

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

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## Heresy in the Early Church: Did You Know?

Remarkable or little-known facts about heresy in the early church

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The three major creeds of the church are all misnamed. The Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles. What is called the Nicene Creed is not the creed that was produced at the Council of Nicea but a later creed. The Athanasian Creed has nothing to do with Athanasius and many have argued that it is not even a creed.

In the Nicene Creed, the key word used to describe Christ's relation to God—*homoousion*, meaning, "of the same substance"—had been considered heretical a century earlier. Some earlier orthodox theologians argued that the term was not found in the Bible and that it blurred the distinctions between the Father and the Son.

Though the debate about Christ's deity extended over centuries, the debate about the Holy Spirit's divine nature lasted only about twenty years.

Some of the greatest of early theologians were confused about Christ's nature. Clement of Alexandria, for example, masterfully refuted the Gnostic heresy that said Christ did not have a real human body and therefore did not eat and drink. Clement held that Jesus did indeed eat and drink but not because he needed food and drink to stay alive—Jesus, Clement argued, only wished to keep his disciples from heretical beliefs about him.

Not all defenders of orthodoxy stayed orthodox themselves. Tertullian and Novatian, for example, two major anti-Gnostic theologians of the 200s, each fell out of favor with the church: Tertullian, because of his conversion to the Montanist heresy; Novatian, because of his unforgiving stance against those who had denied Christ under persecution.

For a time at Antioch, rival groups differed about the deity of the Holy Spirit. One group prayed, "Glory be to the Father *and* to the Son *and* to the Holy Spirit," and the other one, "Glory be to the Father *with* the Son *in* the Holy Spirit." The bishop managed to avoid offending either party by developing laryngitis at this point in the liturgy!

During his 45-year reign as bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, the champion of Nicene orthodoxy, was exiled five times by five emperors, for a total of 17 years. Though his views on Christ's deity were to become the official teaching of the church, when he died, it was still not clear his views would prevail.

Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth-century Greek bishop, held to the generally accepted belief that God is impassible—incapable of suffering or emotion. He equally held to the deity of Christ, who underwent his "passion" (i.e., his suffering) for us on the cross. This commitment led him to affirm that the eternal Word "suffered impassibly."

Heretics often provided a great service to the church. For example, Marcion rejected the Old Testament and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, thus forcing the church to define the New Testament canon. Arius, in denying the deity of Christ, made the church articulate the doctrine that became the

most crucial to Christianity.

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## Heresy in the Early Church: From the Editor - How to Read This Issue

Mark Galli, Editor

It's been said, "God writes straight with crooked lines," meaning God has allowed heresy to arise to help Christians clarify what they believe.

Well, most of the time.

If, after reading this issue, you can't wax eloquent on the difference between Monophysitism and Nestorianism, I won't hold it against you. I've been editing this issue for months now, and every time I've run into those and other arcane terms, I've had to thumb through the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* and assorted other reference works to make sure I know what I'm editing!

This is *Christian History's* first foray into the heady topic of the history of theology. We now remember why we've procrastinated entering this field. It's no easy task shaping intricate, complex thinking into understandable and interesting prose. If you hadn't consistently rated heresy in the early church as one of your most desired topics, I don't know that we would have produced this issue.

But you did, and so we have, and I'm excited about the result. We included as many stories, personalities, and fascinating facts as space permitted. The opening article on the Council of Nicea, "A Hammer Struck at Heresy," is one of the best historical narratives we've ever run. Still, there will be times when, more than in most issues, you're going to have to read *Christian History* a little differently. How?

**Slowly.** The theological debates were so technical at points (and many distinctions are best made in ancient Greek or Latin), you're going to have to reread many paragraphs to appreciate distinctives.

**With Post-it Notes.** Because of the abundance of terms, debates, names, and dates, we've added an infographic and offered a topical timeline to help. You might want to refer to them when things become a bit confusing.

**Expecting gaps.** Not every heresy is covered in depth, and not every teaching is defined thoroughly—there just isn't space. We've concentrated on the controversies over the person of Christ because these were the most crucial for the church's future.

Since this is an experiment for *Christian History*, we would love to hear from you about the issue. What was and was not helpful? Should we do this again? Which theological debates of what eras most interest you? Click on Write *Christian History's* Editors and let us know what you think.

In the meantime, read about early heresy, and let God use even those crooked lines to make straight the way of the Lord in you.

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## A Hammer Struck at Heresy

What exactly happened at the famous Council of Nicea, when the Roman emperor convened some 250 quarreling Christian bishops?

ROBERT PAYNE

*"It was of great importance in Christian and even in world history," wrote historian W.H. C. Frend about the first Council of Nicea.*

*In Christian history, the doctrine of Christ's divinity—a doctrine essential and unique to Christianity—was formally affirmed for the first time. In world history, never before had the entire church gathered to determine policy and doctrine—let alone at the bidding of the Roman emperor.*

*The following article, written by the late writer and biographer Robert Payne (d. 1983), is excerpted and adapted from his *The Holy Fire: The Story of the Early Centuries of the Christian Churches in the Near East (1957)*. *Forty years of scholarship later, one can rightfully quibble about some historical details (clarifications and some updated findings are in brackets). But no other narrative conveys as well the human dimension of this critical event.**

Alexander of Alexandria had called a meeting of the presbyters [priests]. According to the historian Socrates, the aging "pope" [some early senior bishops were called "papa," that is, "father"] "with perhaps too philosophical minuteness" began to lecture on the theological mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Alexander had been discussing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost for some time when he was interrupted by one of the presbyters called Arius, a native of Libya. There is no evidence that Alexander was a profound theologian. He may have bumbled, and it is possible that Arius was justified in accusing Alexander of Sabellianism, a heresy that involved a belief in the unity of God at the expense of the reality of the Trinity. But in combating Alexander, Arius fell into a new heresy, for he announced, "If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not."

Here, at some time in 319, the cry of the Arians—"There was a time when the Son was not"—was first heard. The words were to have an extraordinary influence on the shaping of the church. They were dynamite and split the church in two, and these words, which read in Greek like a line of a song, still echo down the centuries.

### The Issue

Alexander was appalled by the new heresy and knew that desperate measures would be necessary to combat it. Once it is admitted that "there was a time when the Son was not," then a bewildering series of further heresies follows. High as he is, the Son is now infinitely lower than the Father. The words are like a wedge, splitting the monotheism of the church. Athanasius [Alexander's chief deacon assistant] saw the danger clearly, and he seems to have taken over from Alexander the task of refuting Arius.

To the credit of Athanasius, he saw clearly that the most dangerous of existing heresies was precisely the heresy announced by Arius. It was a very simple heresy. All Arius said was that if the Father begat the Son, then the Son must have had a birth, and therefore there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. He had come into existence according to the will of the Heavenly Father, and therefore he was less than the heavenly Father, though greater than man. Christ was no more than a mediator between man and God. No, answered Alexander and Athanasius; Christ is absolute God.

In our own heretical age, the dispute between Athanasius and Arius may appear to be a splitting of hairs, but it was not so at the time. The historian Gibbon was amused by the thought that Christianity almost foundered on the controversy between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, the fate of humankind hanging on a single iota. But the difference between Christ the mediator and Christ the God is a very real one, and whether Christ is of the *same* substance [homo-*ousios*] or a *like* substance [homoi-*ousios*] to God the Father is a matter of importance to all Christians, not only theologians.

Arianism brought Christ down to earth, making him at once inferior to the Father, and more popular. Following Arius, a person could believe that Christ was no more than a great, virtuous, and superbly godlike hero. Against this conception, Alexander and Athanasius rebelled, and they seem to have been perfectly aware that the heresy had the power to destroy the church as they knew it.

## Round One

Alexander seems to have behaved with patience; there were long private interviews with Arius; special prayers were offered against the emerging heresy. The clergy of Alexandria were assembled to discuss the matter, and most of them signed an urgent letter to Arius, begging him to acknowledge his heresy. Arius refused.

Alexander had no alternative but to summon a synod of the bishops of Egypt and Libya and depose Arius and his followers. Thereupon Alexander issued an encyclical, stating tersely that the quarrel had gone beyond his powers of healing, and the views of Arius were anathema. The heresy, which was to grow into an immense poisonous flower, was still only a bud, and not all its implications were visible at first. In his encyclical, Alexander explains some of the consequences of the heresy:

"The novelties the Arians have put forward contrary to the Scriptures are these: God was not always a Father ... the Word of God was not always ... [for] there was a time when he was not ... neither is he like in essence to the Father; neither is he the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is he his true wisdom ... . And the Father cannot be described by the Son, for the Word does not know the Father perfectly and accurately."

Alexander's letter, which shows signs of having been partly written by Athanasius, is a masterly summary of the heresy in its beginnings, but it suffered from one obvious fault. It was close-knit and logical. The people wanted something they could sing, and this Arius provided in abundance. "There was a time when the Son was not" became a catch phrase. There were many other catch phrases, hymns and songs, "to be sung at table and by sailors, millers, and travelers." The people took up the cause of Arius, who withdrew to Palestine and later to Nicomedia, where he was protected by the bishop. Here in a corner of Asia Minor not far from Byzantium, Arius continued to taunt the pope of Alexandria, secure in the knowledge that the people were with him.

Arius possessed other advantages. Eusebius, the bishop of Nicomedia, had friends at court and was particularly close to Constantia, the sister of Emperor Constantine. Already the evil that had begun in the church of Alexandria was running through all Egypt, Libya, Upper Thebes, Palestine, and Asia Minor.

## The Emperor Steps in

Inevitably it came to the ears of the emperor, who discussed with Hosius, the saintly bishop of Cordova, what should be done to put an end to the quarrels among the sects. Like James I of England, Constantine regarded unity as "the mother of order," and he was not overmuch concerned with the theological truths at stake: he decided to send Hosius to Nicomedia and Alexandria with a letter written in his own hand, ordering by imperial rescript an end to the quarrel.

The letter—one of the most astonishing letters ever written by an emperor to priests—has come down to us in a version that shows no signs of being edited. It is hot-tempered, querulous, disjointed, and commanding. It is abundantly clear that the emperor is not quite clear in his own mind what the quarrel is about. He observes that "these questions are the idle cobwebs of contention, spun by curious wits," and he asks, "Who is capable of distinguishing such deep and hidden mysteries?" He recognizes that the contestants are well-armed with arguments, but he can make neither head nor tail of them.

The heathen philosophers did better: they quietly agreed to disagree. But these new philosophers are implacable and determined enemies of his peace. Let them make profession of their ignorance of God's ultimate purposes.

It was precisely this profession that Arius and Athanasius were unable to make. Almost in despair, Constantine concludes his letter:

"Seeing that our great and gracious God, the preserver of all, has given us the common light of his grace, I entreat you that my endeavors may be brought to a prosperous end, and my people be persuaded to embrace peace and concord. Suffer me to spend my days and nights in quiet, and may I have light and cheerfulness instead of tears and groans."

