

# A History of Christology

## The First Five Centuries

After the death of Jesus the Christ his followers were identified as a sect of Judaism. Tertullus, the Jewish orator, referring to Paul before Felix states, “For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” (Acts 24:5)

This identity did not endure long as the Jewish rebellion of 66-70 a.d. drove a wedge between the Jews and the sect of the Nazarenes. Eusebius tells us in his Ecclesiastical History that the church at Jerusalem left the city for Pella, a town beyond the Jordan, and escaped the slaughter of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman soldiers under Titus. The followers of Christ were looked on as abandoning Jerusalem and the whole of Judea.

Williston Walker writes in *A History of the Christian Church*, “...it seems likely from indirect evidence that Christians in Palestine took a neutral stance during the Jewish war, and that this fact exacerbated the conflict between synagogue and church and made it less and less possible for believers to live as practicing Jews and synagogue members. By the last decade of the first century, the rabbis who reorganized and reinvigorated Judaism after the destruction of the temple had inserted in the synagogue prayers an anathema which made it impossible for a “Nazarene” to participate officially in the liturgy. This great crisis in the history of Judaism, then, brought about as one of its results a separation of the church from its parent body, even for Christians of Jewish parentage and practice. It meant, therefore, that Christians who continued, as many in Palestine apparently did, to keep the Law and to celebrate the Jewish feasts became an increasingly marginal and anachronistic group, at odds both with Judaism and with the growing Gentile churches.”<sup>1</sup>

The followers of Jesus now stood alone. No longer a sect of Judaism, no longer the sect of the Nazarene, they stood as their own religion, as the followers of Christ, Christianity. The task before them now was to define their tradition and establish their independent identity. Questions arose about the meaning of their message concerning the risen Christ. This new era produced volumes of Christian literature that established and defended the faith and teachings of the new Christian Church.

The most influential writings of the next few centuries were inked by men known as the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Over time these authors of the early Christian apologies defined the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Their writings developed and crystalized the dogma that most in Christianity today embrace as the indisputable tenets of the faith and use as the litmus test for true Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Walker, *History of the Christian Church*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York 1985), p.33

Chief amongst the challenges was defining the nature and person of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus Christ was one of the most essential questions for early Christianity. There were many debates and controversies about the person of Christ – his deity and humanity, and the relationship of the two. The defense of the new Christian faith from other teachings with their roots in Platonic Philosophies, Gnosticism, Egyptian and Persian religions generated endless debate. Today's orthodox doctrine of Jesus being truly man and truly God was the outcome of many struggles.

In early Christianity there were many teachings about the nature and person of Jesus Christ, spawned no doubt by the seeming contrasts of Jesus' title the son of man, and John's Logos theology. The debate ran on through many centuries, writings and church councils. The losers of the debates were called the heretics; the victors were called the orthodox. Writings were lost, writings were burned. The bulk of those that survived are those of the orthodox, those who taught that Jesus is truly man and truly God.

Let us turn now to the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

Ignatius defended the new faith against the Docetist teaching that Jesus was spiritual, not a man possessing a body, not flesh and blood. He responds to those who teach such that Jesus was both man and God.

**Ignatius** (A.D. 30-107) writes in introductory comments of his Epistle to the Ephesians one of the earliest records where Jesus is addressed as God: *"Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus, to the Church which is at Ephesus, in Asia, deservedly most happy, being blessed in the greatness and fulness of God the Father, and predestinated before the beginning of time, that it should be always for an enduring and unchangeable glory, being united and elected through the true passion by the will of the Father, and Jesus Christ, our God: Abundant happiness through Jesus Christ, and His undefiled grace."*<sup>2</sup>

And later he writes, *"There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible, — even Jesus Christ our Lord."*<sup>3</sup>

*"But if, as some that are without God, that is, the unbelieving, say, He became man in appearance [only], that He did not in reality take unto Him a body, that He died in appearance [merely], and did not in very deed suffer, then for what reason am I now in bonds, and long to be exposed to the wild beasts? In such a case, I die in vain, and am guilty of falsehood against the cross of the Lord. Then also does the prophet in vain declare, "They shall look on Him whom they have pierced, and mourn over themselves as over one beloved." These men, therefore, are not less unbelievers than were those that crucified Him. But as for me, I do not place my hopes in one who died for me in appearance, but in reality. For that which is false is quite abhorrent to*

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<sup>2</sup> Epistle to the Ephesians, Chapter 1

<sup>3</sup> Epistle to the Ephesians, Chapter 7

*the truth. Mary then did truly conceive a body which had God inhabiting it. And God the Word was truly born of the Virgin, having clothed Himself with a body of like passions with our own.*<sup>4</sup>

Ignatius refers to Jesus as God, both flesh and spirit, made and not made, however, we see from other Ante-Nicene authors that upon these things there is not yet agreement.

