

# The Formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity

by Lynnford Beachy



**A History of the Formulation of  
the Doctrine of the Trinity  
within Orthodox Christianity**



# The Formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity has not always been a part of Christian teaching. In fact, this doctrine was not formally stated until the fourth century. It is very interesting to learn about the history of this doctrine. This paper is designed to show how the doctrine began to be discussed, the events that led up to a council regarding it, and the way in which it was finally accepted.

Much of the history you are about to learn is taken from a book entitled *The Two Republics*, written by A. T. Jones and published in 1891 by The Review and Herald Publishing Company, Battle Creek, Michigan. Unless otherwise noted, all the quotations in this paper are taken from this book. The page numbers will be given for reference. All of my own writing will be set in a different type style.

First, let us look at how the controversy began. The controversy is often called “the Arian controversy.” We pick up the story by looking at an incident that occurred in the city of Alexandria in the early part of the fourth century.

“A certain Alexander was bishop of Alexandria. Arius was a presbyter in charge of a parish church in the same city. Alexander attempted to explain ‘the unity of the Holy Trinity.’ Arius dissented from the views set forth by Alexander. A sort of synod of the presbyters of the city was called, and the question was discussed. Both sides claimed the victory, and the controversy spread. Then Alexander convened a council of a hundred bishops, by the majority of which the views of Alexander were endorsed. Upon this, Arius was commanded to abandon his own opinions, and adopt Alexander’s. Arius refused, and Alexander excommunicated him and all who held with him in opinion, of whom there were a considerable number of bishops and other clergy, and many of the people.” (Page 332)

As you can see, this was no small controversy.

## **What was the controversy all about?**

“Whether the Son of God, therefore, is of the same substance, or only of like substance, with the Father, was the question in dispute. The controversy was carried on in Greek, and as expressed in Greek the whole

question turned upon a single letter. The word which expressed Alexander's belief, is *Homoousion*. The word which expressed the belief of Arius, is *Homoiousion*. One of the words has two 'i's' in it, and the other has but one; but why the word should or should not have that additional 'i,' neither party could ever exactly determine. Even Athanasius himself, who succeeded Alexander in the bishopric of Alexandria, and transcended him in every other quality, 'has candidly confessed that whenever he forced his understanding to meditate upon the divinity of the Logos, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts.'—*Gibbon 'Decline and Fall,' chap. v, par. i.*" (Page 334)

It is very interesting to note that the main perpetrator of Alexander's views did not even understand the things which he was so adamant that others accept. Can it be wondered how so many people were reluctant to accept these new views about God?

Let's look at what Alexander's ideas entailed.

"Alexander declared:—'The Son is immutable and unchangeable, all-sufficient and perfect, like the Father, **differing only in this one respect, that the Father is unbegotten.** He is the exact image of His Father. **Everything is found in the image which exists in its archetype [original]; and it was this that our Lord taught when He said, 'My Father is greater than I.'** And accordingly we believe that the Son **proceeded from the Father;** for He is the reflection of the glory of the Father, and the figure of His substance. But let no one be led from this to the supposition that the Son is unbegotten, as is believed by some who are deficient in intellectual power: for to say that He was, that He has always been, and that He existed before all ages, is not to say that He is unbegotten.'" (Page 333)

According to Alexander, the only difference between the Father and Son is that the Son was begotten. In explaining how the Son was begotten, Alexander quotes Jesus in saying that He proceeded from the Father. Yet in his final statement Alexander asserts concerning the Son, "that He has always been." Somehow he struggled to reconcile the idea of the Son being begotten with the new idea that He has always existed. We will examine this new idea later in this paper.

Let us now look at what Arius taught.

"Arius said:—'We say and believe, and have taught, and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way unbegotten, even in part; and that He does not derive His subsistence from any matter; but that by His

own will and counsel He has subsisted before time, and before ages, as perfect God, and only begotten and unchangeable, and that He existed not before He was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established. For He was not unbegotten. **We are persecuted because we say that the Son had a beginning, but that God was without beginning.** This is really the cause of our persecution, and likewise, because we say He is from nothing. And this we say, because He is neither part of God, nor of any subjacent matter.” (Page 333)

It is interesting to note that Arius used the word “created” when referring to the Son of God, but as you can see from the preceding statement, he understood that Christ was begotten of His Father, and therefore had a beginning. So Arius actually believed that Christ was “the only begotten Son of God.”

### **The spread of the controversy**

“Arius for himself wrote a book entitled ‘Thalia,’—Songs of Joy—a **collection of songs in which he set forth his views.** This expedient took well, for in the excited state of the parties, his doctrinal songs were hummed everywhere. Alexander on his part, likewise, sent circular letters to the principal bishops round about. The controversy spread everywhere, and as it spread, it deepened.” (Page 332)

“**Sailors, millers, and travelers sang the disputed doctrines at their occupations or on their journeys.** Every corner, every alley of the city [this was said afterwards of Constantinople, but must have been still more true of Alexandria] was full of these discussions—the streets, the market-places, the drapers, the money-changers, the victualers. Ask a man ‘how many oboli?’ he answers by dogmatizing on generated and ungenerated being. **Inquire the price of bread, and you are told, ‘The Son is subordinate to the Father.’** Ask if the bath is ready, and you are told, ‘The Son arose out of nothing.’—*Stanley ‘History of the Eastern Church,’ Lecture iii, par. 10.*

“Constantine’s golden dream of a united Christendom was again grievously disturbed.” (Page 337)

In an effort to bring the two parties together Constantine wrote a long letter to Arius and Alexander expressing his desire of having a united kingdom. This letter, however, had the opposite effect, because it caused each party to be more eager than ever to gain the emperor’s approval. The contention was deepened rather than abated.

