

# The Surprising Origins of the Trinity Doctrine

Posted on **Jul 22, 2011** by [United Church of God](#) *Estimated reading time: 18 minutes*

*“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).*

Most people assume that everything that bears the label “Christian” must have originated with Jesus Christ and His early followers. But this is definitely not the case. All we have to do is look at the words of Jesus Christ and His apostles to see that this is clearly not true.

The historical record shows that, just as Jesus and the New Testament writers foretold, various heretical ideas and teachers rose up from within the early Church and infiltrated it from without. Christ Himself warned His followers: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name . . . and will deceive many” (Matthew 24:4-5).

You can read many similar warnings in other passages (such as Matthew 24:11; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 2 Timothy 4:2-4; 2 Peter 2:1-2; 1 John 2:18-26; 1 John 4:1-3).

Barely two decades after Christ’s death and resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote that many believers were already “turning away . . . to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). He wrote that he was forced to contend with “false apostles, deceitful workers” who were fraudulently “transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13). One of the major problems he had to deal with was “false brethren” (2 Corinthians 11:26).

By late in the first century, as we see from 3 John 9-10, conditions had grown so dire that false ministers openly refused to receive representatives of the apostle John and were excommunicating true Christians from the Church!

Of this troubling period Edward Gibbon, the famed historian, wrote in his classic work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* of a “dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the church” (1821, Vol. 2, p. 111).

It wasn’t long before true servants of God became a marginalized and scattered minority among those calling themselves Christian. A very different religion, now compromised with many concepts and practices rooted in ancient paganism (such mixing of religious beliefs being known

as *syncretism*, common in the Roman Empire at the time), took hold and transformed the faith founded by Jesus Christ.

Historian Jesse Hurlbut says of this time of transformation: “We name the last generation of the first century, from 68 to 100 A.D., ‘The Age of Shadows,’ partly because the gloom of persecution was over the church, but more especially because of all the periods in the [church’s] history, it is the one about which we know the least. We have no longer the clear light of the Book of Acts to guide us; and no author of that age has filled the blank in the history . . .

“For fifty years after St. Paul’s life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, *we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul*” (*The Story of the Christian Church*, 1970, p. 33).

This “very different” church would grow in power and influence, and within a few short centuries would come to dominate even the mighty Roman Empire!

By the second century, faithful members of the Church, Christ’s “little flock” (Luke 12:32), had largely been scattered by waves of deadly persecution. They held firmly to the biblical truth about Jesus Christ and God the Father, though they were persecuted by the Roman authorities as well as those who professed Christianity but were in reality teaching “another Jesus” and a “different gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6-9).

### **Different ideas about Christ’s divinity lead to conflict**

This was the setting in which the doctrine of the Trinity emerged. In those early decades after Jesus Christ’s ministry, death and resurrection, and spanning the next few centuries, various ideas sprang up as to His exact nature. Was He man? Was He God? Was He God appearing as a man? Was He an illusion? Was He a mere man who became God? Was He created by God the Father, or did He exist eternally with the Father?

All of these ideas had their proponents. The unity of belief of the original Church was lost as new beliefs, many borrowed or adapted from pagan religions, replaced the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Let us be clear that when it comes to the intellectual and theological debates in those early centuries that led to the formulation of the Trinity, the true Church was largely absent from the scene, having been driven underground. (See the chapter “[The Rise of a Counterfeit Christianity](#)” in

our free booklet [\*The Church Jesus Built\*](#) for an overview of this critical period.).

For this reason, in that stormy period we often see debates not between truth and error, but *between one error and a different error*— a fact seldom recognized by many modern scholars yet critical for our understanding.

A classic example of this was the dispute over the nature of Christ that led the Roman emperor Constantine the Great to convene the Council of Nicaea (in modern-day western Turkey) in A.D. 325.

Constantine, although held by many to be the first “Christian” Roman Emperor, was actually a sun-worshiper who was only baptized on his deathbed. During his reign he had his eldest son and his wife murdered. He was also vehemently anti-Semitic, referring in one of his edicts to “the detestable Jewish crowd” and “the customs of these most wicked men”— customs that were in fact rooted in the Bible and practiced by Jesus and the apostles.

