

THE
TRINITARIAN
CONTROVERSY
IN THE
FOURTH CENTURY

BY DAVID K. BERNARD

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The Road to Nicea

In the Old Catholic Age (c. A.D. 170 to 325), Christendom shifted from the biblical belief in one God toward a form of trinitarianism.¹ The trinitarians of that age divided the personality of God in tritheistic fashion, and they denied the full deity of Jesus Christ by subordinating the second person of their trinity to the first person.²

By 300, some form of trinitarianism and trinitarian baptism had become dominant in Christendom, but orthodox trinitarianism as we know it today had yet to be formulated clearly or established solidly. We will discuss how such a formulation occurred in the fourth century, focusing particularly on the two ecumenical councils crucial to this process: the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381.

In the second and third centuries most Christians affirmed the absolute oneness of God and the full deity of Jesus Christ and did not think in trinitarian categories.³ We can label this belief generically by the term *modalism*. The most prominent teacher of modalism in the third century was Sabellius, who held that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were modes (designations, manifestations, not persons) of the one God and that Jesus was the incarnation of the

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undivided Godhead.⁴

In the view of prominent church historians such as Adolph Harnack, modalism was once the majority view and was the most significant rival to trinitarianism from about A.D. 180 to 300.⁵ Although “the process is quite in obscurity,”⁶ by the end of the third century it appears that church leaders had mostly rejected modalism in favor of making a personal distinction between God the Father and Jesus Christ.

The nature of this distinction was not clear, however. The Greek Apologists, prominent Christian philosophical writers in the second century, had spoken of Jesus primarily as the Logos (Word). By and large, they viewed the Logos as a second divine person subordinate to the Father. They called both persons God, but they did not view the Logos as coequal or coeternal with the Father.

Tertullian and Origen were leading opinion makers in the third century whom the institutional church nevertheless ultimately condemned as heretics. They argued in favor of a trinity of persons in the Godhead, but they too subordinated Jesus to the Father. They moved closer to the later trinitarian formulation, however—Tertullian by emphasizing that the three persons were of one substance and Origen by introducing the doctrine that the Father and Son were coeternal.

Around 318 a controversy erupted in Alexandria, Egypt, over the nature of the second person. The conflict arose over the teachings of Arius (280?-336), a presbyter (preacher) in Alexandria, who derived much of his thinking from his teacher, Lucian of Antioch.

Like the Christians of earlier times, Arius emphasized the absolute oneness of God, using biblical passages

such as Deuteronomy 6:4, and he therefore rejected the trinitarian thinking that was becoming predominant. Like the trinitarians, however, he used a threefold baptismal formula and believed that Jesus was a second person called the Logos or Son. His way of reconciling these conflicting views was to deny that Jesus was God. He held, in the words of Louis Berkhof, that the Son was “created out of nothing before the world was called into being, and for that very reason was not eternal nor of the divine essence.”⁷ To Arius Jesus was the first and most exalted created being; the supreme agent of God; in effect, a demigod. Jehovah’s Witnesses today espouse essentially the same view.

Arius’s view was similar to that of the Greek Apologists of the second century and to that of the dynamic monarchians, a dissident group in the third century. It was a logical extension of the idea of subordination that was inherent in trinitarianism thus far, for it acknowledged that Jesus was divine but not deity.

While Arius was devoted to monotheism, he vehemently opposed modalism (Sabellianism), and “he protested against what he believed to be the Sabellianism of his bishop, Alexander.”⁸ He objected to Alexander’s stress on the deity of Christ, although Alexander was actually a trinitarian rather than a modalist.

The immediate cause of the contention between them was Arius’s interpretation of Proverbs 8:22-31, a passage that personifies wisdom as an attribute of God. Beginning with the second-century Apologists, theologians commonly identified wisdom in Proverbs as a second divine person, the Son-Logos. Verse 22 says, “The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works

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of old.” Since the Hebrew word translated as “possessed” can mean “created” or “brought forth,” Arius interpreted the passage to mean that God created the Son at a certain point in time before the creation of the world.

Alexander called a synod in Alexandria, which excommunicated Arius and his friends in 321. Arius obtained the support of Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, however, and continued the controversy. Both Alexander and Arius enlisted a number of bishops to their respective sides, and the dispute threatened to disrupt the Christian church throughout the Roman Empire.

News of the controversy reached Emperor Constantine, who had little interest in or understanding of the crucial theological issue at stake—the deity of Jesus—but was concerned that the dispute could cause division in his empire. Constantine had long realized that paganism was dying and that only Christianity could provide the religious, cultural, and philosophical unity his diverse empire needed. In 313, after he defeated his rival Maxentius in 312, he and his coemperor Licinius granted freedom of worship to Christians. In 324 he defeated Licinius and became the sole Roman emperor, and that same year he publicly embraced Christianity. He delayed his baptism as a Christian until shortly before his death in 337, however, on the theory that he could continue to sin and then receive remission of sins in the end. As an example of his morals, in 326 he executed his son, nephew, and wife for reasons that are unclear.

Will Durant explained Constantine’s political interests:

He cared little for the theological differences that

agitated Christendom—though he was willing to suppress dissent in the interests of imperial unity. Throughout his reign he treated the bishops as his political aides; he summoned them, presided over their councils, and agreed to enforce whatever opinion their majority should formulate. . . . Christianity was to him a means, not an end.⁹

Walter Nigg similarly concluded, “Constantine . . . treated religious questions solely from a political point of view.”¹⁰

Initially, Constantine sought to resolve the dispute between Arius and Alexander by appealing to both parties to forgive one another and to seek peace and unanimity. He told them the controversy was “of a truly insignificant character, and quite unworthy of such fierce contention” and “an unprofitable question” that “was wrong in the first instance to propose” and that was on “subjects so sublime and abstruse.”¹¹

Eventually he realized that the problem could not be resolved so easily. At the urging of his close advisor, Bishop Hosius of Cordova, he summoned the first ecumenical council of postapostolic Christendom to deal with the matter and paid the expenses for the delegates.