## The Council of Nicaea

In an attempt to settle the matter Constantine called a general council in A. D. 325 held in a city called Nice, thus known as “The Council of Nicaea.” There were 318 bishops present, not including an innumerable company of deacons, presbyters, acolytes, and other attendants.

“Then the great question that had caused the calling of the council was taken up. **There were three parties in the council—those who sided with Alexander, those who sided with Arius, and those who were non-committal, or, through hope of being mediators, held the middle ground.** Arius, not being a bishop, could not hold an official seat in the council, but he had come at the express command of Constantine, and ‘was frequently called upon to express his opinions.’ Athanasius, who was more responsible for the present condition of the dispute than was Alexander himself, though only a deacon, came with his bishop Alexander. He, likewise, though not entitled to an official place in the council, played not a small part in the discussion and in bringing about the final result of the council.

“The party of Alexander and Athanasius, it was soon discovered, could depend upon the majority of the council; **and they determined to use this power in the formulation of such a statement of doctrine as would suit themselves first, and if it should be found impossible for the party of Arius honestly to accept it, so much the better they would be pleased.**

“In the discussion, some of the songs which Arius had written, were read. As soon as Alexander’s party heard them, they threw up their hands in horror, and then clapped them upon their ears and shut their eyes, that they might not be defiled with the fearful heresy.” (Page 347)

Notice that this same response was used by a group of people in the Bible. Stephen had just given a long speech on Jewish history when he exclaimed that they were guilty of murdering the Son of God. *“Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul.”* (Acts 7:57, 58)

“Next the draft of a creed was brought in, signed by eighteen bishops of the party of Arius; but it was not suffered to exist long enough for anybody ever to obtain a copy. Their opponents broke into a wild uproar, tore the document to pieces, and expelled Arius from the assembly.

## **A creed introduced by Eusebius**

“Next, Eusebius of Cæsarea,—Constantine’s panegyrist—thought to bring the parties together by **presenting a creed that had been largely in use before this dispute ever arose. He stated that this confession of faith was one which he had learned in his childhood, from the bishop of Cæsarea, and one which he accepted at his baptism, and which he had taught through his whole career, both as a presbyter and as a bishop.** As an additional argument, and one which he intended to be of great weight in the council, he declared that ‘it had been approved by the emperor, the beloved of heaven, who had already seen it.’ It read as follows:—

“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things both visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life, **the only begotten Son, the First-born of every creature, begotten of the Father before all worlds,** by whom also all things were made. Who for our salvation was made flesh, and lived amongst men, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the Father, and shall come in glory to judge the quick and the dead. And we believe in 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: as also our Lord sending forth His own disciples to preach, said, ‘Go and teach all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:’ concerning which things we affirm that it is so, and that we so think, and that it has long so been held, and that we remain steadfast to death for this faith, anathematizing every godless heresy. That we have thought these things from our heart and soul, from the time that we have known ourselves, and that we now think and say thus in truth, we testify in the **name of Almighty God, and of our Lord Jesus Christ,** being able to prove even by demonstration, and to persuade you that in the past times also thus we believed and preached.” (Pages 347, 348)

Eusebius of Cæsarea, the man who presented this creed, wrote a book entitled Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History. In this book, he states his beliefs, which are the beliefs he learned as a child, which he taught throughout his career. He states:

“For as no one hath known the Father, but the Son, so no one on the other hand, can know the Son fully, but the Father alone, **by whom He was begotten.** For who but the Father hath thoroughly understood that Light which existed before the world was—that intellectual and substantial wisdom, and that living Word which in the beginning was with the Father, before all creation and any production visible or invisible, **the**

**first and only offspring of God**, the prince and leader of the spiritual and immortal host of heaven, the angel of the mighty council, the agent to execute the Father's secret will, the maker of all things with the Father, **the second cause of the universe next to the Father**, the true and only Son of the Father, and the Lord and God and King of all created things, **who has received power, and dominion with divinity itself, and power and honour from the Father...** Where he introduces **the Father and maker as the Ruler of all, commanding with His sovereign nod, but the divine word as next to Him, the very same that is proclaimed to us, as ministering to His Father's commands...** The Son Himself, however, by no means indifferent to the worship of the Father, is appointed to teach the knowledge of the Father to all... Of Him, Moses obviously speaks as **the second after the Father,... intrusted with the second rank of sovereignty and rule over all**, 'the captain of the Lord's host,...'" (*Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, pages 15-17)

It is clear that Eusebius of Cæsarea understood that Christ was begotten (born) by the Father before all things. In his book he also quotes Proverbs 8:22-30 to prove his point.

In the back of the book just mentioned, there are several letters written shortly after the Council of Nicaea. I will share portions of some of them with you. Here is a portion of a letter written by Eusebius of Nicomedia: (Please note that this is a different Eusebius than the one from Cæsarea.)

"We have never heard, my Lord, of two beings unbegotten, nor of one divided into two; nor have we learnt or believed that He could suffer any thing corporeal, but that **there is one unbegotten, and another truly from Him,... We believe not only that His origin cannot be explained in words, but that it cannot be comprehended,...**" (Letter written by Eusebius of Nicomedia—*A Historical View of the Council of Nice*, by Isaac Boyle, page 41)

The strange idea that the Father and the Son were both unbegotten (without beginning) was new to the people at that time. They had always understood that there is one unbegotten (without beginning) and another begotten by Him (with a beginning). This was the common understanding of the majority of people at the time of, and prior to, the Council of Nicaea.

Let's carry on with the events of the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius of Cæsarea had just presented the creed which had been largely used prior to the controversy.



## **The party of Arius accepts the creed**

“As soon as this [the statement of beliefs by Eusebius] was read in the council, the party of Arius all signified their willingness to subscribe to it. But this did not suit the party of Alexander and Athanasius; it was rather the very thing that they did not want, for ‘they were determined to find some form of words which no Arian could receive.’” (Page 348)

Please notice that the Arians were in harmony with the teachings of Christians prior to the Council of Nicaea as presented in Eusebius’s creed. Yet this did not suit the party of Alexander.