If Constantine had seriously hoped to put an end to the quarrel, he had acted too late. The quarrel was blazing furiously. "In every city," wrote a historian, "bishop was contending against bishop, and the people were contending against one another, like swarms of gnats fighting in the air."

Another historian outlined the danger even more acidly: "In former times, the church was attacked by enemies and strangers from without. Today those who are natives of the same country, who dwell under one roof and sit down at table together, fight with their tongues as if with spears."

When Hosius returned from his missions in Nicomedia and Alexandria, he was a defeated man and could only report that he could see no end in sight to the blaze that had begun when an aging pope addressed his presbyters on the subject of the Holy Trinity.

There had been bloodshed in the streets; Alexandria and Nicomedia were exchanging defiant taunts. Constantine decided to throw all his influence into the battle.

### **Calling the Council**

He decided to call a general council, the first of that long series of church councils that ended with the Council of Trent (1545–1563). He chose as the seat of the council the small city of Nicea in Bithynia, a few miles from Nicomedia.

By Constantine's orders, 1,800 bishops were invited to attend the council. Messengers were sent to all parts of the empire with invitations. Each bishop was allowed to bring two presbyters and three slaves in his retinue; the services of the public post stations were offered free; from all corners of the empire the bishops descended upon Nicea, crowding the public roads.

It was not a good time for traveling. The eastern rivers were flooded with the rains of a late spring, and though the empire, stretching from Britain to the borders of Persia, was nominally at peace, there were marauding soldiers and bandits along the roads. Fewer than 400 bishops answered the imperial summons, but their numbers were swelled by a horde of attendant presbyters, deacons, subdeacons, and laymen.

Most of the ecclesiastics came from the East, for Europe and North Africa had not yet been corrupted by the schism. Six bishops and two presbyters represented the West. They were Hosius of Cordova, Caecilian of Carthage, Nicasius of Dijon, Domnus of Strido in Pannonia, Eustorgius of Milan, and Marcus of Calabria. The two Roman presbyters Victor and Vincentius represented the old and dying Sylvester, bishop of Rome.

From the East came bishops who had suffered persecution. There was Paul, bishop of Mesopotamian Caesarea, with his hands scorched by flames. Paphnutius of Upper Egypt, famous for the austerity of his life, had had his right eye dug out and the sinews of his left leg were cut during the Diocletian persecution. Bishop Potammon of Heraclea, who had known Antony and lived in the deserts of the Nile, had also lost an eye.

There was James, bishop of Nisibis, who wore a coat of camel's hair, and from the island of Cyprus came Bishop Spyridion, a saintly shepherd who refused to give up tending sheep even when he was elevated to the episcopate, a man who performed miracles to the delight of the Cypriots and to their further delight thundered against virginity, saying that it was right and proper that married people should enjoy themselves in bed. Then there was John, bishop of Persia, from lands outside the empire, and from the unknown north came Theophilus the Goth, a flaxen-haired Scythian from somewhere in Russia.

This motley crowd of bishops represented varying traditions of Christianity. There were sharp-featured intellectuals, men of abstruse book learning, capable of splitting hairs by the yard. There were wise old hermits who had spent the previous year clothed in rough goat hair cloaks, living on roots and leaves. There were men so saintly that it was almost expected of them that they would perform miracles during the council.

There were cantankerous men, and men riddled with heresies, and men who rode to Nicea in hope of preferment from the hands of the emperor. There were men who came peacefully, intending only to observe and then report to their flock, and there were other men determined to wage war in the council chamber.

Yet in the last instance, none of these bishops except Hosius of Cordova was to have any great and final effect upon the outcome of the conference.

### **Enter the Emperor**

Although five separate accounts of the council have been handed down from eyewitnesses, and there are eight more accounts written by historians of the generation immediately following Nicea, we do not know exactly where the council took place, whether it was in a building specially erected for the purpose or whether it was in one of the imperial palaces.

Tradition points to a site on the edge of the lake, a vast marble hall enclosed with columns, and perhaps open to the sunlight. In the center of the hall was a throne on which a copy of the Gospels was placed, and at the far end was another throne for the emperor, carved in wood, richly gilt and set above the level of the unpainted thrones of the bishops.

In this hall, early in the morning of Ascension Sunday, while a mist was floating on the lake, the bishops awaited the arrival of the emperor. Few of the bishops had set eyes upon this emperor, who had singlehandedly welded the East and West into a single empire and shown himself so devout a Christian. They waited expectantly.

At last they heard the tramp of armed guards, and then some high officers of the court, themselves converted to Christianity, entered the hall to announce that the emperor was on his way. The bishops were standing. Soon an avant-courier was seen raising a torch, the signal that the emperor was about to enter, and then like children, these bishops from Syria and Cilicia, Arabia, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Mesopotamia, Persia, Scythia, and Europe were hushed. Human majesty in the person of Constantinius Victor Augustus Maximus was about to appear before their eyes, and in the history of the world only Octavian, who had ruled the Roman Empire during the life of Christ, had ever reigned over so vast an empire.

Constantine wore high-heeled scarlet buskins, a purple silk robe blazing with jewels and gold embroidery, and there were more jewels embedded in his diadem. He was then 51 but looked younger, enormously tall and vigorous, with a high color and a strange glitter in his fierce, lion-like eyes. He wore his hair long, but his beard was trimmed short. He had a thick heavy neck, and a curious way of holding his head back, so that it seemed not to be well set on the powerful shoulders, and there was about all his movements a remarkable casualness, so that when he strode, he gave the impression of someone dancing.

### **Constantine's Speech**

Having marched slowly across the whole length of the hall, Constantine sat in silence for a while, sitting between Pope Alexander of Alexandria and his closest ecclesiastical adviser, Bishop Hosius of Cordova. All eyes were fixed on him. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea [or, more likely, Eustathius of Antioch] read a speech of welcome in metrical prose and then chanted a hymn of thanksgiving for the emperor's victories; then once again there was silence until Constantine collected himself, and speaking in Latin, which was still the language of the court, in a voice that seemed strangely soft and gentle for a man so commanding, he bade the bishops remember that it was the power of God that had dethroned the tyrants, and worse than any battlefield was a civil war between factions of the church.

"It is my desire," he said, "that you should meet together in a general council, and so I offer to the King of All my gratitude for this mercy that has come to me above my other mercies—I mean that there has been granted to me the benefit of seeing you assembled together and to know you are resolved to be in common harmony together."

All this was flattery, for the very purpose of the convocation was to resolve a bitter conflict, and Constantine knew well enough from the petitions he had already received from the bishops that bitterness remained.

He continued, "When I gained my victories over my enemies, I thought nothing remained for me but to give thanks unto God and to rejoice with those who have been delivered by me. But when I learned, contrary to all expectations, that there were divisions among you, then I solemnly considered them, and praying that these discords might also be healed with my assistance, I summoned you here without delay. I rejoice to see you here, yet I should be more pleased to see unity and affection among you. I entreat you, therefore, beloved ministers of God, to remove the causes of dissension among you and to establish peace."

There was now no mistaking the threat behind the words, and as though to make his threat more clear, the emperor summoned one of his attendants and silently produced the parchment rolls and



letters containing complaints and petitions that the bishops had privately sent him. A brazier was set up. The emperor tossed the petitions into the flames. While they were still burning, he explained that all these petitions would appear again on the day of judgment, and then the great Judge of all things would pass judgment on them: for himself he was content to listen to the public deliberations of the bishops and had not even read these bitter messages sent to him.

### **Vicious Debates in Song**

The conference was now open. At once the Arians and the anti-Arians were at one another's throats. Denunciation and angry accusation flew across the hall. Everyone was suddenly arguing. There was a wild waving of arms. "It was like a battle in the dark," the historian Socrates said later. "Hardly anyone seemed to know the grounds on which they calumniated one another."

Constantine had invited Arius to be present and listened earnestly when Arius explained the nature of his beliefs, and he was not particularly surprised when Arius burst out into a long, sustained chant, having set his beliefs to music. These chants and songs were sung by the people, and Arius may have thought the emperor would listen more keenly to chanting than to a disquisition on the faith:

***The uncreated God has made the Son  
A beginning of things created,  
And by adoption has God made the Son  
Into an advancement of himself.  
Yet the Son's substance is  
Removed from the substance of the Father:  
The Son is not equal to the Father,  
Nor does he share the same substance.  
God is the all-wise Father,  
And the Son is the teacher of his mysteries.  
The members of the Holy Trinity  
Share unequal glories.***

The anti-Arian bishops were appalled, closed their eyes, and put their hands over their ears. It was as though in the middle of a critical debate on the future of the world, someone interrupted with nonsense rhymes or a series of perplexing and meaningless mathematical equations.

Yet the heart of the Arian mystery was in these rhymes sung to a music employed by the Alexandrian dance bands. Arius, gaunt, white-faced, his stringy hair reaching to his shoulders, could repulse any theological argument by simply chanting one of these songs, and when Athanasius [or likely another] answered with a close-knit argument, there was consternation, for they seemed to be talking in different languages about different things, like two men from different worlds or different universes.

### **A Stab at Compromise**

Probably Athanasius was standing just behind Pope Alexander, and therefore very close to the emperor. We know that he attracted the emperor's attention, but it was not Athanasius who resolved the issue. It seems to have been Hosius who announced that the simplest way of reaching agreement would be to draw up a creed.

The first creed presented to the council was written by 18 of the Arian bishops. Couched in scriptural language, this creed stated the Arian position so offensively that bedlam broke loose when it was solemnly presented to the attention of the bishops.

At this point, Eusebius of Caesarea suggested a creed that he had first heard as a child, an astonishingly beautiful creed that was to form the basis of the creed finally adopted. Eusebius was careful to say he advanced this creed only because he believed divine things cannot be fully expressed in human language: it was not perfect, but it was as close to perfection as he ever hoped to reach. This creed read:

***We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible,***

***And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, the only begotten Son, the Firstborn of every Creature, begotten of the Father before all worlds, through whom also all things were made.***

***Who for our salvation was made flesh and lived among men, and suffered and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the Father, and shall come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead.***

***And in the one Holy Ghost.***

***Believing each of them to be and to have existed, the Father, only the Father, and the Son, only the Son, and the Holy Ghost, only the Holy Ghost....***

This creed the emperor accepted, and the Arians, seeing in it nothing that specifically destroyed their position, would have accepted it if their opponents had not seen that this creed failed in any way to resolve the conflict. It was necessary to state the creed in such a way that the Arians would be forced to deny their essential tenets.

Pope Alexander discussed the matter with Hosius. Constantine, turning against the Arians he had previously favored, suggested that Christ should be defined as ***homoousios***—one in essence with the Father—and this definition should be included in the creed. The orthodox bishops were gaining strength.

