 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 was undividedly one and yet irreducibly three. How this was so was a mystery. In this context it seemed much more possible to say that Father and Son were of one "essence" or "being" without implying that God was material or that Father and Son were "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 was eternally begotten of the Father. It was also the context in which they understood what it meant for the Spirit to proceed eternally from the Father and Son. These decades saw pro-Nicenes clearly state that the Spirit was one with Father and Son against those who still maintained earlier beliefs that the Spirit was subordinate to Father and Son (often understood 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 towards knowledge and love of God through discipline and practices that would reshape the imagination. Increasingly, pro-Nicenes emphasized the 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 rapprochement of the previous two decades resulted, through the help of the pro-Nicene emperor Theodosius, in the Council of Constantinople. 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 He is worshipped 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 was 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 not only by human effort but by the inspiration of the Spirit shaping and guiding, leading a real human community into the truth.

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The Council of Nicaea and its bitter aftermath

Steven Gertz and Jennifer Trafton

Tired of just reading about the Arian controversy? Ready to dip into the original letters? Then pick up a copy of J. Stevenson's ***A New Eusebius*** (S.P.C.K., 1957; rev. ed. 1987), a fabulous collection of 319 documents from the early church. You'll want to 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*** (Seabury Press, 1966; rev. ed. 1990), which includes excerpts from 236 fourth- and fifth-century documents and follows Athanasius' battle with Arian emperors like Constantius II until the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy under the emperor Theodosius. Readers will find in this collection such gems as Ossius of Cordoba's reprimand of Constantius for taking Arius's side in the matter, contemporary accounts of Athanasius' exiles, and the Canons of the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Here's a selective bibliography for those seeking more in-depth study of the Nicene council and its creed:

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W. H. C. Frend, ***The Early Church*** (Fortress, 1982)

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Timothy D. Barnes, ***Constantine and Eusebius*** (Harvard, 1981)

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Arianism After Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts, edited by Michel Barnes and D. H. Williams (Edinburgh, 1993)

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, edited by E. Ferguson (Garland, 1997)

D. H. Williams, ***Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants*** (Eerdmans, 1999)

Luke Timothy Johnson, ***The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*** (Doubleday, 2003)

Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism, edited by Christopher R. Seitz (Brazos, 2001)

And just for fun, check out ***I Believe***, 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*** (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2003).

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Holiness of heart, life, and pen

Charles Wesley and Charles H. Sheldon

Chris Armstrong

Charles Wesley (1707-88). Charles M. Sheldon (1857-1946). Separated by 150 years and a continent, these two men shared traits deeper than a common first name. Both believed Christians must respond to their Savior's amazing love by loving others in practical ways. And both, desiring that others be captivated by a higher vision of life in Christ, expressed that vision in words that galvanized millions.

Charles Wesley

The prematurely born eighteenth child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, Charles Wesley would remain a short man, like his famous older brother. But while John Wesley's compact frame contained a commanding personality, Charles Wesley has been described as a round-faced, near-sighted man whose speech was abrupt and social manner awkward.

In contrast to his driven, disciplined, and perhaps over-earnest older brother, Charles was also, in the words of his beloved wife Sarah, "tender, indulgent, kind, as a brother, a husband, a father" and "warmly and unalienably devoted" to his friends.

What people noticed most about Charles Wesley, however, was his great humility. Literary scholar David Lyle Jeffrey writes of Charles's "luminous" spiritual character, recounting the first time the great antislavery reformer William Wilberforce encountered Wesley. It was two years before Charles's death, at the house of Hannah More. Wilberforce later remembered, "when I came into the room Charles Wesley rose from the table, and coming forward to me, gave me solemnly his blessing. I was scarcely ever more affected. Such was the effect of his manner and appearance that it altogether overset me, and I burst into tears, unable to restrain myself."

This "luminousness" of spiritual character should not surprise us. The Wesley brothers were brought up steeped in the Bible, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, and the spiritual classics their parents loved to read. Their mother Susannah formed them with regular times of catechism and devotion—a formation that doubtless contributed to their later sense that the Holy Spirit is present in all the Christian's experience.

Charles first felt this presence in a powerful way after he returned from a disappointing missionary trip to Georgia in 1736. He had been seeking for personal assurance both of faith and of his vocation. Historian Frank Whaling tells the story:

"On May 21, 1738, three days before his brother, he received an inward assurance of faith. Influenced by Luther's commentary on Galatians, he heard an inward voice asking him to arise and believe, and through the medium of interior words such as these and Scripture passages such as Isaiah 40, verse 1, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God,' he found a new inner dynamic."