“They hunted about, therefore, for some point or some word, upon which they could reject it. It will be noticed that this creed says nothing about the substance of the Son of God, while that was the very question which had brought the council together. Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, was chief of the Arians who held seats in the council. At this point a letter was brought forth which he had formerly written, in which he had stated that ‘to assert the Son to be uncreated, would be to say that he was ‘of one substance’—*Homoousion*—with the Father, and to say that ‘He was of one substance’ was a proposition evidently absurd.’

“This gave to the party of Alexander and Athanasius the very opportunity which they desired; it supplied from the opposite party the very word upon which they had all the time insisted, and one of the chiefs of that party had declared that the use of the word in that connection was evidently absurd. If they, therefore, should insist upon the use of that very word, it would certainly exclude the Arian party. ‘The letter produced a violent excitement. There was the very test of which they were in search; the letter was torn in pieces to mark their indignation, and **the phrase which he had pledged himself to reject became the phrase which they pledged themselves to adopt.**’—Stanley ‘*History of the Eastern Church,*’ *Lecture iii, par. 22.*” (Page 349)

## **Alexander’s party attempts to add to the creed**

“As Constantine had approved the creed already read by Eusebius, the question of the party of Alexander now was whether he would approve it with the addition of this word, and the hopes of both parties now hung trembling upon the emperor. Hosius and his associates, having the last consultation with him, brought him over to their side. **At the next meeting of the assembly, he again presented the creed of Eusebius, approved it, and called upon all to adopt it.** Seeing, however, that the

majority would not accept the creed of Eusebius as it was, Constantine decided to ‘gain the assent of the orthodox, that is, the most powerful, part of the assembly,’ by inserting the disputed word. ‘He trusted that by this insertion they might be gained, and yet that, under the pressure of fear and favor, the others might not be altogether repelled. He therefore took the course the most likely to secure this result, and professed himself the patron and also the interpreter of the new phrase.’—*Stanley ‘History of the Eastern Church,’ Lecture iii, par. 28.*

“*Constantine ordered the addition of the disputed word.* The party of Alexander and Athanasius, now assured of the authority of the emperor, required the addition of other phrases to the same purpose, so that when the creed was finally written out in full, it read as follows:—

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things both visible and invisible.

“And in one Lord Jesus Christ, **the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten**, that is to say, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, **begotten, not made**, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down, and was made flesh, and was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, went up into the heavens, and is to come again to judge the quick and dead.

“And in the Holy Ghost.

“But those that say, ‘There was when He was not,’ and ‘Before He was begotten He was not, and that He came into existence from what was not,’ or who profess that the Son of God is of a different person or ‘substance.’ or that He is created, or changeable, or variable, are anathematized by the Catholic Church.’

“Thus came the original Nicene Creed.” (Pages 349, 350)

## **Further alterations to the creed**

This creed has been changed from its original. Please notice the changes that were made. Here is a copy of the Nicene Creed as it reads today:

“We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, **the Only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father** [Original reads: the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten], God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, **of one Being with the Father** [Original reads: that is to say, of the substance of the Father].

Through Him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven: **by the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary** [Added in], and became man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried.” (*The Ordinary of the Mass*)

Catholics define the term “eternally begotten” in this way:

“The Christian belief is that the Christ of history is the Son of God, eternally begotten by one ceaseless action from the Father...” (*Tell Us About God... Who Is He?*, page 30, by the Knights of Columbus)

This is what the Catholic Church teaches today. They claim that the term, “eternally begotten” means that Christ was begotten of the Father in one ceaseless action. They claim that Christ has been in the process of being begotten forever in the past, is still being begotten, and will continue to be begotten forever in the future. They apparently adopted this idea in an attempt to reconcile this new teaching of Christ always existing with the plain Bible statements that Christ was begotten of His Father.

Notice this interesting quote taken from a letter written by Arius.

“He has even expelled us from the city as atheists, because we do not assent to such **declarations as follow, publicly uttered by him.** ‘God is always, the Son is always. The Father and the Son are co-existent. **The Son, unbegotten, co-exists with God, and is always begotten: without being begotten, He is begotten:** [Footnote: **There appears to have been some confusion of ideas in the mind of the bishop, if his words are correctly reported by Arius. It is probable that this passage is intended to express what is called the ‘eternal generation’ of the Son,** a phrase, however, which, itself, may not be considered as remarkably perspicuous (distinct, plain)]: nor does God precede the Son in thought, nor by a single moment. Always God, always the Son. From God himself the Son exists.’ Because **Eusebius, your brother, bishop of Cæsarea,** and Theodotus and Paulinus, Athanasius, Gregorius and Aetius, **and all the bishops of the East, affirm, that God, who is without a beginning, existed before the Son,** they have been condemned...” (Letter by Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia; taken from *A Historical View of the Council of Nice with a Translation of Documents*, by Isaac Boyle, pages 39, 40.)

As you can see, the new idea that Christ has existed as long as the Father was not generally accepted before the Council of Nicaea, nor after the council did all Christians accept this new idea.

Let us also notice another change that has been made to the Nicene Creed since the time it was originally written.

The term “of one Being with the Father” was added into the new creed, describing their current belief that the Father and the Son are the same being.

St. Austin wrote,

“The Son is one Person, and the Father is another; they do not, however, constitute two Beings, but the Father is the same Being that the Son is, that is, the only true God.” (*Tract. 36, in Joann*)

When the Nicene Creed was first signed by those at the council, some were specifically concerned with the term **“of the substance of the Father.”** They were concerned that some may take this to mean that the Father and Son are the same Being. Please notice the following quotation taken from a letter written by Eusebius of Cæsarea.