A new creed, formed by patching together the old creed and a new, more vigorous statement of the anti-Arian position, was finally announced by Hosius on June 19. It read:

***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 of the Father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made, both things in Heaven and things in earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into Heaven, and shall come to judge the quick and the dead.***

***And in the Holy Ghost.***

***And those who say "There was a time when he was not" and "He did not exist before he was made" and "He was made out of nothing" or those who pretend that the Son of God is "of another hypostasis or substance" or "created" or "alterable" or "mutable," the Catholic Church anathematizes.***

In this form, the Nicene Creed left much to be desired. It was tortured, blunt-edged, without poetry or rhythm, and without the nobility of the creed of the church of Palestine. But many words that gave a living significance to the original creed—"the Word of God," "the Firstborn of every creature," "begotten of the Father before all worlds"—were in fact deliberately omitted to show that the

triumphant Alexandrians would allow no compromise, no loophole for the Arians and were bent on avoiding all misunderstanding.

## Poetry from Chaos

In its original form, the Nicene Creed was a weapon: it was to become a more sublime article of faith in time, when poetry and ornament and a less abrupt rhythm were fashioned for it by the simple process of adding words. These words, which gave depth and resonance to the Creed, were added at the Council of Constantinople in 381, and finally approved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Then the second clause came to read:

***And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens and was made flesh of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and went up into the heavens, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and is to come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.***

So there came about by the slow process of trial and error, as a poet will substitute a new word to a line or resurrect a word used formerly, continually revising his rhythms, an astonishingly beautiful summary of the Christian faith, such a summary as might have come full-grown from the mind of one of the apostles.

But in fact this statement of faith came about arduously and slowly, after many bitter contests and many subtle dialectical quarrels, and in the version accepted by the West, there were to be more changes. The words "God from God," omitted in the original creed of the church of Constantinople, were restored, and there were still more alterations in the coda, for in time the anathemas against Arianism lost their force. No one reading the Western version of the Nicene Creed today need remember that it was originally a hammer struck at heresy.

But the heresy remained. All Athanasius's diatribes, and all the decisions of the council, were powerless to prevent it.

Later Athanasius was to write to the Emperor Jovian, saying that Nicea was the occasion for a public proscription of every heresy. For a while he believed that "the Word of the Lord, which was given at the Ecumenical Council of Nicea, remains for ever." He had good reason to believe that he had won a resounding success.

Constantine had been won over. Arius was publicly anathematized. According to the historian Socrates, Constantine issued an imperial rescript ordering that all the books of Arius should be burned "so that his depraved doctrine shall be entirely suppressed and so that there shall be no memorial of him left in the world." The punishment for concealing any book compiled by Arius was death!

Yet some 54 years later, when Gregory Nazianzus was summoned to Constantinople, he found only one small congregation in the city that had not become Arian. In the end, Arianism was to die, and largely as the result of Athanasius's enduring statement of the orthodox doctrine. But in spite of the anathemas, it was still a living force in the land.

## Closing Banquet

The council came to an end on July 25 with a solemn banquet attended by the emperor.

They had deliberated for nearly seven weeks, not only about the Arian heresy. An Arabic translation of the canons discussed at Nicea, found in the sixteenth century, shows that they debated on 84 subjects, ranging from the date of Easter (they set the day as the first Sunday, not coinciding with the Passover, after the first full moon following the vernal equinox) to determining whether the clergy could marry (the clergy were enjoined to marry before ordination, but not afterward).

Now exhausted, the bishops prepared to make their way homeward. The last speeches had been made. There remained only the ceremonial leave-taking at the banquet, with the emperor sitting at a table in the midst of them. Constantine, stiff with purple, gold, and precious stones, was in good humor. He complimented Athanasius, gave presents to the bishops he favored, and at one point he summoned the unregenerate Bishop Acesius, who possessed a singular regard for the Novatian heresy, which held that only God had the power to pardon sins and that anyone who commits sin after baptism must be permanently refused Communion.

Constantine reminded Acesius that the doctrine of the church was now finally established. Acesius made a long speech in defense of his puritan interpretation of the Scriptures.

Constantine guffawed, "Ho, ho, Acesius! Now plant a ladder and climb up to heaven by yourself!"

And sometime later, Constantine summoned the saintly Bishop Paphnutius and kissed the empty socket, and pressed his legs and arms to the paralyzed limbs, and he was especially gentle to all the other bishops who had suffered under the persecutions.

Then the bishops went out through a line of imperial bodyguards with bared swords.

The council was over.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

## The King Visits Earth

The champion of orthodoxy on why the Word became flesh.

*[\* Condensed and modernized from "St. Athanasius on the Incarnation," translated and edited by a religious of C.S.M.V. (St. Vladimir's, 1944). Used with permission.]*

What was God to do in face of the dehumanizing of humankind, this universal hiding of the knowledge of himself by the wiles of evil spirits? What else could he possibly do but renew his image in humankind, so that through it people might once more come to know him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very image himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Human beings could not have done it, for they are only made after the image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in his own person, because it was he alone, the image of the Father, who could recreate human beings made after the image.

At one and the same time—this is the wonder—as man, he was living a human life; and as Word, he was sustaining the life of the universe; and as Son, he was in constant union with the Father.

The solidarity of humankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption that goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses. Because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; he has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence, the designs of the enemy against humankind have been foiled, and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be.

Some may ask, Why did he not manifest himself by means of other and nobler parts of creation such as sun or moon or stars or fire or air, instead of mere man? The answer is this: the Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering people. For one who wanted to make a display, the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for him who came to heal and to teach, the way was not merely to dwell here but to put himself at the disposal of those who needed him.

—*Athanasius*  
"On the Incarnation"

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

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## Heretic in the Early Church: Christian History Infographic - Sifting Through the Christ Controversies

A quick summary of the competing schools of thought.

the Editors

*Many distinctions they made are difficult to translate into English. Still, all parties agreed on one thing: God is impassible, that is, he not subject to change or feelings. But how do you combine this with the Scriptures that imply Christ "became" human and suffered?*

*In particular, Christians argued passionately about two things:*

### Is Jesus Divine or Human?

#### • Christ Is Fully Divine!

Most of these people were driven by the conviction that only God can save humankind. Thus they were willing to protect the deity of Christ, even at the expense of his humanity, or in the case of the modalists, at the expense of the Trinity of persons.

**Docetists**, e.g., Gnostics: The divine Christ would never stoop to touch flesh, which is evil. Jesus only seemed (dokeo, in Greek) human and only appeared to die, for God cannot die. Or, in other versions, "Christ" left "Jesus" before the Crucifixion.

**Key text:** Phil. 2:8: "... and [Christ] being found in appearance as a man ..."

**Apollinarians:** Jesus is not equally human and divine but one person with one nature. In Jesus' human flesh resided a divine mind and will (he didn't have a human mind or spirit), and his divinity controlled or sanctified his humanity.

**Key text:** John 1:14: "The Word became flesh" [and not a human mind or will].

**Modalists**, a.k.a. Sabellians: God's names (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) change with his roles 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.

**Key texts:** Ex. 20:3: "You shall have no other gods before me" and John 10:30: "I and the Father are one."

#### • Christ May Be Special, But He's Not Divine!

These people took seriously the Gospels' portrait of Christ, in which Jesus is portrayed very much as a human being.

**Ebionites:** For these conservative Jewish Christians, God is one, and Jesus must be understood in Old Testament categories. Jesus was merely a specially blessed prophet.

**Key text:** 1 Tim. 2:5: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ."

**Adoptionists**, a.k.a., dynamic monarchianists: No denying Jesus was special, but what happened is this: at birth (not conception) or baptism, God "adopted" the human Jesus as his special son and gave

him an extra measure of divine power (*dynamis*, in Greek).

**Key text:** Luke 3:22 (in some ancient versions): "You are my beloved Son, today I have begotten you."

**Arians:** The Son as Word, Logos, was created by God before time. He is not eternal or perfect like God, though he was God's agent in creating everything else.

**Key text:** John 1:14: "The Word [is] the only-begotten of the Father."

### How is Jesus Both Divine and Human?

#### • Christ: One Nature!

**Monophysites**, e.g., Eutychians: Jesus cannot have two natures; his divinity swallowed up his humanity "like a drop of wine in the sea."

**Key text:** Col. 1:19: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him."

#### • Christ: Two Persons!

**Nestorians:** If you dismiss Jesus' humanity like that, he cannot be the Savior of humankind. Better to say he has two natures and also two persons: the divine Christ and the human Christ lived together in Jesus.

**Key text:** John 2:19: "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days" [i.e., though the human Christ will be destroyed, the divine Christ will continue].

### The Orthodox View

Jesus is fully human and fully divine, having two natures in one person—"without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

**Key text:** Phil. 2:5–11: "Christ Jesus ... being in very nature God, [was] made in human likeness ... and become obedient to death.... Every tongue [should] confess Jesus Christ is Lord."

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

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## Fine-Tuning the Incarnation

A lot of mistakes were made before the church figured out how best to describe Jesus Christ.

Bruce L. Shelley

Shortly after the turn of the second century, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, consulted Emperor Trajan about the rapidly spreading Christian "superstition" in his district, asking him what he should do about it. By interrogating a few people, Pliny learned that "on an appointed day," Christians habitually met before daybreak and recited "a hymn to Christ, as to a god."

These hymns, which go back to the earliest days of Christianity, sharply contradict the popular notion that the doctrine of the Incarnation is only a brainchild of fourth-century theologians playing irrelevant word-games. Long before Christian emperors convened their solemn assemblies, thousands of Christian worship services sang the praises of the Holy Child of Bethlehem.

This is one reason the orthodox party eventually triumphed in the Arian controversy: Athanasius simply argued theologically what the church had been singing for two centuries. But if the Arian controversy settled the issue of Christ's full divinity and humanity, it did not settle the issue of exactly *how* the divine Christ became human. That concern was left to later theologians.

### Christ without a Human Soul

With the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity (A.D. 312), the church marked a new phase in its triumphant expansion. Almost overnight it became fashionable to believe. As a result, churches were crowded, as professor Alan Richardson said, "with the half-converted, the socially ambitious, and the ill-instructed." The Greek idea of God as utterly transcendent reappeared with new vigor among professing Christians—with mixed results.

During the fourth century, two schools of theology offered contrasting interpretations of biblical passages speaking of the Incarnation. One of these was at Alexandria, the other at Antioch. The Alexandrians emphasized strongly the divine nature; the Antiochenes, the human. One began in heaven and moved to earth; the other commenced on earth and looked to heaven.

The first sophisticated explanation of the Incarnation came from the Alexandrian side of the debate, from one Apollinarius (c.310-c.392), an elderly pastor of Laodicea who greatly admired Athanasius, leader of the Alexandrian school. We may be inclined to think of all heretics as dark, sinister figures bent on the overthrow of Christian truth, but Apollinarius's lapse into heresy didn't happen until he was over 60. Till then he enjoyed a reputation as a pillar of orthodoxy. Churches throughout the empire experienced only shock when they first heard that the venerable bishop had fallen into error.