As emperor in a period of great tumult within the Roman Empire, Constantine was challenged with keeping the empire unified. He recognized the value of religion in uniting his empire. This was, in fact, one of his primary motivations in accepting and sanctioning the “Christian” religion (which, by this time, had drifted far from the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles and was Christian in name only).

But now Constantine faced a new challenge. Religion researcher Karen Armstrong explains in *A History of God* that “one of the first problems that had to be solved was the doctrine of God . . . a new danger arose from within which split Christians into bitterly warring camps” (1993, p. 106).

#### **Debate over the nature of God at the Council of Nicaea**

Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 as much for political reasons—for unity in the empire—as religious ones. The primary issue at that time came to be known as the Arian controversy.

“In the hope of securing for his throne the support of the growing body of Christians he had shown them considerable favor and it was to his interest to have the church vigorous and united. The Arian controversy was threatening its unity and menacing its strength. He therefore undertook to put an end to the trouble. It was suggested to him, perhaps by the Spanish bishop Hosius, who was influential at court, that if a synod were to meet representing the whole church both east and west, it might be possible to restore harmony.

“Constantine himself of course neither knew nor cared anything about the matter in dispute but he was eager to bring the controversy to a close, and Hosius’ advice appealed to him as sound” (Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1954, Vol. 1, p. 258).

Arius, a priest from Alexandria, Egypt, taught that Christ, because He was the Son of God, must have had a beginning and therefore was a special creation of God. Further, if Jesus was the Son, the Father of necessity must be older.

Opposing the teachings of Arius was Athanasius, a deacon also from Alexandria. His view was an early form of Trinitarianism wherein the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were one but at the same time distinct from each other.

The decision as to which view the church council would accept was to a large extent arbitrary. Karen Armstrong explains in *A History of God*: “When the bishops gathered at Nicaea on May 20, 325, to resolve the crisis, very few would have shared Athanasius’s view of Christ. Most held a position midway between Athanasius and Arius” (p. 110).

As emperor, Constantine was in the unusual position of deciding church doctrine even though he was not really a Christian. (The following year is when he had both his wife and son murdered, as previously mentioned).

Historian Henry Chadwick attests, “Constantine, like his father, worshipped the Unconquered Sun” (*The Early Church*, 1993, p. 122). As to the emperor’s embrace of Christianity, Chadwick admits, “His conversion should not be interpreted as an inward experience of grace . . . It was a military matter. His comprehension of Christian doctrine was never very clear” (p. 125).

Chadwick does say that Constantine’s deathbed baptism itself “implies no doubt about his Christian belief,” it being common for rulers to put off baptism to avoid accountability for things like torture and executing criminals (p. 127). But this justification doesn’t really help the case for the emperor’s conversion being genuine.

Norbert Brox, a professor of church history, confirms that Constantine was never actually a converted Christian: “Constantine did not experience any conversion; there are no signs of a change of faith in him. He never said of himself that he had turned to another god . . . At the time when he turned to Christianity, for him this was *Sol Invictus* (the victorious sun god)” (*A Concise History of the Early Church*, 1996, p. 48).

When it came to the Nicene Council, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* states: “Constantine himself presided, actively guiding the discussions, and personally proposed . . . the crucial formula expressing the relation of Christ to God in the creed issued by the council . . . Overawed by the emperor, the bishops, with two exceptions only, signed the creed, many of them much against their inclination” (1971 edition, Vol. 6, “Constantine,” p. 386).

With the emperor’s approval, the Council rejected the minority view of Arius and, having nothing definitive with which to replace it, approved the view of Athanasius—also a minority view. The church was left in the odd position of officially supporting, from that point forward, the decision made at Nicaea to endorse a belief held by only a minority of those attending.

The groundwork for official acceptance of the Trinity was now laid—but it took more than three centuries after Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection for this unbiblical teaching to emerge!

#### **Nicene decision didn’t end the debate**

The Council of Nicaea did not end the controversy. Karen Armstrong explains: “Athanasius managed to impose his theology on the delegates . . . with the emperor breathing down their necks . . .

“The show of agreement pleased Constantine, who had no understanding of the theological issues, but in fact there was no unanimity at Nicaea. After the council, the bishops went on teaching as they had before, and the Arian crisis continued for another sixty years. Arius and his followers fought back and managed to regain imperial favor. Athanasius was exiled no fewer than five times. It was very difficult to make his creed stick” (pp. 110-111).