“When this form was dictated by the prelates, **their expressions ‘of the substance of the Father,’ and ‘consubstantial with the Father,’ were not suffered to pass without examination.** Hence, therefore, several questions arose, and answers were made, and **the sense of these terms was carefully considered. They admitted that the words ‘of the substance’ signified that the Son was of the Father, but not as a part of the Father [the same Being]. We thought it well to assent to this explanation, as conveying the pious doctrine, that the Son was of the Father; but not, however, a part of the Father.** We therefore agreed to this opinion; nor did we reject the word consubstantial, having in view the promotion of peace, and being anxious to avoid a departure from the right belief. For the same reason, we approved also of the words ‘begotten, not made,’ since the word make, they said, was common to the other creatures which were made by the Son, and to which He has nothing similar; and that therefore He is not made like those who were created by Himself, but is of a more excellent substance than any created being. **The divine oracles inform us, that He was of the Father, by a mode of generation, which can neither be conceived nor expressed by any created intelligence....**

**“But by the expression ‘consubstantial with the Father’ nothing else is intended, than that the Son of God has no similitude with created beings, but resembles in all things the Father only, by whom He was begotten,** and that He is of no other substance or essence than that of the Father. The proposition being thus explained, we thought that we might justly accede to it;...

“We finally embraced, without further contention, those expressions which were found to be unexceptionable, when, on a candid examination of the sense of the words, **it appeared that they entirely agreed with those admitted by ourselves, in the exposition of faith which we at first proposed.**” (Taken from a letter written by Eusebius Pamphilus of Cæsarea to the church at Cæsarea in *A Historical View of the Council of Nice with a Translation of Documents*, pages 44-46 by Isaac Boyle.)

It is very clear that Eusebius of Cæsarea did not believe that Christ was a created being in any way but that he was begotten of His Father, thus making Him of a much higher nature than any created being. It is also interesting to notice that Eusebius of Cæsarea was writing to Arians, defending his signing of the creed. This view did not seem to be contrary to the beliefs of the Arians. Also, his belief that Christ was begotten rather than created was accepted by the party of the Athanasians as suitable to allow him to continue in his position as a bishop.

Eusebius wrote that it appeared to him, along with his associates, as if the terms “of the substance of the Father” and “consubstantial with the Father” entirely agreed with what Eusebius had first brought out as a statement of beliefs, which beliefs the Arians all agreed to subscribe to.

The disputed terms were added to the creed, and depending upon the definition of those terms, even some of those of the Arian persuasion could agree to the creed. Yet with the terms being added to the creed all it took was a revision of the definitions of the terms at a later date to come up with the teachings which the Catholic Church holds today.

## **The acceptance of the new creed**

Now back to the description of the council found in *The Two Republics*. The original Nicene Creed was just read before the assembly.

“Thus came the original Nicene Creed. Constantine’s influence carried with it many in the council, but seventeen bishops refused to subscribe to it. **The emperor then commanded all to sign it under penalty of banishment.** This brought to terms all of them but five. **Eusebius of Cæsarea, the panegyrist and one of the counselors of Constantine, took a whole day to ‘deliberate.’ In his deliberation he consulted the emperor, who so explained the term *Homoousion* that it could be understood as *Homoiousion*. He ‘declared that the word, as he**

**understood it, involved no such material unity of the persons of the Godhead as Eusebius feared might be deduced from it.’—Stanley ‘History of the Eastern Church,’ Lecture iii, par. 34. In this sense, therefore, Eusebius adopted the test, and subscribed to the creed.”** (Page 350)

Concerning the difference between the two terms that caused the controversy, *homoiosian* (of like substance) and *homoousian* (of the same substance), Benjamin G. Wilkinson wrote the following:

“Nevertheless, those who would think in terms of *homoiosian* or ‘similar,’ instead of *homoousian*, or ‘identical,’ were promptly labeled as heretics and Arians by the clergy. Yet when the emperor, Constantine, in full assembly of the Council of Nicaea, asked Hosius, the presiding bishop, what the difference was between the two terms, Hosius replied that they were both alike. At this all but a few bishops broke out into laughter and teased the chairman with heresy.” (Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant*, page 92)

The dispute involved definitions of words not even found in the Bible. The difference of the words were so minor that it was hard to determine just what the difference was. Even the leading supporter of the Arian view was willing to subscribe to the main body of the new creed.

“Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nice subscribed to the body of the creed, but refused to subscribe to the curse which it pronounced upon the Arian doctrines. **Sentence of banishment was pronounced; then they yielded and subscribed,** yet they were removed from their bishoprics, and Catholics were put in their places. Two of the other bishops, however,—Theonas of Marmarica in Libya, and Secundus of Ptolemais,-absolutely refused from first to last to sign the creed, and they were banished. As for Arius, he seems to have departed from Nice soon after he was expelled from the council. Sentence of banishment was pronounced against him with the others. But as he was the chief expositor of the condemned doctrines, Constantine published against him the following edict:—

“Victor Constantine Maximus Augustus, to the bishops and people: Since Arius has imitated wicked and impious persons, it is just that he should undergo the like ignominy. Wherefore as Porphyry, that enemy of piety, for having composed licentious treatises against religion, found a suitable recompense, and such as thenceforth branded him with infamy overwhelming him with deserved reproach, his impious writings also having been destroyed; so now it seems fit both that Arius and such as hold his

sentiments should be denominated Porphyrians, that they may take their appellation from those whose conduct they have imitated. **And in addition to this, if any treatise composed by Arius should be discovered, let it be consigned to the flames, in order that not only his depraved doctrine may be suppressed, but also that no memorial of him may be by any means left. This therefore I decree, that if any one shall be detected in concealing a book compiled by Arius, and shall not instantly bring it forward and burn it, the penalty for this offense shall be death; for immediately after conviction the criminal shall suffer capital punishment. May God preserve you.**" (Pages 350, 351)

### **An attempt to cover up history**

“His [Arius] book, ‘Thalia,’ was burnt on the spot; and this example was so generally followed, that it became a very rare work.’—*Stanley ‘History of the Eastern Church,’ Lecture iv, par. 39.* The decree banishing Arius was shortly so modified as simply to prohibit his returning to Alexandria.” (Page 351)

The Catholic Church exerted all her power to destroy any records of what Arius believed. The only records we have are those that either fell through the hands of the Catholic power, or those which they have chosen to keep, whether in their original form or altered by them.

