



ENVISIONING THE TRINITY THE SHAPING OF A DOCTRINE

No one has ever claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity is easy to understand. So we may find it helpful at the outset to keep in mind several important things.

The first thing we need to consider is the doctrine's history. The doctrine of the Trinity is not expressly stated in the Bible. Few doctrines are. This is an elementary but significant point because it tells us we have to go beyond the time of the New Testament if we want to understand this doctrine's origins.

By around AD 200 Christian writers were using several metaphors to talk about the relation of the Father to the Son and Spirit. Irenaeus, who lived in the late second century, compared the Son and Spirit to the hands the Father uses to act in the world. Other writers began using special terms

to think about the Father, Son, and Spirit. Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 220), for instance, introduced the Latin term *persona*. This term came from the theater, where it referred to the mask actors would sometimes wear. Later the word came to signify the actor's role onstage. For Tertullian, Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguished by the roles they play in salvation. However, these metaphors and specific terms did not yet constitute the doctrine of the Trinity. They simply indicated that Christians were beginning to think about the issues.

One very important early writer who had a large impact on Trinitarian thinking was Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254). Origen spent a lot of time trying to understand the Bible's teaching about Jesus. He was especially intrigued by the idea, presented in John's gospel, of the Father begetting the Son. Origen offered an interpretation of this idea that many later writers liked. Although, he observed, creatures beget one another within time, the Father begot the Son in eternity, that is, before the creation of the world and outside of time. If the Father had begotten the Son within time, he argued, then the Son would have had a beginning in time—in other words, the Son would be one of God's creations. Origen believed it was essential to affirm that the Son is not a creature but is divine and eternal.

At the same time, Origen was concerned to do justice to those biblical passages in which Jesus was portrayed as being subordinate to the Father—as when, in John’s gospel, Jesus declared that the Father was greater than he (John 14:28). Taking these passages at face value, Origen asserted that within the Trinity there is an order: the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son. Much of the later discussions surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity were about the implications of Origen’s teaching.

The events that led to the doctrine began with a dispute in Alexandria, Egypt, between a priest, Arius (ca. 250-336), and his bishop, Alexander (d. 326). The dispute was about Jesus Christ and can be summarized in four questions:

1. Does Jesus Christ truly and fully know the Father? Only if the answer is yes can he function as the revelation and revealer of the Father. Arius argued that Jesus Christ is one of God’s creations and thus is unable to perfectly know the Father.
2. How should the New Testament be interpreted when it describes Jesus? In some places Jesus is portrayed as human—getting thirsty, being tempted, and dying. In other places Jesus is portrayed as divine. How are we to reconcile those passages?

3. Is the Son subordinate to the Father? Arius agreed with Origen that the Son is subordinate to the Father; however, this became an extremely important and exaggerated point for Arius, while it was a minor point for Origen.
4. What does “beget” mean for the Son? Arius disagreed with Origen about the Son being begotten in eternity. Arius held that Jesus the Son was begotten in time and was therefore one of God’s creations.

We can see, then, that the debate about the Trinity began as a debate about Jesus Christ and the relation of Jesus to God the Father.

The debate was bitter and divisive. Arius found some supporters as well as some opponents. Many didn’t know what to think about this debate and didn’t take a firm stand for or against Arius. At length, the political authorities stepped in. The Roman emperor at the time was Constantine. He was not a Christian but was generous to the church. More important, he understood that the debate about the Trinity could bring about political disruption. So he convened a meeting of bishops in Nicaea (present-day Turkey) in 325. Such a meeting of bishops for official purposes is called a council. The council at Nicaea has been called an *ecumenical* council because it was thought to

represent the entire world (*oikoumenē* is the Greek word for “inhabited world”).

The council rejected Arius’ theology. But getting agreement on an affirmative doctrine of the Trinity proved difficult. After some debate, a statement was drafted that most of the bishops were willing to live with. This statement is today referred to as the Nicene Creed. Omitting the non-Trinitarian portions, it reads as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of everything seen and unseen. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the son of God, the only begotten from the Father, from the essence of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same essence as the Father, from whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth. . . . And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit. The holy catholic and apostolic church curses those who say that there was [a time] before [the Son] existed and that he did not exist before he was begotten and that he came to be from nonbeing, or who claim that the son of God is of a different being or essence or is something created, or changeable in any way.²

This statement strongly affirms the full divinity of the Son. It also contains some curses on anyone who would agree with Arius that the Son

was one of God's creations. At the same time, it contains some special wording (especially "of one substance with the Father") that some found disturbing or difficult to understand.³

The Nicene Creed did not end the debate about the Trinity. Here's a condensed version of what happened next: the Arians didn't go away, there was more debate about Jesus' human nature, and new controversies arose about the Holy Spirit. In an attempt to resolve the new issues and continuing controversy, a second council was convened, this time at Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey) in 381.

This council produced a creed that largely repeated the Nicene Creed. However, the council recognized that the Nicene Creed said little about the Holy Spirit, so its creed has more to say on this point. Here is the second creed, once again omitting the non-Trinitarian portions:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of everything seen and unseen. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of the Father, who was begotten from the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same essence as the Father, from whom all things were made. . . . And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the life-maker, who proceeds from the

Father, who is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, who spoke through the prophets.⁴

This is the creed that is usually recited in churches. It is mistakenly referred to as the Nicene Creed, which normally is *not* recited. But saying, “Constantinopolitan Creed,” is a mouthful, so since the second creed largely reproduces the first, we just call it the Nicene Creed.

With these two creeds, the church’s doctrine of the Trinity was established. Except for changes in wording, it has remained substantially the same since 381 for most churches.⁵