The ongoing disagreements were at times violent and bloody. Of the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, noted historian Will Durant writes, “Probably more Christians were slaughtered by Christians in these two years (342-3) than by all the persecutions of Christians by pagans in the history of Rome” (*The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4: The Age of Faith*, 1950, p. 8). Atrociously, while claiming to be Christian many believers fought and slaughtered one another over their differing views of God!

Of the following decades, Professor Harold Brown, cited earlier, writes: “During the middle decades of this century, from 340 to 380, the history of doctrine looks more like the history of court and church intrigues and social unrest . . . The central doctrines hammered out in this period often

appear to have been put through by intrigue or mob violence rather than by the common consent of Christendom led by the Holy Spirit” (p. 119).

### **Debate shifts to the nature of the Holy Spirit**

Disagreements soon centered around another issue, the nature of the Holy Spirit. In that regard, the statement issued at the Council of Nicaea said simply, “We believe in the Holy Spirit.” This “seemed to have been added to Athanasius’s creed almost as an afterthought,” writes Karen Armstrong. “People were confused about the Holy Spirit. Was it simply a synonym for God or was it something more?” (p. 115).

Professor Ryrie, also cited earlier, writes, “In the second half of the fourth century, three theologians from the province of Cappadocia in eastern Asia Minor [today central Turkey] gave definitive shape to the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 65). They proposed an idea that was a step beyond Athanasius’ view—that God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit were coequal and together in one being, yet also distinct from one another. These men—Basil, bishop of Caesarea, his brother Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—were all “trained in Greek philosophy” (Armstrong, p. 113), which no doubt affected their outlook and beliefs (see “Greek Philosophy’s Influence on the Trinity Doctrine,” beginning on page 14).

In their view, as Karen Armstrong explains, “the Trinity only made sense as a mystical or spiritual experience . . . *It was not a logical or intellectual formulation but an imaginative paradigm that confounded reason.* Gregory of Nazianzus made this clear when he explained that contemplation of the Three in One induced a profound and overwhelming emotion that confounded thought and intellectual clarity.

“No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Three than I am carried back into the One. When I think of any of the Three, I think of him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me” (p. 117). Little wonder that, as Armstrong concludes, “For many Western Christians . . . *the Trinity is simply baffling*” (ibid.).

### **Ongoing disputes lead to the Council of Constantinople**

In the year 381, 44 years after Constantine’s death, Emperor Theodosius the Great convened the Council of Constantinople (today Istanbul, Turkey) to resolve these disputes. Gregory of Nazianzus, recently appointed as archbishop of Constantinople, presided over the council and urged the adoption of his view of the Holy Spirit.

Historian Charles Freeman states: “Virtually nothing is known of the theological debates of the council of 381, but Gregory was certainly hoping to get some acceptance of his belief that the Spirit was consubstantial with the Father [meaning that the persons are of the same being, as *substance* in this context denotes individual quality].

“Whether he dealt with the matter clumsily or whether there was simply no chance of consensus, the ‘Macedonians,’ bishops who refused to accept the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, left the council . . . Typically, Gregory berated the bishops for preferring to have a majority rather than simply accepting ‘the Divine Word’ of the Trinity on his authority” (*A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State*, 2008, p. 96).

Gregory soon became ill and had to withdraw from the council. Who would preside now? “So it was that one Nectarius, an elderly city senator who had been a popular prefect in the city as a result of his patronage of the games, but who was still not a baptized Christian, was selected . . . Nectarius appeared to know no theology, and he had to be initiated into the required faith before being baptized and consecrated” (Freeman, pp. 97-98).

Bizarrely, a man who up to this point wasn’t a Christian was appointed to preside over a major church council tasked with determining what it would teach regarding the nature of God!

### **The Trinity becomes official doctrine**

The teaching of the three Cappadocian theologians “made it possible for the Council of Constantinople (381) to affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit, which up to that point *had nowhere been clearly stated, not even in Scripture*” (*The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, “God,” p. 568).

The council adopted a statement that translates into English as, in part: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages . . . And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets . . .” The statement also affirmed belief “in one holy, catholic [meaning in this context universal, whole or complete] and apostolic Church . . .”

