

The Divinity of Jesus: An Early Christian Debate

A key theological debate in the early Church concerned the relationship between Jesus and God the Father and Jesus' divinity. Opinions abounded. Gnostics, as we have seen, separated the Creator from the true God and Jesus from the Christ who dwelt within him. Christians who continued in the Jewish tradition usually saw Jesus in Old Testament terms: as a teacher, prophet, or angel but not divine in the same way as God the Father. Other groups saw Jesus as a human being whom God had "adopted" as his Son so that God came to dwell within Jesus in a special way. Still others thought Jesus was divine, but in his divinity he was not actually a separate being from the Father. In theological terms, this discussion concerns Christology, which simply means the view one takes of Christ and his role.

Many Western theologians of the third and fourth centuries believed Christ was divine in the same way as God the Father but also was distinct from him—not just a name for a different part of the same thing. They believed Jesus' death played a part in God's plan of salvation but working out the details was tricky. If Jesus was just another human, there was no reason to believe his death could have any effect on salvation. The same was true if Jesus was some kind of angel or was inhabited by a divine being—his death would not have any effect on humans' relationship to God.

In the East, Origen led the way in adapting the views of Neo-Platonism to a Christian context. Neo-Platonism, or "new Platonic thought," began with Plotinus in the mid-third century and quickly became the most important school of philosophical thought in the ancient world. While it derived from Plato's thought, Plotinus did not worry about sticking too closely to the writings of Plato.

In Plotinus's view, three beings are at the heart of the universe: the One, Mind, and Soul. The One is the source of all being and all good, the essential element in the universe. From it arises Mind, the basis of all rational principles (scientific laws plus philosophical concepts). Working through Mind, the One animates existence through the production of Soul, which is the principle of activity in all that exists. To put it simply, the One is the reason why a "hunk of clay" can exist; Mind gives the clay form; and through Soul, the clay is given life and becomes human. The One, Mind, and Soul are totally spirit; things that involve matter, like the world and physical bodies, are not thought of highly. However, humans are a mixture of matter and spirit, and if they focus more on their spirits and less on their bodies, they can come closer to Soul, which means coming closer to the One.

For Origen, God the Father is the eternal One, and Christ his Son is Mind, the being that comes forth from the One and acts always in accordance with it. Origen and other Eastern Christian thinkers talked a lot about how God becoming human in Jesus allowed humans to come into union with the divine. The reasoning was different from that in the West, but the problem was the same: Jesus had to be divine to make the whole scheme work. If Jesus was not God, then he did not bring humans into union with God, only with another created being.

It is easy to think all of this is simply something beyond human knowledge and immaterial to everyday life, but for Christians it is and has always been vital. From the beginnings of Christianity to today, Christians have prayed to Jesus for salvation, believing his life and death made salvation possible. Nevertheless, philosophy and theology traditionally agree that only God never changes. If Jesus is not God, then he can change, and Christians who believe in him can lose their salvation.



The Most Serious Split

All this came to a head with the ideas of Arius. His thinking about Christ was nowhere near the wildest, but its moderation was probably one of the reasons why it sparked major controversy.

Arius started with the idea that God was God and everything else was everything else, and he put Jesus in the “everything-else” category. Arius thought that if God was the beginning of all reality, then there could not have been anything other than God before creation. Arius did not think Christ was just another human, but he did not think Christ was the same thing as God, either. He said that when God decided to make the world, God created the Son out of nothing, so the Son is greater than and before anything else in creation—but there was a time before he came into existence. God’s intention was to use the Son to bring salvation to the world, so the Son was born into the body we call Jesus.

This was something new; Arius did not use the language of the OT [Old Testament] to talk about the relationship between God the Father and the Son, and he did not turn to Neo-Platonic thought. His position came out of his study of the Scriptures; he started with the account of creation in Genesis and then looked at the gospels to understand how Jesus was the Son. He wrote a poem called the *Thalia* expressing his understanding and even put together a song with the chorus, “There was a time when he was not,” meaning a time when the Son did not exist, that God had not eternally been a father.

Arius was a priest in the church of Alexandria when he started teaching his views about the Son. His bishop, Alexander, became alarmed when he noticed other clergy members picking up on Arius’s views, and in 319, he called a council. One hundred bishops attended, and eighty of them voted to excommunicate Arius and his supporters. The Christian church had a big controversy on its hands.