In what was to become a life-long pattern, Charles immediately poured out some of this experience in a hymn. Captivated by God's grace, he turned from rejoicing over his own assurance of salvation to inviting others:

***Outcasts of men, to you I call,
Harlots, and publicans, and thieves!
He spreads his arms to embrace you all:
Sinners alone his grace receive.***

This sense of a personal call from Christ and a wonder at God's love towards all people would characterize so many of his hymns. Indeed, some have suggested that Wesley's tremendous body of work—over 9,000 hymns, with some 500 still sung today—has taught the body of Christ even better than anything John wrote or spoke.

Mere teaching, however, was never enough, even if it helped bring people to salvation or a greater sense of the immediate presence and love of God. Trained in the classics of church history, the brothers Wesley imbibed the medieval principle that salvation involves not just faith but "faith formed in love" (***fides caritate formate***)—disciplining all one's relationships and actions for the good of others. To be loved by God was, by definition, to love other people. John and Charles's ministries testified to this from the beginning.

When Charles, for example, formed a group of serious-minded Christians at Oxford—the "Holy Club"—to study and follow intensively introspective spiritual disciplines, the inner life of the group overflowed into practical ministry to London's most needy. They gave liberally to the poor, preached to those in prison, and generally practiced down-to-earth care for others. Developing habits of charity in that setting, Charles became known even to his detractors as one who worked tirelessly among the poor, providing from his own goods (for example) to release impoverished parents from debtors' prison and arrange for their children to go to school.

Throughout his life, the labor of love that occupied Charles Wesley most was the work of evangelism. Like so many Methodists who followed, Wesley traveled almost incessantly, preaching wherever an audience presented itself. What is staggering about this is that in the midst of such labor, along with the responsibilities of his family and his flock (he was ordained a priest and served more than one congregation), Wesley managed a writing pace that yielded, as biographer John R. Tyson calculates, "one finished hymn every two days, year in and year out, for the fifty years of his ministry."

To the end Charles Wesley stood, as poet, evangelist, and minister to the needs of the hurting, between God and his people. He stretched out his arms in both directions and gave both actions and words—what words!—to God's yearning for his people, and to the people's answering worship.

Charles M. Sheldon

"Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing 'Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,' and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl too." These words rang out one Sunday morning in comfortable upper-middle-class First Church in the fictional town of Raymond. The speaker was a tramp who had walked, mid-service, into the church and up the center aisle.

"It seems to me," he continued, "there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do?"

When, the following week, First Church's pastor, Rev. Henry Maxwell challenged his congregation to live up to their faith by asking themselves that same question, "What would Jesus do?" and act accordingly regardless of personal cost, the resulting movement revolutionized First Church and Raymond, and then other churches and cities throughout the country.

This is the story of one of the most-read religious novels of all time, ***In His Steps***. The writer, Charles M. Sheldon, was himself a Congregational minister. Beginning in October, 1896, Sheldon read the story to his own congregation. Then he had it published serially. Then as a book. Though never considered a literary classic, Sheldon's novel touched people and captured their imaginations from the first. His biographers claim that for the 60 years following its first publication, ***In His Steps*** sold more copies than any other book in the United States after the Bible: more than 8 million.

From early in life, Charles Sheldon was both a lover of God and a lover of "the people"—all people, rich or poor, black or white. The son of a Congregational minister who served as that church's first missionary home superintendent, Sheldon grew up in the Dakota Territory in a log cabin he himself helped build. Biographer Timothy Miller recounts that the young Sheldon "hunted with the Dakotas, fished with them, slept with them on the open prairie, and learned some of their language."

Sheldon also drank in the Bible from an early age, as "each morning the family would sit together in the 'parlor' of the log cabin and read aloud, each member of the family old enough to participate taking two verses in turn." Though his conversion as a teenager was unemotional, Sheldon's new life in Christ made him "strangely happy." He spoke of feeling that "a great burden had been rolled off my back" and desiring to avoid "anything possibly offensive" to Christ.

In his first pastorate in Waterbury, Connecticut, Sheldon attended not just to the souls but the daily needs of his congregation and their town. After "boarding around" with 45 families of his small mountainous parish's 175-member church, he launched a series of practical works. He planted a vegetable garden on church property and sold the produce. He began Bible study groups and a successful reading club that attracted over 200 youth and resulted in a drive to create a town library. He worked with a young doctor to convince the people to move their wells farther from their pigpens when a typhoid epidemic killed more than two dozen townspeople.