“An erroneous charge was circulated that all who were called Arians believed that Christ was a created being. [Footnote: **It is doubtful if many believed Christ to be a created being. Generally, those evangelical bodies who opposed the papacy and who were branded as Arians confessed both the divinity of Christ and that He was begotten, not created, by the Father.** They recoiled from other extreme deductions and speculations concerning the Godhead.]” (Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant*, page 92)

“Whether the teachings of Arius were such as are usually represented to us or not, who can say? Phillipus Limborch doubts that Arius himself ever held that Christ was created instead of being begotten [Footnote: Limborch, *The History of the Inquisition*, page 95].” (Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant*, page 142)

It is interesting that the history of the Arian controversy has been so well hidden that it is hard to determine just what Arius believed. Yet it seems doubtful that all the accusations brought against Arius and those of like persuasion are accurate. It had become the general rule to brand all those who did not subscribe to the Trinity doctrine as Arians. Since it is commonly thought that Arians believe that Christ is



a created being, and thus not divine, it has been the continual accusation that if you deny the Trinity doctrine, you believe that Christ is a created being, and deny the divinity of Christ. This accusation, when applied to those who dissented with the accepted teachings of the Catholic Church on this subject, has seldom been accurate.

### **The events following the Council of Nicaea**

“As before remarked, those who against their will had subscribed to the creed of the Council of Nice, were determined to redeem themselves as soon as possible, and by whatever means it could be accomplished. And they did accomplish it. The story is curious, and the lessons which it teaches are valuable...

“In A. D. 327 died Constantine’s sister, Constantia. She had held with the Arian party, having an Arian presbyter as her spiritual adviser. This presbyter had convinced her that Arius had been unjustly condemned by the council. In her dying moments ‘she entreated the emperor to reconsider the justice of the sentence against that innocent, as she declared, and misrepresented man.’ Constantine soon afterward sent a message to Arius, recalling him from banishment, and promising to send him back to Alexandria. Arius came and presented a confession of faith which proved satisfactory to the emperor. About the same time Constantine also restored to favor the other two leading Arians, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Ptolemais. ‘They returned in triumph to their dioceses, and ejected the bishops who had been appointed to their place.’—*Milman ‘History of Christianity,’ book iii. chap. iv, par. 21.* Hosius having returned to his place in Spain, Constantine fell under strong Arian influences, and the Arian bishops began to use him for the accomplishment of their purposes.

“In A. D. 328, Constantine made a journey to Jerusalem to dedicate the church that he had built there, and Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis both accompanied him.” (Pages 355, 356)

The Arians had finally won the support of Constantine, and Constantine was now even traveling around the empire with the chief theologians in the Arian party. The Arian influences upon Constantine were very strong indeed. They were successful in sending Athanasius into exile five different times by the power of the emperor.

“Athanasius was again condemned, and banished to Treves in Gaul, February, A. D. 336.

“The return of Arius to Alexandria was the cause of continued tumult, and he was called to Constantinople. At the request of the emperor, Arius



presented a new confession of faith, which proved satisfactory, and Constantine commanded the bishop of Constantinople to receive Arius to the fellowship of the church on a day of public worship—it happened to be a Sabbath (Saturday)—on which day, as well as Sunday, public worship was held at Constantinople.’—*Neander ‘History of the Christian Religion and Church,’ Vol. ii, Section Fourth, div. ii, a, par. 30.* The bishop absolutely refused to admit him. The Arians, under the authority of the emperor, threatened that the next day, Sunday, they would force their way into the church, and compel the admission of Arius to full membership in good and regular standing. Upon this the Athanasian party took refuge in ‘prayer;’ **the bishop prayed earnestly that, rather than the church should be so disgraced, Arius might die; and, naturally enough, Arius died on the evening of the same day.** ‘In Constantinople, where men were familiar with Asiatic crimes, **there was more than a suspicion of poison.** But when Alexander’s party proclaimed that his prayer had been answered, they forgot what then that prayer must have been, and that the difference is little between praying for the death of a man and compassing it.’—*Draper ‘Intellectual Development of Europe,’ chap ix, par. 39.*” (Pages 358, 359)

“Petition after petition was presented to Constantine for the return of Athanasius to his place in Alexandria, but the emperor steadily denounced him as proud, turbulent, obstinate, and intractable, and refused all petitions. In 337, in the presence of death, **Constantine was baptized by an Arian bishop; and thus closed the life of him** upon whom a grateful church has bestowed the title of ‘the Great,’ though, ‘tested by character, indeed, he stands among the lowest of all those to whom the epithet has in ancient or modern times been applied.’—‘Encyclopedia Britannica,’ Article ‘Constantine.’” (Page 359)

## **New emperors arise**

“Constantine was succeeded by his three sons; Constantine, aged twenty-one years; Constantius, aged twenty; and Constans, aged seventeen. They apportioned the empire amongst themselves. Constantine II had Constantinople and some portions of the West, with pre-eminence of rank; Constantius obtained Thrace, Egypt, and all the East; and Constans held the greater part of the West. **Constantius was a zealous Arian, Constantine and Constans were no less zealous Catholics.**” (Page 359)