Arius took off for Palestine, where he was warmly welcomed by Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea; he also received support from a number of other bishops. Some of them held their own councils in 320 and 321 that declared Arius’s views acceptable; one council even condemned the views of Alexander just as his council had condemned those of Arius. The fight was on.

The Emperor Constantine sought to squash the controversy quickly, reasoning that such dissension weakened the Empire and jeopardized its favor with God. Constantine wrote letters to both Alexander and Arius, pointing out that they agreed on the most important things and declaring that some things were just not knowable to humans. Still the matter raged, and finally the Emperor decided a big gesture was in order. He called the Council of Nicaea, possibly the most important council in the history of the Church.

The Work of the Council of Nicaea

While the relationship of God the Father and the Son was the most important issue discussed at Nicaea, it was not the only one. The bishops also dealt with issues of church discipline and administration. They drew up a list of twenty canons, or regulations, that dealt with (1) the structure of churches; (2) the dignity of the clergy; (3) how to bring the *lapsi*, heretics, and others separated from the Church back into unity; and (4) liturgy.

After three long months, the Council had finished its work. The State that had so recently persecuted the Church was now actively promoting and striving to help unify it. The Council of Nicaea was not only the triumph of what would become the orthodox interpretation of Christ as one in being, or of one substance, with the Father but also a breathtaking vision of how Church and State could work together. When the



bishops headed home with the big job of explaining the Council's decisions to the people in their areas, they took with them a deeper understanding of where the Church now stood in the Empire that covered almost their entire known world.

The Father and the Son: Thinking Through What It All Means

Working through one problem opened the way for others. Those who signed the Nicene Creed could not agree on what it means to say that God the Father and the Son are of the same substance. Some thought “of the same substance” meant that God the Father and the Son share an eternal substance different from everything else; others saw it as meaning that the three Persons of the Trinity are without distinction; still others thought it was about the divinity of the Son; and still others were not really clear on any of it but wanted unity in the Church.

Let's take a look at how a few thinkers worked through these issues.

Athanasius

The way Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria saw it, humans were made to be immortal, a perfect reflection of God. People only lost immortality and became imperfect because of sin. Sin is not so much a mistake to be corrected or a debt to be paid as it is the way imperfection and change came into creation. To overcome this, God had to bring about a new creation by entering humanity. Athanasius said that Christ “was made [human] that we might be made god,” meaning Christ made it possible for humans to reflect God's image perfectly once again. For Athanasius, then, it is important that Christ is of the very same substance as the Father. His role is not to bridge some gap between humans and God—why would we need this since God created us?—but to participate in humanity so that humans might participate in God's divinity.

Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa agreed with Athanasius that the Son was divine, but he took a different tack in proving it. He did not just want to know if Christ was human or divine; he wanted to truly understand the existence of the Holy Trinity. He believed people often got confused trying to figure out how Christians can talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and still not worship three Gods. The key, he felt, was to make a logical and scripturally sound argument to explain the relationship among the members of the Trinity—if you understand how they relate to each other, then you will understand how they are not three different Gods.

An admirer of Origen, Gregory used philosophy to develop his theology. In a work called “An Answer to Ablabius,” he developed one of the tightest arguments ever created on the subject of the Trinity. He said that God exists in three persons but that all three have one substance or nature. Christian Scriptures tell us the Trinity always acts with one accord, but the conclusion Gregory draws from his argument is that this is the result of the Three Persons sharing one substance, not the cause of it.



Moving Forward: Constantinople and Chalcedon

Theologians kept absorbing the work of the Council of Nicaea, but this led them to other thorny questions: Did Christ have only a divine nature, or did he have a human one as well? And what about the Holy Spirit—where did it fit into the picture? Over the next 125 years, the Church tried to untangle these difficult issues.

Years after Nicaea, people were still arguing about what it meant to say that the Father and the Son are of the same substance. More local councils were called and more creeds written, but the confusion kept growing. Finally, another council was called for May of 381 in Constantinople.

The Council of Constantinople is known as the second great ecumenical council of the Church, although “ecumenical” is a bit of a stretch—all 150 bishops attending came from the East. It was certainly eventful, though: The first presiding bishop died just as things got going, the next one had to resign over political issues, and the third was actually a layman who was quickly baptized and consecrated bishop. As for what the council actually did, it is hard to say because the official recordings of the proceedings are lost. It may have revised the Nicene Creed to the form we use today, although there is no mention of this until the Council of Chalcedon in 451, or it may just have restated the importance of the Creed. Either way, it definitely held to the Nicene line that the Father and the Son share the same divinity and that those who leaned toward an Arian interpretation of the Creed were wrong.