Echoing Athanasius, Apollinarius began his case for the Incarnation with the full deity of Christ: only God could save the world, and, if Christ is Savior, he must be divine. But the question is, how?

The old scholar struck upon the idea of approaching the question from a psychological view. He felt that human nature embraced the body and the soul. But at the Incarnation, the divine Word displaced the animating and rational soul in a human body, creating a "unity of nature" between the Word and his body. Humanity, he felt, was the sphere, not the instrument of salvation—merely the place where



salvation occurred, not a means of salvation. Christ, therefore, had only one nature: Apollinarius spoke of "one enfleshed nature of the divine Word." The Alexandrian stress on Christ's deity remains, but the only thing human about Christ was his physical body.

Apollinarius, definite as his heresy was, deserves our praise for a pioneering effort that forced the church to think more deeply about Christ. His fault lies in his inability to push any further into the heart of truth. The widespread respect that Apollinarius had gained over the years explains why he was never exiled—though, as a heretic, he was forbidden to worship in the Catholic church. He died in his eighties, remaining a scholar and writer to the end.

Objections to Apollinarianism arose quickly. Does the Gospels' picture of Jesus not depict a normal human psychology, showing Christ with a human mind and human emotions? And if the Word displaced the rational human soul, with its powers of choice and sin, how could Christ be fully human, and therefore, how could human beings be fully redeemed? If the Word did not unite full humanity with himself, then how can we hope to be saved?

In this atmosphere, the Council of Constantinople (381) effectively silenced the Apollinarian teaching. It simply was not an adequate description of the Incarnation.

### **Mother of God?**

The second "heresy" was associated with the name Nestorius, a famous preacher at Antioch, who in 428 was appointed archbishop of Constantinople. In the shadow of the imperial palace, Nestorius proved to be a devout, well-meaning monk but a strident, tactless preacher. On the streets, his persecuting temper earned him a nickname, "Firebrand." Shortly after assuming his duties in the capital, he launched a sermon attack against the popular term *Theotokos*, or "God-bearer," as a title for the Virgin Mary. Ordinary church folk assumed that their new preacher regarded the Savior as an inspired man, nothing more.

In point of fact, Nestorius meant nothing of the sort. He thought the term might suggest that the babe born of Mary was not human but God only, which he felt was another form of the Apollinarian heresy. He suggested as an alternative the title *Christotokos*, "Mother of Christ." But his unguarded rhetoric made some think he believed Christ not only had two natures but also two wills, that there were two Christs so to speak, one divine, one human, existing in the one body. Since this appeared to deny the Gospels' portrait of Jesus as an integrated individual, controversy filled the air; charges sounded from pulpits. Cyril, archbishop of Alexandria, called on Nestorius to recant.

To settle the uproar, the emperor adopted the time-honored policy of summoning a general council. It met at Ephesus in the summer of 431. Nestorius refused to attend, but the emperor, who had once supported Nestorius, acceded to Cyril's demands and deposed the firebrand. Repudiated, Nestorius found himself exiled to his former monastery at Antioch even as a new bishop assumed his pulpit in Constantinople. Nestorius's followers were also expelled from the church and soon established the Nestorian Syrian churches of the Middle and Far East, some of which survive to this day.

Nestorius lived until late in 451, long enough to welcome Pope Leo's doctrinal epistle (or "Tome") and the "definition" of orthodoxy announced at the Council of Chalcedon. He received the council's conclusions as his own. "I have endured the torment of my life," he said just before dying on the borders of the empire. "Every day I beseech God to accomplish my dissolution, whose eyes have seen the salvation of God."

Fine words from a maligned man. But the Nestorian controversy did serve one lofty purpose. The more extreme members of the Antioch school made clear the need to talk about Christ's deity and humanity in convincing terms, especially terms describing the union of both in a single person.

## "Robber Council"

Soon after the Council of Ephesus, a third disgraceful affair called Eutychianism spread controversy throughout the East. From a monastery near Constantinople, an elderly but unlearned monk named Eutyches (c.378–454) began to defend Christ's deity, a teaching sometimes called monophysitism (from the Greek, meaning "one nature"). He taught that Christ's humanity was swallowed up in his deity, just "as a drop of honey that falls into the sea dissolves in it." It was virtually a rerun of Apollinarianism, and before that, docetism (the teaching that Christ only seemed to be a man).

Patriarch Flavian of Constantinople pronounced the monk a heretic. In Alexandria, however, Dioscorus, the city's patriarch, was eager to assert his power in Constantinople. At his request, the emperor once again summoned an "imperial council." This one at Ephesus (449) allowed Dioscorus to rehabilitate Eutyches, but the rest of the church saw through the politics. Pope Leo dismissed it as a "robber council" and joined Emperor Flavian in asking the emperor for a new council. Such was the shady background of the historic Council of Chalcedon, a town not far from Constantinople.

In 451 nearly 400 bishops quickly indicted Dioscorus for his actions at the "robber council" and then set forth the definition that has become classical orthodoxy. Chalcedon admirably states what Christ is not.

Against the earlier heretic Arius, the assembly affirmed that Jesus was truly God, and against Apollinarius that he was truly man. Against Eutyches it confessed that Jesus' deity and humanity were not changed into something else, and against the Nestorians that Jesus was not divided but was one person.

In order to deny the Greek conception of God as remote and uninterested, but at the same time to be loyal to Scripture, Chalcedon offers no "explanation" of Jesus' mystery. The council fathers knew that Jesus fits no class. He is absolutely unique. Chalcedon left the mystery intact; the church remained a worshiping community.

But the affirmation also made it possible to tell the story of Jesus as good news. Since Jesus was a normal human being, he could fulfill every demand of God's righteous law, and he could suffer and die a real death. Since he was truly God, his death was capable of satisfying divine justice. God himself had, by his grace, provided the sacrifice.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

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## The Defining Moment

Key portions of the church's most important theological statement

*[\* Adapted from "Creeds, Councils, and Controversies: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church, A.d. 337–461," edited by J. Stevenson (SPCK, 1966) and Peter L'Huillier, "The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils" (St. Vladimir's Press, 1996).]*

***The Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith (451) set the boundaries in which Christians were to think about Jesus Christ. Though a few churches have disagreed, the vast majority of Christendom has submitted to this "definition." Here, the most relevant section is broken into thought blocks:***

Some, taking in hand to set aside the preaching of the truth by heresies of their own, have uttered vain babblings, daring to pervert the mystery of the dispensation....

The synod is opposed to those who presume to rend asunder the mystery of the Incarnation into a double Sonship.

It deposes from the priesthood those who dare to say that the Godhead of the only begotten is passable.

It withstands those who imagine a mixing or confusion of the two natures of Christ.

It drives away those who erroneously teach that the form of a servant he took from us was of a heavenly or some other substance.

It anathematizes those who feign that the Lord had two natures before the union but that these were fashioned into one after the union.

Therefore, following the holy fathers, all of us teach unanimously that everyone must confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one single and same Son, who is perfect according to divinity and perfect according to humanity,

truly God and truly man, composed of a reasonable [i.e., rational] soul and a body, consubstantial with the Father according to divinity and consubstantial with us according to humanity, completely like us except for sin;

he was begotten by the Father before all ages according to his divinity, and in these latter days, he was born for us and for our salvation of Mary the Virgin, the Mother of God, according to his humanity,

one single and same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, known in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation;

the difference in natures is in no way suppressed by their union, but rather the properties of each are retained and united in one single person and single hypostasis ["substance"];

he is neither separated nor divided in two persons, but he is a single and same only-begotten Son, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ,

such as he was announced formerly by the prophets, such as he himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, taught us about himself, and such as the symbol of the fathers [the Nicene Creed] has transmitted to us.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

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## Finding the Truth

How the earliest church decided Marcion and the Gnostics, among others, were wrong.

GUSTO GONZALEZ, JR.

*[\* A condensed excerpt from "The Story of Christianity" by Justo L. Gonzalez (Harper & Row, 1984). Used with permission.]*

*Long before the controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, the church had already been dealing with heresy for some time. Early on teachers arose who said they had special access to Jesus' "real teachings." So early on, the church had to come up with methods for discerning truth and rejecting error.*

*In his The Story of Christianity (Harper & Row, 1984), Justo González, a member of the faculty of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, discusses the two most powerful heresies of the earliest church and how it responded.*

## Secret Knowledge

Of all the differing interpretations of Christianity, none was as dangerous, nor as close to victory, as was Gnosticism. This was a vast and amorphous movement that existed both within and outside the church.

The name Gnosticism derives from the Greek word **gnosis**, which means "knowledge." According to the Gnostics, they possessed a special, mystical knowledge reserved for those with true understanding. That knowledge was the secret key to salvation.

Salvation was the main concern of the Gnostics. They concluded that all matter is evil, or at best unreal. A human being is in reality an eternal spirit that somehow has been imprisoned in a body. Since the body is a prison to the spirit, and since it misguides us as to our true nature, it is evil. Therefore the Gnostics' final goal was to escape from the body and this material world in which we are exiled. The world is not our true home but rather an obstacle to the salvation of the spirit.

How, then, is the origin of the world and of the body to be explained? Gnosticism affirmed that originally all reality was spiritual. The supreme being had no intention of creating a material world but only a spiritual one. Thus a number of spiritual beings were generated. Gnostic teachers did not agree as to their exact number, with some systems positing 365 such spiritual beings or "eons." In any case, one of these eons, far removed from the supreme being, fell into error and thus created the material world. According to one system, for instance, Wisdom, one of the eons, wished to produce something by herself, and the resulting "abortion" was the world. That is what the world is in Gnosticism: an abortion of the spirit and not a divine creation.

But since this world was made by a spiritual being, there are still "sparks" or "bits" of spirit in it. It is these that have been imprisoned in human bodies and must be liberated through **gnosis**.

In order to achieve that liberation, a spiritual messenger must come to this world to waken us from our "dream." Our spirits are "asleep" within our bodies, being driven by the impulses and passions of the body, and someone must come from beyond to remind us who we really are and to call us to struggle

against our incarceration. This messenger brings the *gnosis*, the secret knowledge and inspiration necessary for salvation.

Above us are the heavenly spheres, each ruled by an evil power whose aim is to impede our progress to the spiritual realm. In order to reach the spiritual "fullness," we must break through each of those spheres. The only way to do this is to have the secret knowledge that opens the way—much like a spiritual password. The heavenly messenger has been sent precisely to give us that knowledge, without which there is no salvation.

In Christian Gnosticism, that messenger is Christ. Christ has come to earth to remind us of our heavenly origin and to give us the secret knowledge without which we cannot return to the spiritual mansions.