“In this same year [A. D. 340] Constantine II was killed in a war with his brother Constans. This left the empire and the religion to the two brothers—Constantius in Constantinople and the East, Constans in the West. **In the dominions of Constans all Arians were heretics; in the dominions of Constantius all Catholics were heretics. The religious war continued, and increased in violence.**” (Page 360)

“In February, A. D. 350, Constans was murdered by the usurper Magnentius, and in 353 Constantius became sole emperor by the final defeat and death of the usurper. Constantius no sooner felt himself assured of the sole imperial authority, than **he determined to execute vengeance upon Athanasius, and make the Arian doctrine the religion of the whole empire.** Yet he proposed to accomplish this only in orthodox fashion, through a general council. As it was thus that his father had established the Athanasian doctrine, which was held by all the Catholics to be strictly orthodox, to establish the Arian doctrine by a like process, assuredly could be no less orthodox.” (Page 366)

“The officers immediately began with the greatest possible secrecy to gather the necessary troops into the city. Twenty-three days were thus spent, and a force of five thousand troops held possession of the most important parts of the city. The night before a solemn festival day of the church, Athanasius was conducting the services in the church of St. Theonas. Suddenly, at midnight, there was all about the church the sound of trumpets, the rushing of horses, and the clash of arms; the doors were burst open, and with the discharge of a cloud of arrows, the soldiers, with drawn swords, poured in to arrest Athanasius. ‘The cries of the wounded, the groans of those who were trampled down in attempting to force their way out through the soldiery, the shouts of the assailants, mingled in wild and melancholy uproar.’—*Milman ‘History of Christianity,’ book iii, chap. v, par. 28.* In the tumult, Athanasius again escaped.” (Pages 372, 373)

Scenes like these were not uncommon. The marriage of the church with the state resulted in every kind of violence. Bishops were elected and ordained while being surrounded by heavily armed guards to protect them from the mutinous crowds over which they were to preside.

## **The Council of Rimini**

“In the summer of A. D. 359, more than four hundred bishops assembled at Rimini, of whom eighty were Arians. One hundred and

sixty assembled at Seleucia, of whom one hundred and five were Semi-Arians; about forty were Arians, while the Catholics were still fewer in number. A civil officer of high rank was appointed to represent the emperor at each council, and the one appointed to Rimini was directed not to allow any bishop to go home until all 'had come to one mind concerning the faith.' That there might be as little difficulty as possible in coming to one mind, a creed was drawn up and sent to the council to be signed. There were at that time present with the emperor at Sirmium five bishops, one of whom was George of Alexandria, and all of whom were Arians or Semi-Arians. They drew up a creed, the main points of which were as follows:—

“We believe in one only and true God, the Father and Ruler of all, Creator and *Demiurge* of all things, and in one only begotten Son of God, who was begotten of the Father without change before all ages, and all beginning, and all conceivable time, and all comprehensible substance... God from God, similar to the Father, who has begotten Him according to the Holy Scriptures, whose generation no one knows [understands] but the Father who has begotten Him... The words *ousia*, because it was used by the Fathers in simplicity [that is, with good intention], but not being understood by the people, occasions scandal, and is not contained in the Scriptures, shall be put aside, and in future no mention shall be made of the *Usia* with regard to God... But we maintain that the Son is similar to the Father in all things, as also the Holy Scriptures teach and say.” (Pages 377, 378)

Constantius used his power to persuade all to sign. Just as his father before him, Constantius threatened banishment upon all those who would not sign his creed. Notice what is written about the Council of Milan just a few years prior to this council.

“He then declared that whoever did not sign might expect banishment. At this the orthodox bishops lifted up their hands beseechingly towards heaven, and prayed the emperor ‘to fear God, who had given him the dominion, that it might not be taken from him; also to fear the day of judgment, and not to confound the secular power with the law of the church, nor to introduce into the church the Arian heresy.’—*Hefele History of the Church Councils, sec. 74, par. 6.*

“They forgot that they themselves, many of them at least, had unanimously approved in Constantine at the Council of Nice the identical course which now they condemned in Constantius at the Council of Milan. In their approval of the action of Constantine in forcing upon others what they themselves believed, they robbed themselves of the right to protest when Constantius or anybody else should choose to force

upon them what somebody else believed. They ought not to have thought it strange that they should reap what they had sown.” (Page 368)

We can learn an important lesson from this episode. Anytime someone uses force, whether by the government or by any other means, to persuade others to believe as they do, they are certainly following the course of Satan and all his followers. There is no sanction in the Bible for using force to persuade others to believe a certain way. This spirit was manifested by the Catholic Church many times throughout the Dark Ages. This spirit is the spirit of the devil. Let us ever remember this valuable lesson.

### **The Arian doctrine becomes orthodox**

Constantius succeeded in making the Arian doctrine orthodox in A. D. 360.

“The emperor’s confession was then published throughout the whole empire, and all bishops were commanded to sign it, under penalty of exile upon all who refused. ‘This order was executed with the utmost rigor in all the provinces of the empire, and very few were found who did not sign with their hands what they condemned in their hearts. Many who till then had been thought invincible, were overcome, and complied with the times; and such as did not, were driven, without distinction, from their sees into exile, and others appointed in their room, the signing of that confession being a qualification indispensably requisite both in obtaining and keeping the episcopal dignity. **Thus were all the sees throughout the empire filled with Arians, insomuch that in the whole East not an orthodox bishop was left**, and in the West but one; namely, Gregory, bishop of Elvira in Andalusia, and he, in all likelihood, obliged to absent himself from his flock and lie concealed.’—*Bower ‘History of the Popes,’ Liberius, par. 24, 25.*

“Thus Constantius had succeeded much more fully than had his father, in establishing ‘the unity of the faith.’ That faith was the original Arian. **And Arianism was now as entirely orthodox, and, if the accommodated sense of the word be used, as entirely Catholic, as the Athanasian had ever been.**” (Pages 381, 382)

This period of history is quite well ignored by most Catholics. Few would want to admit that the Arian doctrine was considered orthodox at any time in the history of the Catholic Church.