This was not the end of Arianism, though. By the middle of the fourth century, Arian missionaries had already carried their beliefs to some of the Germanic tribes known in history as the barbarians. When these tribes began invasions a few centuries later, they brought their Arian Christian faith with them. The Vandals in North Africa, the Visigoths in Spain, the Lombards in Italy—all established kingdoms with Arian Christianity as their faith of choice. Among the invaders, only the Franks held on to the Nicene faith. However, most of the peoples being conquered by all these invading hordes were orthodox believers. Put this together with the growing power of the Nicene-inclined Franks, and you will see why Arian Christianity eventually died out.

Once they had the relationship of God the Father and Son suitably figured out, theologians started trying to puzzle through what it meant for Christ to be both divine and human. One idea was that Christ had within him two natures, one human and one divine. Nestorius, who became patriarch of Constantinople in 428, took this to a logical extreme. He did not like people calling Mary the *theotokos*, the “bearer of God”; how could this be, he said, because what Mary gave birth to was only the human nature? It is not like God came into being when Jesus was born of Mary. So Mary is the bearer of Jesus but not of God, and to say otherwise is to confuse the two natures. Nestorius said that when the two natures come together, each maintains its ability to exist without the other.

The patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril, thought Nestorius went too far in distinguishing the natures. How can we say that God dwelt among us if we have to figure out whether it was Jesus’ divine or human nature acting every time he did something? Cyril argued the two natures cannot be separated, but they exist together as a whole. Mary is the *theotokos* not because the divinity of Christ began in her but because she is mother of the human that exists in union with the divine.

Cyril was also interested in promoting Alexandria as a patriarchal see of greater authority than Constantinople. He convinced the bishop of Rome to support his position, and a synod held in Rome in 430 condemned Nestorius. Cyril sent Nestorius a series of twelve condemnations of his position and told



him to sign them or be declared heretical. Nestorius, who had gotten the support of John, the patriarch of Antioch, sent back twelve condemnations of Cyril.

The Western branch of the Church (the patriarchs of Alexandria and Rome) was squaring off against the Eastern branch (the patriarchs of Constantinople and Antioch). A council called in 431 at Ephesus to straighten the situation out just made things worse. Cyril opened the proceedings before any of Nestorius's supporters arrived; because he would not let Nestorius himself speak, the council quickly condemned and deposed Nestorius. When John of Antioch arrived and saw what had happened, he called his own council and deposed Cyril.

Emperor Theodosius III, thinking a crisis was imminent, had Cyril, Nestorius, and John imprisoned. Cyril finally convinced the Emperor to bring together a council that could hammer out a solution. Cyril's position was largely accepted, and Nestorius was made to leave Constantinople, eventually ending up in an Egyptian desert monastery.

But the problems did not end there. Many still supported Nestorius's ideas, and even among those who did not, some did not like Cyril's ideas either. Finally, the Council of Chalcedon was called in 451 to hash things out, and this time it worked. The bishops decided Cyril basically had it right: Christ is not some kind of hybrid part God—part human; he is both truly and fully God and truly and fully human.

Nestorius's ideas did not die when they were condemned at the Council of Chalcedon, however. Some of his followers rejected the council's decision and continued to spread his ideas, eventually forming a separate Christian body known as the Nestorian Church. This became the most important Christian group in Persia, and from the end of the fifth century on, they considered themselves officially separate from the Church in communion with Rome.

Nestorian missionaries spread their version of the Christian message as far east as India and China. In the sixteenth century, some Nestorian communities in India rejoined the Roman Catholic Church—these are usually called Chaldean Catholics and are part of the Uniat Churches, those that maintain their own traditions while being fully in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Nestorian churches still exist in Iraq, Iran, parts of India, and even the United States.

After centuries of separation, in 1994 the Nestorian Church and the Catholic Church jointly declared that they recognized how the truth of Christ's mission was continued in both of their traditions.

(This article is excerpted from *The Catholic Church: A Brief Popular History*, by Cynthia Stewart [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008]. Copyright © 2008 by Anselm Academic. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.)