Since Christ is a heavenly messenger, and since body and matter are evil, most Christian Gnostics rejected the notion that Christ had a body like ours. Some said his body was an appearance, a sort of ghost that miraculously seemed to be a real body. Many distinguished between the heavenly "Christ" and the earthly "Jesus." In some cases, this was coupled with the notion that Jesus did have a body but that this was of a "spiritual matter," different from ours. Most denied the birth of Jesus, which would have put him under the power of the material world.

All these notions are various degrees of what the rest of the church called docetism—a name derived from a Greek word meaning "to seem," for all these doctrines implied, in one way or another, that the body of Jesus appeared to be fully human but was not.

Meanwhile, how is this life to be lived? At this point, Gnostics gave two divergent answers. Most declared that, since the body is the prison of the spirit, one must control the body and its passions and thus weaken its power over the spirit. But there were also some who held that, since the spirit is by nature good and cannot be destroyed, we are to leave the body to its own devices and let it follow the guidance of its own passions. Thus while some Gnostics were extreme ascetics, others were libertines.

Gnosticism was a serious threat to Christianity throughout the second century.

### **Anti-Jehovah**

Marcion, whose father was bishop of Sinope in Pontus, knew Christianity from an early age. But he had a profound dislike towards both Judaism and the material world. About A.D. 144, he went to Rome, where he gathered a following.

Since Marcion was convinced that the world is evil, he concluded that its creator must be either evil or ignorant. But instead of positing a long series of spiritual beings, as the Gnostics did, Marcion proposed a much simpler solution. According to him, the God and Father of Jesus is not the same as Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. It was Jehovah who made this world. The Father's purpose was that there be only a spiritual world. But Jehovah, either through ignorance or out of an evil intent, made this world and placed humankind in it.

This means that the Hebrew Scriptures are indeed inspired by a god, although this is Jehovah and not the Supreme Father. Jehovah is an arbitrary god, who chooses a particular people above all the rest. And he is also vindictive, constantly keeping an account on those who disobey him and punishing them.

Over against Jehovah, and far above him, is the Father of Christians. This God is not vindictive but loving. This God requires nothing of us but rather gives everything freely, including salvation. This God does not seek to be obeyed but to be loved. It is out of compassion for us, Jehovah's creatures, that the Supreme God has sent his Son to save us, who simply appeared as a grown man during the reign of

Tiberius. Naturally at the end, there will be no judgment, since the Supreme God is absolutely loving and will simply forgive us.

All this led Marcion to set the Hebrew Scriptures aside. If the Old Testament was the word of an inferior god, it should not be read in the churches nor used as the basis of Christian instruction. In order to fill this gap, Marcion compiled a list of books that he considered true Christian Scriptures. These were the epistles of Paul—one of the few, according to Marcion, who had really understood Jesus' message—and the Gospel of Luke. As to the many quotations from the Old Testament in Luke and Paul, Marcion explained them away as interpolations—the handiwork of Judaizers seeking to subvert the original message.

For a number of years, this rival church achieved a measure of success, and even after it was clearly defeated, it lingered on for centuries.

### **Back to the Bible**

Marcion's list was the first attempt to put together a "New Testament." When early Christians spoke of "Scripture," what they meant was the Hebrew Scriptures, usually in the Greek version known as the Septuagint. It was also customary to read in church passages from one or several Gospels, as well as from the Epistles—particularly Paul's. Since there was no approved list, different Gospels were read in different churches, and the same was true of other books.

But Marcion's challenge required a response, and thus the church at large began to compile a list of sacred Christian writings. This was not done in a formal manner, through a council or special meeting. A consensus developed gradually.

There was no question, except among Gnostics and Marcionites, that the Hebrew Scripture was part of the Christian canon. This was important as a proof that God had been preparing the way for the advent of Christianity and even as a way of understanding the nature of the God who had been revealed in Jesus Christ. Christian faith was the fulfillment of the hope of Israel and not a sudden apparition from heaven. As to what is now called the New Testament, the Gospels were the first to attain general recognition. It is important to note that those early Christians decided to include more than one Gospel in their canon. They did this as a direct response to the challenge of Marcion and Gnosticism.

Many Gnostic teachers claimed that the heavenly messenger had trusted his secret knowledge to a particular disciple, who alone was the true interpreter of the message. Thus various Gnostic groups had a book that claimed to present the true teachings of Jesus. Such was, for instance, the Gospel of Saint Thomas.

In response, the church at large sought to show that its doctrines were not based on the supposed witness of a single apostle or Gospel but on the consensus of the entire apostolic tradition. The very fact that the various Gospels differed in matters of detail but agreed on the basic issues at stake made their agreement a more convincing argument.

By the end of the second century, the core of the canon was established: the four Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline epistles. On the shorter books of the present canon, there was no consensus until a much later date. It was in the second half of the fourth century that a complete consensus was achieved as to exactly which books ought to be included in the New Testament.

### **The Symbol of Faith**

Another element in the church's response to heresies was what we now call the Apostles' Creed. Its basic

text was put together, probably in Rome, around the year 150. It was then called "symbol of the faith."

The word **symbol** meant a means of recognition, such as a token that a general gave to a messenger so that the recipient could recognize a true messenger. Likewise, the "symbol" put together in Rome was a means whereby Christians could distinguish true believers from those who followed the various heresies, particularly Gnosticism and Marcionism.

One of the main uses of this symbol was in baptism, where it was presented to the candidate in the form of a series of three questions:

***Do you believe in God the Father almighty?***

***Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?***

***Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?***

Closer scrutiny clearly shows that this early creed is directed against Marcion and the Gnostics. First, the Greek word **pantokrator**, usually translated as "almighty," literally means "all ruling." What is meant here is that there is nothing, and certainly not the material world, that falls outside of God's rule. The distinction between a spiritual reality that serves God and a material reality that does not is rejected. This world, its matter and its physical bodies, are part of the "all" over which God reigns.

The creed's most extensive paragraph is the one dealing with the Son. This is because it was precisely in their Christology that Marcion and the Gnostics differed most widely from the church. First, we are told that Jesus Christ is the "Son of God." Other ancient versions say "Son of the same" or "His Son." Jesus is the Son of the God who rules over this world and over all reality. The birth "of Mary the virgin" is not there primarily in order to stress the virgin birth—although, quite clearly, that is affirmed—but rather to affirm the very fact that Jesus was born and did not simply appear on earth, as Marcion and others claimed. The reference to Pontius Pilate is not there to put the blame on the Roman governor but rather to date the event to insist on the fact that it was a historical, datable event. And docetism is further denied by declaring that Jesus "was crucified ... died, and rose again." Finally, it is affirmed that this same Jesus will return "to judge," a notion that Marcion would never accept.

The "holy church" is affirmed because Christians were beginning to underscore the authority of the church. And the "resurrection of the flesh" is a final rejection of any notion that the flesh is evil or of no consequence.

## **No More Secrets**

In the struggle against heresy, the debate finally came to the issue of the authority of the church. All agreed that the true message was the one taught by Jesus. The Gnostics claimed that they had some secret access to that original message through a succession of secret teachers. Marcion claimed that he had access to that message through the writings of Paul and Luke—which, however, had to be purged of what did not agree with Marcion's views regarding the Old Testament. The church at large claimed to be in possession of the original gospel and the true teachings of Jesus. Thus what was debated was in a way the authority of the church against the claims of the heretics.

At this point, the notion of apostolic succession became very important. What was argued was simply that, had Jesus had some secret knowledge to communicate to his disciples—which in fact he did not—he would have entrusted that teaching to the same apostles to whom he entrusted the church. If those apostles had



received any such teaching, they in turn would have passed it on to those who were to follow them in the leadership of the church. Therefore, were there any such secret teaching, it should be found among the direct disciples of the apostles, and the successors of those disciples, the bishops.

But the truth of the matter is that those who can now—that is, in the second century—claim direct apostolic succession unanimously deny the existence of any such secret teaching. In conclusion, the Gnostic claim that there is a secret tradition, and that they have been entrusted with it, is false.

In order to strengthen this argument, it was necessary to show that the bishops of the time were indeed successors of the apostles. This was not difficult, since several of the most ancient churches had lists of bishops linking them with the apostolic past. Rome, Antioch, Ephesus, and others had such lists.

Be it through actual bishops or through other leaders (some early churches were headed by councils of “elders”), the orthodox church of the second century could show its connection with the apostles in a way in which Marcion and the Gnostics could not.

### **The “Catholic” Church**

The word *catholic* means “universal,” but it also means “according to the whole.” To separate itself from the various heretical groups and sects, the ancient church began calling itself “catholic.” This title underscored both its universality and the inclusiveness of the witness on which it stood. It was the church “according to the whole,” that is, according to the total witness of all the apostles. Only the church “catholic,” the church “according to the whole,” could lay claim to the entire apostolic witness.

Ironically, through an evolution that took centuries, debates regarding the true meaning of *catholic* came to be centered on the person and authority of a single apostle—Peter.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

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## Why Bishops Should Be Trusted

When some early Christians said they had secret apostolic teaching, one church father said, "Not likely."

It is not right to say that [the apostles] preached before they had come to perfect knowledge, as some dare to say, boasting that they are the correctors of the apostles. For after our Lord had risen from the dead, and they were clothed with the power from on high when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were filled with all things and had perfect knowledge. They went out to the ends of the earth, preaching the good things that come to us from God.

The tradition of the apostles can be clearly seen in every church by those who wish to behold the truth. We can enumerate those who were established by the apostles (and their successors) in the churches down to our time—none of whom taught or thought of anything like the heretics' mad ideas. Even if the apostles had known of "hidden mysteries" (which they had taught to the "perfect" secretly and apart from others), they would have handed them down especially to those to whom they were entrusting the churches themselves. For they certainly wished those whom they were leaving as their successors to be perfect and irreproachable.

### Apostolic Succession

[Take] the very great, oldest, and well-known church, founded and established at Rome by those two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul. When the blessed apostles had founded and built up the church, they handed over the episcopate to Linus. (Paul mentions this Linus in his epistles to Timothy.) Anencletus succeeded him. After him, Clement received the lot of the episcopate. He had seen the apostles and associated with them and still had their preaching sounding in his ears and their tradition before his eyes. (And not he alone, for there were many still left in his time who had been taught by the apostles.)

Similarly Polycarp, who not only was taught by apostles, and who associated with many who had seen Christ, was installed by apostles for Asia as bishop in the church in Smyrna. (I saw him myself in my early youth.) He survived for a long time and departed this life in a ripe old age by a glorious and magnificent martyrdom. He always taught what he learned from the apostles, which the church continues to hand on, and which are the only truths. The churches in Asia all bear witness to this, as do those who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time. He is certainly a much more trustworthy and dependable witness than Valentinus and Marcion and the other false thinkers!

Since there are so many clear testimonies, we should not seek from others for the truth that can easily be received from the church. There the apostles, like a rich man making a deposit, fully bestowed upon her all that belongs to the truth, so that whoever wishes may receive from her the water of life. She is the entrance to life; all the others are thieves and robbers.