## The Trinity doctrine re-established

This was not, however, the end of the controversy. As we will see, the Athanasian doctrine was again established in the Catholic Church.

“In 375 Valentinian died, and was succeeded by his two sons, Gratian, aged sixteen years, and Valentinian II, aged four years.

“Gratian was but the tool of the bishops. Ambrose was at that time bishop of Milan, and never was episcopal ambition more arrogantly asserted than in that insolent prelate. Soon the mind of the bishop asserted the supremacy over that of the boy emperor, and Ambrose ‘wielded at his will the weak and irresolute Gratian.’—*Milman ‘History of Christianity,’ book iii, chap. viii, par. 28.* But above all things else that Gratian did, that which redounded most to the glory of the Catholic Church was his choice of Theodosius as associate emperor. Valens was killed in a battle with the Goths, A. D. 378. A stronger hand than that of a youth of nineteen was required to hold the reins of government in the East.

“In the establishment of the Catholic Church, the place of Theodosius is second only to that of Constantine. About the beginning of the year 380 he was baptized by the Catholic bishop of Thessalonica, and immediately afterward he issued the following edict:—

“It is our pleasure that the nations which are governed by our clemency and moderation, should steadfastly adhere to the religion which was taught by St. Peter to the Romans, which faithful tradition has preserved, and which is now professed by the pontiff Damasus, and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the discipline of the apostles, and the doctrine of the gospel, let us believe the sole deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: under an equal majesty, **and a pious Trinity.** [This is the first mention of the word *Trinity* in any of the creeds or edicts, to the best of my knowledge.] We authorize the followers of this doctrine to assume the title of Catholic Christians; and as we judge that all others are extravagant madmen, we brand them with the infamous name of ‘heretics,’ and declare that their conventicles shall no longer usurp the respectable appellation of churches. Besides the condemnation of divine justice, they must expect to suffer the severe penalties which our authority, guided by heavenly wisdom, shall think proper to inflict upon them.’

“This law was issued in the names of the three emperors, Gratian, Valentinian II, and Theodosius. **‘Thus the religion of the whole Roman world was enacted by two feeble boys and a rude Spanish soldier.’**—*Milman ‘History of Christianity,’ book iii, chap. ix, par. 1.*

“In Constantinople the Catholics were so few that at the accession of Theodosius they had no regular place of meeting, nor had they any pastor.” (Pages 387, 388)

## **The Council of Constantinople**

“At the beginning of the year 381 Theodosius issued an edict expelling from all the churches within his dominions, all the bishops and other ecclesiastics who should refuse to subscribe to the creed of Nice. By a commissioned officer with a military force, the edict was executed in all the provinces of the East. Having thus established his religion throughout the empire, the next thing to do was to have a general council endorse his action, compose the disputes which disturbed the Catholic party itself, and again settle the faith of the Catholic Church. To this end a general council was called to meet at Constantinople this same year, A. D. 381.

“The council met in the month of May, and was composed of one hundred and eighty-six bishops—one hundred and fifty Catholics, and thirty-six Macedonians.” (Pages 391, 392)

“...one hundred and fifty bishops framed the following creed:—

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator 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 times [ages]** [Notice that they still believed that the Son of God was begotten of the Father before all ages], Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten, not created, of the same substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; who was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceedeth from the Father; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the prophets. And in one Holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for a resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.” (Page 396)

Up until this time the main part of the controversy was over the relationship of the Father and His Son. But with this new creed the addition of the Holy Spirit as a third individual was added. It was thus that the actual doctrine of the Trinity was first presented in a creed.

Although the doctrine of the Trinity was voted by the majority, many would not subscribe to the teachings of the Catholic Church on this matter.

“No one will blame the evangelicals for recoiling from the papal view of the Trinity, when history shows that their views were strong enough to cause two popes to sign decrees contrary to the policy of the papacy respecting Nicaea.” (Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant*, page 93)

“Those who recoiled from the extreme speculations and conclusions of the so-called Trinitarians believed Deuteronomy 29:29: ‘The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.’” (*Ibid.*, pages 93, 94)

The Waldensian Christians, who held the true gospel throughout the Dark Ages, did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity.

“No wonder that the Celtic, the Gothic, the Waldensian, the Armenian Churches, and the great Church of the East, as well as other bodies, differed profoundly from the papacy in its metaphysical conceptions of the Trinity and consequently in the importance of the Ten Commandments.” (*Ibid.*, page 94)

“Evidently Claude, while maintaining that Christ was divine by nature, did not accept the extreme speculations concerning the Godhead voted by the first Council of Nicaea. This was true of most of the evangelical bodies which differed from the Church of Rome.” (*Ibid.*, page 222)

Those who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity did so because it affected many other doctrines.

“It [the doctrine of the Trinity] had, however, such profound effect upon other doctrines relating to the plan of salvation and upon outward acts of worship that a gulf was created between the papacy and the institutions of the church which Patrick had founded in Ireland.” (*Ibid.*, page 92)

## **The central doctrine of the Catholic Faith**

“The burning question of the decades succeeding the Council of Nicaea was how to state the relations of the Three Persons of the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. **The council had decided, and the papacy had appropriated the decision as its own.**” (*Ibid.*, page 91)

To this day, the papacy admits that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated by her.

“The mystery of the Trinity is the central doctrine of the Catholic Faith. Upon it are based all the other teachings of the Church...