In 1889, Sheldon was called to the founding pastorate of Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas. In his first sermon to what would be his lifelong flock he expressed his intention to preach "a Christ who belongs to the rich and to the poor, the ignorant and the learned, the old and the young, the good and the bad."

The following year, Sheldon was confronted with an issue that would become a flashpoint for the young "social gospel" movement: unemployment and labor unrest. On the burgeoning industrial landscape of America, thousands of men were losing their jobs. Though some Christians blamed the unemployed for their indolence, Sheldon perceived the systemic evil of a capitalist system that cared nothing for individuals.

The young minister put on old clothes and tramped for a futile week in search of work. Then he spent one week each with eight different Topeka groups: streetcar operators, college students, blacks, railroad workers, lawyers, physicians, businessmen, and newspaper men.

The families of Tennesseetown, a black community up the street from Sheldon's church, comprised one-third of Topeka's population. "Exodusters" from the south, their houses were dilapidated and their poverty abject. Sheldon stayed longer here than elsewhere, the first week trying to understand the roots of Tennesseetown's poverty and help find work, the second visiting their schools, and the third traveling with a black man to gauge the level of prejudice in the surrounding communities.

He concluded that it was not "incompetence," as local newspapers insisted, but racism and a cycle of poverty that oppressed the people of Tennesseetown. He was the first white to say so. Through a survey of some 800 residents, he found out which basic social services were most needed, and he set out to provide them. Other churches soon joined in his efforts, many of which included a significant self-help component. Tennesseetown crime rates fell and prosperity increased. Resident Minus Gentry

remembered fondly, "Everybody loved him, everybody. I'm sure nobody ever resented him."

Going beyond practical help to address the racist roots of the community's problems, Sheldon became an early civil rights advocate. He stood up against anti-black activities and spoke out against the Klan.

From his "sermon stories" (he read some 30 of these to his congregation, packing the house every Sunday evening) to his lifelong social activism (most notably his fervent crusade against the "whiskey trade"), Sheldon crossed lines and confounded categories. Though he clearly imbibed the new streams of theological liberalism that were emerging at Andover during his time there, he refused to become drawn into theological controversy. A true pietist, he saw such disputes as a waste of time when so many Christians were failing to live like their Master.

Sheldon certainly considered himself a part of his day's liberal social-gospel movement. But in many ways he looked like what we might call an "evangelical." The person and work of Christ were his touchstone. While he saw the need to address systemic social evils, he also saw that it was often personal habits—such as drinking and patterns of crime—that oppressed individuals and communities. He believed that real change could ultimately come only through a change in individual sinners' hearts. And he believed those individuals could be changed only by the grace of God and the willing, sacrificial work of faithful Christians (two of his famous novel's most sympathetic figures are a tent evangelist and his wife).

Like Charles Wesley 150 years before, Charles Sheldon was activated above all by a profound sense of Christ's love for every person. And like Wesley, Sheldon felt that such a love demanded nothing less than a life of total dedication. Though it showed in different ways—social action rather than evangelization, novels rather than poetry—who can doubt that both these Charleses lived, and wrote, faithful to the grace of the same Lord?

No epitaph for Charles M. Sheldon is more fitting than his own words of anticipation as he grew older: "It is not death but life I greet ... when he who loves me calls me home."

How Armenia "Invented" Christendom

Steven Gertz

Only a week prior to his attack on Poland in September, 1939, Adolf Hitler reportedly delivered a secret talk to members of his General Staff, urging them to wipe out the Polish race. "After all," he argued, "who remembers today the extermination of the Armenians?"

Hitler was referring to the genocide of nearly 1.5 million Armenian Christians at the hands of Ottoman Turks from 1915 to 1923 in what is now eastern Turkey. Turkish authorities deny the atrocities ever took place, but the story of bloodbath in Armenia is one of the well-documented tragedies of our time.

Still, it's unfortunate that Armenia (today located directly east of Turkey and west of the Caspian Sea) is now known for this story above any other. It says nothing about the people of Armenia, or the part they have played in global Christianity. For contribute they did, in a manner that might surprise even a seasoned church historian.

Tortured for Christ

No man has more stature in the Armenian church today than Gregory the Illuminator. While not the first to bring Christianity to Armenia, Gregory is, at least in the minds of Armenians, the nation's spiritual father and the people's patron saint.