With this declaration in 381, which would become known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Trinity as generally understood today became the official belief and teaching concerning the nature of God.

Theology professor Richard Hanson observes that a result of the council's decision "was to reduce the meanings of the word 'God' from a very large selection of alternatives to one only," such that "when Western man today says 'God' he means the one, sole exclusive [Trinitarian] God and nothing else" (*Studies in Christian Antiquity*, 1985, pp. 243-244).

Thus, Emperor Theodosius—who himself had been baptized only a year before convening the council—was, like Constantine nearly six decades earlier, instrumental in establishing major church doctrine. As historian Charles Freeman notes: "It is important to remember that Theodosius had no theological background of his own and that he put in place as dogma a formula containing intractable philosophical problems of which he would have been unaware. In effect, the emperor's laws had silenced the debate when it was still unresolved" (p. 103).

#### **Other beliefs about the nature of God banned**

Now that a decision had been reached, Theodosius would tolerate no dissenting views. He issued his own edict that read: "We now order that all churches are to be handed over to the bishops who profess Father, Son and Holy Spirit of a single majesty, of the same glory, of one splendor, who establish no difference by sacrilegious separation, but (who affirm) the order of the Trinity by recognizing the Persons and uniting the Godhead" (quoted by Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 1999, p. 223).

Another edict from Theodosius went further in demanding adherence to the new teaching: "Let us believe the one deity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity. We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, *in our judgement, they are foolish madmen*, we decree that *they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics*, and shall not presume to give their conventicles [assemblies] the name of churches.

"They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation, and the second the punishment which our authority, in accordance with the will of Heaven, shall decide to inflict" (reproduced in *Documents of the Christian Church*, Henry Bettenson, editor, 1967, p. 22).

Thus we see that a teaching that was foreign to Jesus Christ, never taught by the apostles and unknown to the other biblical writers, was locked into place and the true biblical revelation about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit was locked out. Any who disagreed were, in accordance with

the edicts of the emperor and church authorities, branded heretics and dealt with accordingly.

### **Trinity doctrine decided by trial and error**

This unusual chain of events is why theology professors Anthony and Richard Hanson would summarize the story in their book *Reasonable Belief: A Survey of the Christian Faith* by noting that the adoption of the Trinity doctrine came as a result of “a process of theological exploration which lasted *at least three hundred years* . . . In fact it was a process of trial and error (almost of hit and miss), in which the error was by no means all confined to the unorthodox . . . *It would be foolish to represent the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as having been achieved by any other way*” (1980, p. 172).

They then conclude: “This was a long, confused, process whereby different schools of thought in the Church worked out for themselves, and then tried to impose on others, their answer to the question, ‘How divine is Jesus Christ?’ . . . *If ever there was a controversy decided by the method of trial and error, it was this one*” (p. 175).

Anglican churchman and Oxford University lecturer K.E. Kirk revealingly writes of the adoption of the doctrine of the Trinity: “The theological and philosophical vindication of the divinity of the Spirit begins in the fourth century; we naturally turn to the writers of that period *to discover what grounds they have for their belief*. To our surprise, *we are forced to admit that they have none* . . .

“*This failure of Christian theology . . . to produce logical justification of the cardinal point in its trinitarian doctrine* is of the greatest possible significance. We are forced, even before turning to the question of the vindication of the doctrine by experience, to ask ourselves *whether theology or philosophy has ever produced any reasons why its belief should be Trinitarian*” (“The Evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” published in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, A.E.J. Rawlinson, editor, 1928, pp. 221-222).

### **Why believe a teaching that isn't biblical?**

This, in brief, is the amazing story of how the doctrine of the Trinity came to be introduced—and how those who refused to accept it came to be branded as heretics or unbelievers.

But should we really base our view of God on a doctrine that isn't spelled out in the Bible, that wasn't formalized until three centuries after the time of Jesus Christ and the apostles, that was debated and argued for decades (not to mention for centuries since), that was imposed by religious

councils presided over by novices or nonbelievers and that was “decided by the method of trial and error”?

*Of course not.* We should instead look to the Word of God—not to ideas of men—to see how our Creator reveals Himself!

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