What if there should be a dispute about some matter of moderate importance? Should we not turn to the oldest churches, where the apostles themselves were known, and find out from them the clear and certain answer to the problem now being raised? Even if the apostles had not left their Writings to us, ought we not to follow the rule of the tradition that they handed down to those to whom they committed the churches?

—*Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–c.200)*

## Against the Heresies

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## Heresy in the Early Church: A Gallery of Malcontents for Christ

The mixed motives and odd teachings of four notorious heretics

Stephen Miller is a free-lance writer and former editor of Illustrated Bible Life. He is a member of CHRISTIAN HISTORY's editorial advisory board.

### Valentinus

(2nd century A.D.)

*From papal candidate to leading Gnostic*

A brilliant theologian who taught in Alexandria, Egypt (the Oxford of his day), Valentinus moved to Rome in about A.D. 136 and quickly became a candidate for pope, then known as bishop of Rome. Not only was he not elected, he was excommunicated when he later emerged as leader of a heresy known as Gnosticism, which taught that only a select few receive *gnosis* ("knowledge" in Greek) from God about how to find salvation.

With this conviction, Valentinus proceeded to reinterpret the Bible—misinterpret, charged critics such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. For Valentinus, the most important lessons of Scripture came not from the obvious meaning but from the symbolism beneath the words. This method of biblical interpretation, called allegory, allowed Valentinus to create elaborate stories and teachings that blurred the lines between Christianity, mysticism, philosophy, and Judaism.

To the Genesis sketch of Creation, for example, Valentinus added a number of details. Throughout the ages, according to Valentinus, God produced 15 spiritual couples who personified divine characteristics such as goodness and truth. One being, *Sophia* (Greek for "wisdom"), rejected her partner because her only passion was to know everything about God. By herself she conceived and gave birth to a deformed child, whom she named *Ialdabaoth* (probably meaning "Child of Chaos"). Out of the elements of creation, her son (the diety portrayed in the Old Testament) produced the dark world of humanity and infused it with numbness toward God. Jesus, God's great revelator, came to awaken people to the "deep things of God."

For Valentinus and other Gnostics, there was no mixing of the spiritual world with the physical. Thus they rejected the incarnation, crucifixion, and bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Valentinianism endured merciless polemics by the church fathers for the first few centuries A.D. then faded into oblivion—until 1945.

Until then, all we knew of Valentinus came from his critics. But among the 52 documents recovered from the ruins of what was perhaps a Gnostic monastery near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, is a book written by Valentinus or his followers. Called *The Gospel of Truth*, it reads like a sermon and draws on the Gospels and the writings of Paul.

### Novatian

(c. 200–258)

*Fought for a pure church a little too hard*

It was the spring of 251, and the Roman bishop was dead—martyred by Romans in a new wave of

persecution. But raiders from the north were temporarily diverting the empire's attention, so Christians were breathing a sigh of relief. Two issues immediately confronted church leaders: (1) Who should they elect as the new bishop of Rome? (2) What should they do about "lapsed Christians," those who renounced their faith during persecution?

Novatian was the leading churchman in Rome, a brilliant theologian, and the obvious choice for pope. But he wasn't elected, perhaps because of his unpopular, hard-line position about the lapsed. He said they could never be readmitted to the church, and he invoked the words of Jesus: "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, a major North African city, did not agree. He called Novatian "a foe to mercy, a destroyer of repentance." The influential African bishop supported Cornelius, who was elected pope. Cornelius believed that the lapsed could be reinstated to the church by repenting and doing penance based on the seriousness of the offense. Christians who had offered sacrifices on Roman altars drew the stiffest penance.

Local supporters of Novatian rallied around their man and elected him pope. Cornelius promptly excommunicated him. Both men courted recognition of church leaders abroad. In the process, Novatian's followers evolved into a separate church, with bishops and congregations throughout the empire.

Novatian fled Rome during renewed persecution that began in late 251. Remaining true to his beliefs, he died a martyr during yet another round of persecutions some seven years later. Novatian's church endured for about four centuries, until Muslim invaders swept westward and slaughtered those who refused to convert to Islam.

**Paul of Samosata**  
**(Bishop of Antioch, c. 260–268)**  
***Luxury-loving bishop***

From his humble beginnings in the village of Samosata, in what is now southern Turkey, Paul developed into a church leader who moonlighted for mammon. When he was elected bishop of Antioch (in modern Syria), he was the chief financial officer for Queen Zenobia of Palmyra.

Somehow he amassed a fortune. His critics said it was through accepting bribes. Whatever the source of the money, he quickly earned a reputation as the luxury-loving bishop—at least according to early church critics, who were known to exaggerate the immorality of heretics.

But it wasn't only this behavior, condemned as unbecoming of a bishop, that generated three church conferences in five years but his theology. Paul apparently believed that Jesus was no more God than were the prophets, and for this reason he forbade the singing of hymns to Jesus. Jesus, the bishop preached, was "an ordinary man" on whom "the Word came and dwelt," not one worthy of worship.

Paul's critics said the bishop understood the Trinity as a union of the Father, Wisdom (Spirit), and the Word (Logos). Wisdom and the Word reside within the Father, Paul said, as reason resides within humanity. Wisdom and the Word are not separate persons, he explained; they subsist within the Father. Paul said it was God's gift of the Word that uniquely inspired and empowered Jesus.

The bishop evaded the questions the first two councils asked him, but members of a council in 268 managed to wrangle enough answers out of him to convince the majority that he was, in fact, a heretic. They deposed him and elected a new bishop.

The queen, however, had other plans. A staunch ally of Paul, she retained him as bishop. Four years later, when Rome defeated the queen, the Roman commander forced Paul to resign and banished him

from the city. Disciples of Paul, called Paulianists and Samosatines, worshiped as a sect until most joined the theologically kindred Arians in the following century.

## **Pelagius**

**(c. 354-after 418)**

***He battled lax morals with bad theology***

When the British monk Pelagius moved to Rome in about 380, he didn't like what he saw. Professing Christians, consumed by their desire for luxury and wealth, felt no shame in offering and accepting bribes. Their passion for materialism was matched by their apathy toward spiritual matters, such as godly living.

Brilliant and strong-minded Pelagius thought these warped ethics grew naturally out of the prevailing theology, which emphasized God's grace and asserted that human beings are incapable of holy living. Pelagius and his followers argued otherwise.

Emphasizing the free will that God gave humanity, Pelagians rejected predestination as well as original sin, the belief that the sin of Adam and Eve spiritually contaminated the human race. They taught that the sin of Adam and Eve affected only them, and that human beings are born without sin and with the freedom to choose their own path in life.

Many theologians, like Jerome and Augustine, respected Pelagius's life and intent. Pelagius, himself a devout monk, convinced many wealthy Romans to do as he had done and forsake their possessions.

But as Pelagianism spread, it became an increasing problem for the church, and the aging Augustine worked fervently to stop it. At risk, believed Augustine, was the doctrine of grace. If humans are born without sin, what is the need for God's grace? And why not let humanity save itself by exercising free will and choosing to live the holy life? The biblical scholar Jerome joined Augustine in condemning Pelagius, calling him a "corpulent dog ... weighed down with ... porridge."

Pope Innocent I excommunicated Pelagius in 417. Though the monk was briefly restored by the new pope, Zosimus, in 418, Zosimus encountered such a storm from African bishops, where Augustine lived, that he changed his mind and wrote a letter condemning the Briton.

Pelagius disappeared from history, though his teachings endured for another century. The issues raised by Pelagianism reappeared many times in the Middle Ages and broke out afresh during the Reformation.

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## Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

### Origen: Model or Heretic?

He created controversy when he tried to explain the gospel in terms his culture could grasp.

Kenneth R. Calvert

Origen of Alexandria, a third-century Christian scholar, loved Jesus, the Scriptures, and Neo-Platonic philosophy—a combination that Christians since have viewed as either the height of faithful theology or the depth of horrendous error.

Whatever one's views of his theology, his life was utterly dedicated to Christ. In his boyhood, when a persecution struck Alexandria hard, he wanted to rush to be martyred. Only a ruse by his mother—who hid his clothes—prevented his leaving the house! Later in life, the church historian Eusebius reported, he castrated himself in literal obedience to Matthew 19:12. And in 250, during the violent persecution of Decius, he was imprisoned and tortured so severely that he never recovered.

On the other hand, though praised by many, he was rejected by his bishop. Origen's most orthodox admirers, like Gregory of Nyssa, often rejected his teachings. Later some thought Origen was a devil. Theologians today still debate the orthodoxy of his views.

### Pushing the Boundaries

At the root of these controversies is Origen's use of the Bible. Neo-Platonism taught that physical objects acted as symbols of spiritual reality and so contained a double meaning. Likewise, Origen and many other Christians (like Augustine) believed the Scriptures had a double meaning; the spiritual significance, while escaping the notice of most people, could be contemplated by the perfected Christian. But Origen's interpretations pushed the boundaries of orthodoxy.

He believed, for instance, in the pre-existence of souls and that eventually everyone, including the Devil, would be saved. In addition, he described the Trinity as a hierarchy, not as an equality of Father, Son, and Spirit. Though Origen attacked Gnosticism, in many ways, like the Gnostics, he rejected the goodness of the material creation. His critics have always complained that in many ways this teacher was "blinded by Greek culture."

### A Man of Christ

Yet Origen said, "I want to be a man of the church ... to be called ... of Christ." His *Contra Celsum*, a defense of Christianity, helped Christians endure physical and intellectual persecution. His *Hexapla* (now destroyed), a comparison of various ancient biblical texts, was an important step in the development of the biblical canon.

The contradictions in Origen are due in great part to his genius as well as the cultural tensions he faced. On the one hand, he presented a creative defense of Christianity and brought Christianity to Roman elites. On the other hand, his genius led him down some dubious paths. In short, he faced the tensions of every Christian: to be both relevant to, and separate from, the world.