“The Church studied this mystery with great care and, after four centuries of clarification, decided to state the doctrine in this way: in the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons,-the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...” (*Handbook for Today's Catholic*, page 11)

“Our opponents [Protestants] sometimes claim that no belief should be held dogmatically which is not explicitly stated in Scripture (ignoring that it is only on the authority of the Church we recognize certain Gospels and not other as true). **But the Protestant churches have themselves accepted such dogmas as the Trinity for which there is no such precise authority in the Gospels...**” (*Life Magazine*, October 30, 1950)

The Catholic Church did not acquire the doctrine of the Trinity from the Bible, but rather adopted it from the pagan religions.

“The Platonic trinity, itself merely a rearrangement of older trinities dating back to earlier peoples, appears to be the rational philosophic trinity of attributes that gave birth to the three hypostases or divine persons taught by the Christian churches.... This Greek philosopher's [Plato, fourth century B. C.] conception of the divine trinity... can be found in all the ancient [pagan] religions.” (Paris, 1865-1870, *Nouveau Dictionnaire Universel*, edited by M. Lachâtre, Vol. 2, page 1467)

## **Testimony from early church writers**

Justin Martyr, quoting from Proverbs 8, refers to Christ in the following statement:

“The Lord created me the beginning of His ways for His works.... He begets me before all the hills.” He adds: “You perceive, my hearers, if you bestow attention, that **the Scripture has declared that this Offspring was begotten by the Father before all things created;** and that which is begotten is numerically distinct from that which begets, any one will admit.” (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter CXXIX)

Irenaeus of Lyons wrote,

“For the Church, although dispersed throughout the whole world even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and from their disciples the faith **in one God, Father Almighty**, the creator of heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them; and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (*Against Heresies* 1:10:1, A. D. 189)

Tertullian wrote,

“We do indeed believe that there is only one God, but we believe that under this dispensation, or, as we say, oikonomia, **there is also a Son of this one only God**, his Word, who proceeded from him and through



whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made.”  
(*Against Praxeas* 2, A. D. 216)

Origen wrote,

“The specific points which are clearly handed down through the apostolic preaching are these: First, that there is one God who created and arranged all things, and who, when nothing existed, called all things into existence, and that in the final period this God, just as he had promised beforehand through the prophets, sent the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, that **Jesus Christ** himself, who came, **was born of the Father before all creatures**; and after he had ministered to the Father in the creation of all things, for through him all things were made.” (*The Fundamental Doctrines* 1:0:4, A.D. 225)

Novatian wrote,

“**God the Father**, founder and creator of all things, **who alone knows no beginning**, who is invisible, immeasurable, immortal, and eternal, is one God. Neither his greatness nor his majesty nor his power can possibly be—I should not say exceeded, for they cannot even be equaled. **From him... the Word was born, his Son...** And the latter, since he was born of the Father, is always in the Father. And I indeed say always... He that exists before all time must be said to have been in the Father always, for he that exists before all time cannot be spoken of in relation to time... Assuredly, he [the Son] is God, proceeding from God, causing, as Son, a second person after the Father, but not taking away from the Father the fact that God is one.” (*Treatise on the Trinity* 31, A.D. 235)

Epiphanius of Salamis wrote,

“**We believe in one God, the Father almighty**, maker of all things, both visible and invisible; **and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of God the Father**, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father; God of God, light of light, true God of true God; begotten, not made;...” (*The Man Well-Anchored* 120, A.D. 374)

The testimony of the early church writers makes it clear that the concept of the Trinity was foreign to Christianity until it was adopted at the Council of Nicaea. Since that time the doctrine has undergone some alterations until it stands today as the central doctrine of the Catholic faith. Protestants claim to be free from Catholic tradition, yet most Protestant churches cling to the doctrine of the Trinity, along with many other Catholic teachings, although they have no plain biblical evidence to support it.

Many people would like you to believe that the Trinity doctrine has always been a part of Christian teaching. However, it is clear that this

teaching was adopted by the Catholic Church long after the death of Christ and His apostles. It is also clear that the early Christians did not hold to this doctrine.

From the beginning of time to Christ's day and beyond, God's people have believed that Christ was brought forth (born) before all time and that God, His Father, gave Him up for us. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten [born] Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."* (John 3:16) This was the belief of the Apostles, this is the belief that God's people carried up to the fourth century, this is the belief that God's people preserved in the wilderness throughout the Dark Ages, and this is the belief that God's true church will cling to at Christ's return.

*"As fundamental errors, we might class with this counterfeit sabbath other errors which Protestants have brought away from the Catholic church, such as sprinkling for baptism, **the trinity**, the consciousness of the dead and eternal life in misery. **The mass who have held these fundamental errors, have doubtless done it ignorantly; but can it be supposed that the church of Christ will carry along with her these errors till the judgment scenes burst upon the world? We think not.**"* (James White, *Review and Herald*, September 12, 1854)

Let us forsake the fundamental error of the Trinity, which can be traced no further back than the fourth century unless you look to the pagan religions. I pray that you will stand with the few, with the faithful, who reject this unscriptural doctrine; not because I wish to stand at variance with the Catholic Church on this doctrine, but because this doctrine has negative results upon the atonement and many other aspects of our Christian faith.

***"For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."*** (Jeremiah 2:13)



*The Formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity* is an account of how the Trinity doctrine came to be considered an Orthodox teaching within Christianity. You will be intrigued to learn the events surrounding the formulation of one of Christianity's most controversial yet pivotal teachings.

I pray that you will be blessed by this booklet.

# The Formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity

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For more information, or to obtain free Bible studies on this and many other subjects, please contact:

***Present Truth Fellowship***

PO Box 315

Kansas, Oklahoma 74347

U. S. A.

**Phone:** (304) 633-5411

**Internet:** <http://www.presenttruth.info>

**E-mail:** [info@presenttruth.info](mailto:info@presenttruth.info)