Born into a wealthy family around 257, Gregory nevertheless had a rough beginning his biographer, Agathangelos, tells us Gregory's father murdered the Armenian king and paid for it with his life. But the boy was rescued from the chaos following the murder, and his new guardians raised him as a Christian in Cappadocia (east-central Turkey). There, according to Agathangelos, Gregory "became acquainted with the Scriptures of God, and drew near to the fear of the Lord."

When Gregory's tutors told him of his father's wickedness, Gregory approached the murdered king's son, Tiridates, to offer his service (all the while concealing his identity). Tiridates accepted Gregory's offer, but when Gregory refused to worship Anahit, an idol the king had raised in gratitude for military successes, Tiridates became furious: "You have come and joined us as a stranger and foreigner. How then are you able to worship that God whom I do not worship?"

Tiridates tortured Gregory, hanging him upside-down and flogging him, then fastening blocks of wood to his legs and tightening them. When these tactics failed, he tried even more gruesome measures. Still the saint refused to bow the knee. Tiridates then learned that Gregory was the son of his father's murderer, and he ordered that the missionary be thrown into a "bottommost pit" filled with dead bodies and other filth. There Gregory sat for 13 years, surviving only on bread a widow threw down each day after receiving instruction to do so in a dream.

Converting the King

At about this time a beautiful woman named Rhipsime arrived in Armenia, fleeing an enforced marriage to the Roman emperor Diocletian. Tiridates took a liking to her too, and took her forcibly when she refused to come to him. But "strengthened by the Holy Spirit," she fought off his advances and escaped.

Furious, Tiridates ordered her execution, and that night Rhipsime burned at the stake. Her abbess Gaiane soon followed her in death, along with 35 other companions.

The king, still lusting after Rhipsime, mourned her death for six days, then prepared to go hunting. But God visited on him a horrible punishment Agathangelos calls it demon possession reducing him to insanity and throwing his court into chaos. Tiridates' sister had a vision to send for Gregory, imprisoned so long ago. People laughed at the idea Gregory might still be alive, but recurrent visions finally convinced a nobleman, Awtay, to visit his pit. Astonished to find the missionary living, Awtay brought him to meet the king, who was feeding with swine outside the city.

Tiridates, along with other possessed members of his court, rushed at Gregory. But Gregory "immediately knelt in prayer, and they returned to sobriety." Tiridates then pleaded for Gregory's forgiveness, and the king and his whole court repented of their sin and confessed faith in Christ.

Assessing Gregory's Legacy

Scholars disagree over how much Agathangelos's history can be taken at face-value. After all, he wrote his book in 460 (Tiridates is believed by Armenians to have converted in 301), and much of his story has elements of hagiography that lead one to wonder whether the events ever happened. But even skeptics acknowledge that Gregory was a real person with considerable ecclesiastical influence in Armenia the signature of his son and successor Aristakes can be found among those ratifying the Council of Nicaea in 325. And even if we can document little about the man, his pre-eminence among Armenia's heroes of the faith is unassailable.

Why? First, Gregory persuaded the king to build a string of churches across Armenia, beginning with Holy Etchmiadzin according to some scholars the oldest cathedral site in the world and an important pilgrimage site for all Armenians. The seat of the Armenian church would pass to other cities, but Gregory "established" Christianity in Armenia via this church.

Gregory also introduced Christian liturgy to Armenia. These rites consisted of psalmody, scriptural readings, and prayers recited in Greek or Syriac. After Mesrop Mashtots invented an Armenian alphabet at the beginning of the fifth century, both the Bible and the liturgy were translated into the Armenian language.

Most importantly, Gregory set in motion the mass conversion of Armenia to Christianity. According to Agathangelos, the king ordered all pagan shrines to be torn down, and Gregory proceeded to baptize more than 190,000 people into the new faith. Whether the nation converted as quickly as Agathangelos implies is difficult to discern. Certainly by the fifth century, Armenia was well on its way to becoming a "Christian" nation.

Armenia is an ancient if not the oldest model for what we now call Christendom. Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette notes that the Armenian church "was an instance of what was to be seen again and again, a group adoption of the Christian faith engineered by the accepted leaders and issuing in an ecclesiastical structure which became identified with a particular people, state, or nation."

Certainly the Roman Empire is a prime example of this, but Armenia is at least as old, and perhaps a more impressive example given the invasions and persecution it endured at the hands of the Turks (and before them, Arabs and Persians). Indeed even Byzantium attempted to bring Armenia within its orbit, but the nation resisted, arguing that its apostolic origins were on par with Rome.

So lest you assume Rome is our first example of Christendom, think again. Long may Armenia's church endure.