—**Kenneth R. Calvert**  
Hillsdale College, Michigan

## Heresy in the Early Church: Christian History Timeline

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### GNOSTICISM

c. 140 Valentinus begins teaching Gnostic views in Rome

144 Marcion is excommunicated for Gnostic-like views

c. 175 Basilides espouses Gnostic teachings in Alexandria

c. 180 Irenaeus writes *Against the Heresies*, opposing Gnosticism

c. 450 Gnostic sects diminish

*Forms of Gnosticism return with Paulicians (800s) and Albigensians (1200s)*

### QUARTODECIMANISM

c. 155 Polycarp and others from Asia Minor advocate Nisan 14 as date of Easter

c. 190 Pope Victor insists on Sunday observance and tries to stamp out Quartodecimanism ("14th-ism"), though Irenaeus advocates tolerance

325 Council of Nicea accepts Alexandrian method of determining Easter

400 Rome begins using Alexandrian method

*In the Middle Ages, the Celtic church (in 625) and the church in Gaul (in the 800s) join the West in adopting the Alexandrian method*

### MONTANISM

c. 157 Montanus begins prophesying that the Heavenly Jerusalem will soon descend in Phrygia, in Asia Minor

170s Montanism develops ecstatic and ascetic practices

c. 190 Montanism condemned by church councils in Asia Minor

c. 207 Tertullian converts to Montanism

c. 400 Montanism wanes but survives in pockets



***Though severely persecuted by Justinian I (483–565), Montanism survives into the 800s***

## **MONARCHIANISM**

c. **190s** Monarchianism (emphasizing God's *monarchia*, "unity"—not the three persons) spreads

c. **200** Noetus condemned at Rome for Patripassianism ("the father suffers-ism"), the teaching that the Father suffered as the Son

**268** Council of Antioch deposes Paul of Samosata and condemns Sabellianism (i.e., modalism: Father, Son, and Spirit are temporary manifestations of the same being)

***By the early 300s, most Monarchianists become Arians***

## **"PURITANISM"**

**249–250** Decian persecution causes many Christians to "lapse," i.e., deny the faith

**251** Novatian teaches that the lapsed should not be readmitted to the church; some Christians admit the lapsed on easy terms

**252** Cyprian argues for middle view: penance for the lapsed

**255–256** African bishops insist on rebaptism of heretics and schismatics; Rome disagrees

**311** Donatists refuse to accept new bishop of Carthage because he "handed over" the Scriptures under persecution; they consecrate a rival bishop

**314** Council of Arles condemns Donatism, which insists on unwavering loyalty of church members

**411** Donatism significantly weakened by government condemnation

***Donatism survives in pockets in Africa until Islam conquers the region (late 600s)***

## **ARIANISM**

c. **318** Arius's views, that Jesus is not divine, gains popularity; Athanasius writes ***On the Incarnation***, affirming the full deity and humanity of Jesus

**325** Council of Nicea, called by Emperor Constantine, condemns Arians and affirms the divinity of Christ

**328–361** Temporary triumph of Arianism; period of factions and confusion; Nicene bishops, like Athanasius, are deposed and banished

**337** New Eastern emperor, Constantius, openly embraces Arianism

c. **340** First conversions of Goths by Arian Ulfilas

**361** Valentinian, an orthodox, becomes Western emperor, and orthodoxy begins to recover lost ground

**381** Theodosius, an orthodox, becomes sole emperor; Council of Constantinople affirms Nicene orthodoxy; Cappadocian Fathers put final touches on Trinitarian doctrine

**390s** Arianism still alive among the Goths and other Germanic peoples

***Arianism disappears in the 700s through gradual conversion to orthodoxy***

## **MONOPHYSITISM**

**371** Apollinarius's views (an early form of Monophysitism ["one-naturism"]: Jesus has one, divine nature) spread

**381** Council of Constantinople condemns Apollinarianism

**440s** Eutyches begins teaching Christ has only one nature after the Incarnation—a divine nature

**449** Through intimidation and bribery, a council at Ephesus (the "Robber Council") declares Eutyches orthodox

**451** Council of Chalcedon proclaims that Christ has two natures and condemns Monophysitism

***In the 500s, after repeated attempts at reconciliation, Monophysites consolidate in Coptic, Syrian, and Armenian communions***

## **PELAGIANISM**

c. **390** Pelagius moves to Rome and is disturbed by moral laxity

c. **410** Pelagius teaches salvation by good works; some of his followers deny original sin

c. **411** Augustine begins writing against Pelagius

**418** Council of Carthage affirms Augustine's teaching

**431** Council of Ephesus condemns Pelagianism

***With the condemnation at the Council of Orange (529), Pelagianism dies out***

## **NESTORIANISM**

**428** Nestorius objects to calling Mary ***Theotokos*** ("God-bearer"), but Cyril of Alexandria defends the term and condemns Nestorius

**431** Council of Ephesus declares Mary ***Theotokos*** and condemns Nestorianism

**436** Nestorius banished to Upper Egypt

**451** Council of Chalcedon condemns Nestorians, who gradually move to Persia and further east to form

their own church

***Nestorians remain a separate church to this day***

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## Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

### Testing the Prophets

#### In the Montanist controversy, did the church reject heresy or the Holy Spirit?

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We feel a special sense of connectedness when we discover a spiritual ancestor who looks like us. For example, those suffering for the faith today draw inspiration from the early martyrs. Others, longing for Spirit-filled worship and “charismatic” witness, find their attention drawn to the enthusiastic, second-century Christian movement called Montanism.

In this example, however, there lies a problem: Montanism, which on the surface looks like modern Pentecostalism, was widely rejected as heretical in the early church. Why?

#### Inspirational Beginnings

Sometime around the year 157, in the Roman province of Asia Minor known as Phrygia, a professing Christian named Montanus began to prophesy ecstatically. Claiming the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he was soon joined by two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla (Prisca). They paid special attention to the biblical teachings about the Paraclete, and they claimed to be the last in a succession of prophets that included the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8–9). They said they were called to summon all believers to righteous preparation for the heavenly descent of the New Jerusalem.

By the 170s, this “New Prophecy” movement, as it was known, spread. The heart of Montanist activity was always in Asia Minor, although converts were eventually won in missionary outposts such as Rome, Byzantium, and Carthage. What attracted scores of early Christians to Montanism? Perhaps the answer lies in three words: authority, vitality, and discipline.

Montanist prophets claimed direct revelations from God, and their utterances (“oracles”) were treasured and preserved as authoritative teaching by the faithful. Here was fresh truth, Spirit-given, for these last days!

Moreover, such revelations, springing as they did from a trancelike ecstasy, were electric experiences for prophet and congregation alike.

Finally, there was a renewed, rigorous emphasis on practical holiness, with prophetic teachings on issues like fasting, marriage, asceticism, and spiritual healing.

In his treatise *On the Soul*, Montanism’s most famous convert, Tertullian, illustrates the movement’s attraction:

“We have now amongst us a sister whose lot it has been to be favored with gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision amidst the sacred rites of the Lord’s Day in the church. She converses with angels and sometimes even with the Lord. She both sees and hears mysterious communications. Some men’s hearts she discerns, and she obtains directions for healing for such as need them. Whether it be in the reading of the Scriptures or in the chanting of psalms or in the preaching of sermons or in the offering up of prayers—in all

these religious services, matter and opportunity are afforded her of seeing visions....”

## **So What Was Wrong?**

Not everyone was so enamored with the movement. In 192, Serapion, bishop of Antioch, declared that “the working of the lying organization called the New Prophecy is held in abomination by the whole brotherhood in the world.”

Another bishop, who wrote anonymously about the same time, spoke of regional synods in Asia Minor convened to address the controversy, resulting in Montanists’ being excommunicated. He was animated by a recent trip to Ancyra, in which the church was “ringing with the noise” of the New Prophecy.

He and other writers objected to Montanism on five main grounds:

1. “Abnormal ecstasy.” Montanus prophesied in a frenzy, without engaging the rational mind, “contrary to the manner which belongs to the tradition and succession of the church from the beginning.”
2. No controls. When respected bishops and church leaders sought to practice discernment with Montanist prophets, the prophets refused to submit.
3. Worldliness. Some questioned the Montanist financial dealings. Others worried about their lifestyle: “Does a prophet dye his hair, paint his eyelids, love adornment, play at gaming tables and dice, lend money at interest?”
4. Extra-scriptural revelation. Many were concerned that people would hold the oracles of the New Prophecy in higher esteem than the Scriptures.
5. False prophecies. Maximilla declared that there would be wars and tumults and, after her death, no more prophets but “The End.” Yet, some thirteen years after her death, there was peace.

On the other hand, a few orthodox teachers, though they didn’t join the movement, refused to condemn it. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, for example, was concerned that those attacking the Montanists would drive the authentic gift of prophecy from the church. Those who did so, he wrote, “do not admit that aspect presented by John’s Gospel, in which the Lord promised that he would send the Paraclete, but they set aside at once both the Gospel and the prophetic Spirit.”

Even the fourth-century heresy hunter Epiphanius could find no serious fault with the movement. Still, the way Montanists practiced the faith made most Christians wary.

## **The End of a Movement**

Early in this century, French historian Pierre de Labriolle showed how Montanism in Asia Minor lasted well into the Middle Ages, though widespread enthusiasm for the movement was over by the fourth century. Tertullian (d. 225), who wrote seven books defending Montanus, was the movement’s last major figure.

Historians continue to debate how the early Christian church handled its twin stewardship of church authority and spiritual power. Some argue that the church, by condemning the movement, squelched a schismatic party that would have created even more dissention. Others say Paul’s admonition was ignored: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire. Do not treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thess. 5:19– 20).

Much of the literature of the controversy (such as Tertullian's ***On Ecstasy***) is lost or has perished. What remains, however, is an issue of vital interest not only to historians of doctrine but to Spirit-led Christians today.

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## Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church

### Risky Lifestyles

**It wasn't just what Christians believed but also how they lived that concerned early church teachers.**

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One of the earliest unofficial outlines of church doctrine, *The Didache*, made it clear that Christians should not practice abortion or expose newly born infants to die. In explaining what it meant to love one's neighbor, it said, "Commit no murder, adultery, sodomy, fornication, or theft. Practice no magic, sorcery, abortion or infanticide." On these ethical issues, Christians were unanimous.

But other practical issues caused division in the church or required church discipline. When we think of heresy in the early church, we usually think of lofty theological debates over the Trinity and the deity of Christ, but pastors also had to draw lines on a number of practical concerns.

### Living with "Spiritual Sisters"

Some monks and nuns in the early church believed they could live together. Monks wanted to be free of housekeeping duties, which nuns (whom they called "spiritual sisters") could perform; the monks could then spend more time in contemplation and in service to others. Because of their vows, they felt they could avoid sexual temptation.

This practice may have existed as early as the second century. Though it was officially forbidden by church councils at Elvira, Ancyra, and Nicea in the early 300s, it existed long after these prohibitions.

Many church fathers preached against it. Jerome (342–420) said many of these women hid their pregnancy under loose clothing, and he spoke of abortion among these "virgins." John Chrysostom (347–407) pointed out candidly that many of the spiritual sisters became spiritual mothers!

### Deathbed Baptisms

Some early Christians believed that sins committed after baptism either could not be forgiven or would exact a costly penance. Thus many Christians put off baptism until just before death and lived most of their lives on the margin of the church.

Pastors steadily criticized this practice as perpetuating spiritual infancy. Not only could one inadvertently die before being baptized, Chrysostom argued, baptism was not a time of sadness before impending death. It was, instead, a time of joy, the beginning of a new life of faith.

In speaking to catechumens, converts who were about to be baptized, he said, "I not only count you blessed but I praise your good will, because, unlike men of laxity, you do not approach baptism at your final gasp.... They receive baptism in their beds, but you receive it in the bosom of the common mother of us all, the church; they receive baptism amidst laments and tears, but you are baptized with rejoicing and gladness; they are groaning, while you are giving thanks; their high fever leaves them in a stupor while you are filled with an abundance of spiritual pleasure."

In spite of such strong teaching, another century passed before the practice died out.

## **Soldiers in Christ**

On some matters, such as whether Christians should serve in the military, the early church's attitude underwent a change.

In the first three centuries, it's difficult to find evidence for Christian participation in the military. Most Christians seem to have accepted Tertullian's (c.160-c.225) view, which he expressed in ***On Idolatry*** and ***On the Crown***: "The soul cannot serve two masters, God and Caesar." He acknowledged the validity of Israel's military exploits before Christ and the sincerity of the repentant soldiers who came to John the Baptist, but he concluded, "The Lord, by taking away Peter's sword [in the garden of Gethsemane] disarmed every soldier thereafter."

After the conversion of Emperor Constantine, however, some Christians began to disagree.

Eusebius of Caesaria (c.260–c.340), the church historian, in his oration, ***On Praise of Constantine***, called Constantine "the Savior's friend." He considered Constantine a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to bless the nations of the earth and thus implied that to serve in Constantine's government or army was to serve God.

On the other hand, the Council of Nicea still required churches to discipline former soldiers who, having left the military because of their Christian conversion, then chose to return to it.

The view that eventually prevailed was expressed by Basil the Great (c.330–379), leader of the churches in Cappadocia (in modern Turkey): "I have become acquainted with a man who demonstrates that it is possible even in the military profession to maintain perfect love for God and that a Christian ought to be characterized not by the clothes he wears but by the disposition of his soul."

## **Calendar Heresy**

For the first seven centuries after the birth of the church, Christians differed about how to determine the date of Easter. Believers from Asia Minor believed it should be celebrated on a fixed date: the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, to correspond with the Jewish feast of Passover. In particular, these Christians thought Easter could be celebrated on any day of the week. They were called Quartodecimans, from the Latin for "fourteenth."

The majority of Christians, however, insisted on celebrating Christ's resurrection on a Sunday, the day he rose from the dead. They calculated Easter in the same way but put it on the Sunday following the fourteenth day of Nisan.

Other groups chose other dates still, and the result was a mess. Bishop Ambrose of Milan (c.339–397) commented in a letter that in A.D. 387, Easter was celebrated on March 21 in Gaul (modern France), April 18 in Italy, and April 25 in Egypt! The differences so troubled the bishops at the Council of Nicea (A. D. 325) that Quartodecimans were called "heretics."

Unity in the Mediterranean world came in the fifth century when the churches all began using the Egyptian method of calculation: Easter was the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox.

The controversy arose again in the early medieval era in Celtic churches and in Gaul. Not until the early 800s was there complete agreement in the West.



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## Heresy in the Early Church: Christian History Interview - The Search for the Biblical Jesus

The hard, technical, theological work on Christ was essentially a 400-year Bible study.

interview with Thomas Oden

*To some, early church debates about Christ read like a computer programming language: impossible to decode. To others, the early church theology seems as relevant as the dress codes of a Carthusian monastery.*

*To help us understand what the early church was driving at in the millions of theological words it produced, Christian History talked with Thomas Oden, who teaches theology at Drew University. He is author of the three-volume systematic theology: The Living God, The Word of Life, and Life in the Spirit (Harper San Francisco, 1992).*

**Christian History: Why did the early church spend so much energy trying to understand precisely how Jesus was human and divine, especially since ultimately it's a mystery how he is both?**

Thomas Oden: All ancient Christian writers and councils knew that it's impossible to fathom fully the Incarnation. Attempts to articulate this mystery always fall short of absolute precision. On the other hand, they discovered that you can talk about the Incarnation in ways that fail to do justice to what we do know.

The early church had to deal with the apostolic testimony of the New Testament, and the New Testament clearly portrays Jesus as the Savior, as Mediator between God's holiness and human sin. It portrays him as truly God and truly human. Any teaching that failed to do justice to the full witness of the Scriptures had to be challenged.

For example, Arianism failed to understand that in Jesus we meet the Uncreated One. Arius thought Jesus was a creature. That runs counter to the apostolic testimony, particularly in John's and Paul's writings. Theological definitions are precise because they look for language that rules out heretical interpretations—interpretations that fall short of the wholeness of biblical faith.

If these ecumenical councils hadn't done the hard labor of working out the precise language, we would have had, not less, but more trouble understanding Jesus Christ.

**Why did many early church fathers, like Athanasius, argue for orthodoxy in ways that seem harsh, even nasty?**

I don't think Athanasius's responses, to take that example, were simply pugnacious. He knew that more than theological opinions were at stake—nothing less than the integrity of the New Testament, the apostolic testimony to Christ. In the case of Arianism, if the church taught that Christ was somehow less than God incarnate, then it would have given the whole game away. You cannot speak about reconciliation the way the New Testament does—a reconciliation of a holy God and sinful humanity—without a full incarnation. For Athanasius, the issues were too important to discuss calmly.

**Some in the early church who were branded as heretics—like the Monophysites—are today reconciling with the Orthodox Church. Are Monophysites heretics or not?**

Clearly some of the more radical Monophysites were, but in some cases, the two parties agreed on fundamentals.

The Monophysites, in trying to protect the deity of Christ, asserted that Christ had one nature (*monophysis*) rather than two. But the word *physis*, or "nature," was used differently by Monophysites and the Orthodox; in many cases, they were not disagreeing as much as talking past one another. In the last two years, the Coptic, Syrian, and other Monophysite churches have moved significantly towards reconciliation with Eastern Orthodoxy, though some serious differences still remain.

**Many Protestants balk at the phrase, "Mary, the Mother of God." Yet the early church was in near unanimous agreement on this term.**

Though many Protestants have problems with the term, it seems to be a concept we all accept. Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, and the major Protestant teachers don't reject the formula of the Council of Ephesus. They don't think of Mary as merely the Christ-bearer, only a specially anointed man, but the actual bearer of God in the flesh.

Again, it's a matter of faithfulness to the apostolic witness. Jesus is the pre-existent Logos, who, John's Gospel says, is with God from the beginning. If this same One is born in the flesh, it is not someone less than God who is born—and Mary is the mother. So the term may trouble some Christians, but I don't think the theology does. In this, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox agree.

**The early theological formulations have been under steady attack for some time. How do you respond, for example, to those who say the early church's conclusions about the Trinity reflect, not timeless truth, but only a Greek intellectual world view?**

The thinking about the Trinity did not begin with philosophy but with the apostolic text, the Scriptures. Paul gives this benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Embedded in this statement (written in the early 50s) is a very early oral tradition that understands God in a tri-fold way. Take another example: In Jesus' baptism, the Father descends to bless the Son by the power of the Spirit. Trinitarian prototypes such as these do not come out of Greek philosophy.

**Are you saying there is no cultural influence?**

Not at all. When the apostolic teaching moved into Greek culture, it used language and symbols appropriate to that culture. But the fundamental notion of the Trinity came before the church ever discussed it in philosophical terms.

Furthermore, even when we do notice the influence of Greek culture in the development of doctrine, we have to recognize the role of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, the Spirit has been at work to guide the church into all truth, as Jesus promised. So it's not accidental that the Spirit has guided the church to formulate a clearer teaching about God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That doesn't mean we have to accept everything the early church adapted from Greek culture. The church in India, for example—which arose in the early centuries and held to the basic theology formulated in Greek culture—had to proclaim the faith in something other than Greek categories!

**Some moderns believe that early church doctrine is hopelessly male-centered, with talk of a Father-God bringing forth a Son. What is your view?**

Actually, the early church teachers thought just the opposite. Augustine taught that God's saving action in his Son Jesus Christ actually honors both male and female. Naturally, an incarnate savior must be born of a woman, for men cannot give birth. If he had become female, however, he would have given a double honor to the female sex—a female bringing forth a female savior. Instead, God becomes male by being born of a female, and so he honors both sexes in the Incarnation.

**Others feel ancient orthodoxy is rigid. Were early creeds theological straitjackets?**

Actually, a great achievement of the early orthodox consensus is its flexibility! Within this orthodoxy, there is enormous cultural flexibility. That's why you find the Nicene Creed, for example, expressed in every language on earth, and in a variety of Christian communions. Southern Baptists, Dutch Reformed, Chinese house-church believers, Mexican Pentecostals, and Rumanian Orthodox all share the same basic Christological and Trinitarian definitions.

**Has studying this abstract doctrine helped you in your own faith?**

My faith has not been helped by abstract doctrine. But it has been helped by the church's hymnody, its liturgy, its pastoral care. Above all, I've been helped by its exegesis, its constant wrestling with Scripture, especially with the New Testament Jesus. The ecumenical community in the first five centuries was constantly making decisions in reference to specific texts of Scripture. It always stood under the authority of Scripture.

So these theological documents, creeds, and treatises are to me lively, relational, and meaningful documents because they wrestle with Scripture and, therefore, with issues we wrestle with today.

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## Heresy in the Early Church: Recommended Resources

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### The Big Picture

The *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, edited by Everett Ferguson (Garland, 1995), covers the bases (and often more) on all the items in this issue. One general work of special value is Stuart G. Hall's *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Eerdmans, 1992).

Crystalline clarity marks Maurice Wiles's *The Christian Fathers* (Oxford, 1982). He shows the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian theology.

Pride of place among textbooks goes to J.N.D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper San Francisco, 1978). Its balance, lucidity, and helpful organization have put countless students in his debt. Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (University of Chicago, 1971) is more impressionistic and written less with beginners in mind. But it is stronger than Kelly in long perspectives and illuminating insights.

### The Big Issue

Central to Christian faith is the person of Christ himself. Volume 1 of *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (A.D. 451)* by Aloys Grillmeier (John Knox, 1975) is massive, and massively learned, but inescapable for those who want to delve deeper.

Church historians continue to dispute Arius's teaching, especially in respect to its intellectual roots and central concerns. Rowan Williams's *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987) is not easy going but remains at center stage. A fine introduction to the mind of the Arians' greatest opponent is available in Alwyn Petterson's *Athanasius* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1995).

### The Big Debate

No book has created waves like Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Its German original (1934) was finally translated into English in 1971 (Fortress). In an age inimical to tradition and authority, it fed the fashion of rehabilitating heresies and heretics by its (strictly historical) thesis. Bauer argued that teachings later condemned (in the later second century onward) were, in fact, dominant in the earliest decades of the church.

The full-scale response by H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (Mowbray, 1954), has not enjoyed the attention it deserves. Subtitled *A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church*, it represents a learned and sophisticated restatement of the traditional view: what became official orthodoxy was taught early on by the majority of church teachers, albeit not in fully developed form.