We also find from the records on those called heretics, the Ebionites, the Docetists and the Gnostics, that other teachings about Jesus were alive and well the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. In contrast to the Docetists, the Ebonites taught that Jesus was just a plain common man who was justified because of his superior virtue, that he did not pre-exist. And the debate continued for centuries, was Jesus God? Was he a man? Was he both?

**Justin Martyr** (A.D. 100-165) designates the Son of God as the Logos. Justin sees the Logos as a separate being from God and subordinate to Him. In his use of Logos theology Jesus is not eternal as the Father is eternal. *"For next to God, we worship and love the Logos who is out of the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, that, becoming a partaker of our sufferings, He might also bring us healing."*<sup>5</sup>

*"There is, and that there is said to be, another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things who is also called an Angel, because He announces to men whatsoever the Maker of all things, above whom there is no other God, wishes to announce to them.... I shall endeavour to persuade you, that He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things, I mean numerically, not in will."*<sup>6</sup>

Justin's teaching as Jesus being numerically different clashes with the Trinitarian doctrine of God being one. Justin always refers to the one true God as the one who created all things, and Jesus as a subordinate other God. Clearly, Christian dogma about Jesus was only developing.

**Irenaeus** (A.D. 125-202) penned the famous work *Against Heresies* to combat the teachings of the Gnostics. It was his battle with the Gnostics that helped form his Christology. Irenaeus did not follow the teachings of Justin Martyr of two separate Gods, one subordinate. Irenaeus taught that there is one God Almighty who made all things by His Word.<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus defends his faith against the Gnostics teachings and the Marcionites. He describes the Father as the only God, the Creator, that there is no one besides Him, there is no second God. God created all things by the word of His power; He made all things by Himself, that is, through His Word and His Wisdom.

*"He (the Creator) made all things freely, and by His own power, and arranged and finished them, and His will is the substance of all things, then He is discovered to be the one only God*

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<sup>4</sup> *Epistle to the Trallians, Chapter 10*

<sup>5</sup> *Second Apology, 13*

<sup>6</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho, 56*

<sup>7</sup> *Against Heresies, Book 1, Chapter 22, 1*

*who created all things, who alone is Omnipotent, and who is the only Father rounding and forming all things, visible and invisible, such as may be perceived by our senses and such as cannot, heavenly and earthly, “by the word of His power;” and He has fitted and arranged all things by His wisdom, while He contains all things, but He Himself can be contained by no one: He is the Former, He the Builder, He the Discoverer, He the Creator, He the Lord of all; and there is no one besides Him, or above Him, neither has He any mother, as they falsely ascribe to Him; nor is there a second God, as Marcion has imagined; nor is there a Pleroma of thirty Æons, which has been shown a vain supposition; nor is there any such being as Bythus or Proarche; nor are there a series of heavens; nor is there a virginal light, nor an unnameable Æon, nor, in fact, any one of those things which are madly dreamt of by these, and by all the heretics. But there is one only God, the Creator — He who is above every Principality, and Power, and Dominion, and Virtue: He is Father, He is God, He the Founder, He the Maker, He the Creator, who made those things by Himself, that is, through His Word and His Wisdom — heaven and earth, and the seas, and all things that are in them: He is just; He is good; He it is who formed man, who planted paradise, who made the world, who gave rise to the flood, who saved Noah; He is the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of the living: He it is whom the law proclaims, whom the prophets preach, whom Christ reveals, whom the apostles make known to us, and in whom the Church believes. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: through His Word, who is His Son, through Him He is revealed and manifested to all to whom He is revealed; for those [only] know Him to whom the Son has revealed Him. But the Son, eternally co-existing with the Father, from of old, yea, from the beginning, always reveals the Father to Angels, Archangels, Powers, Virtues, and all to whom He wills that God should be revealed.”<sup>8</sup>*

Irenaeus teaches the Word is a part of the Father, just as His Wisdom is a part of the Father. It is through His Word that the Father is revealed, that His character is expressed. The Word is made flesh in Jesus. There are not two Gods for Irenaeus, there is but one, who manifests His character and will through His Word. This Word of God, that is God, becomes His son Jesus Christ.

*“There is therefore one and the same God, the Father of our Lord, who also promised, through the prophets, that He would send His forerunner; and His salvation — that is, His Word — He caused to be made visible to all flesh, [the Word] Himself being made incarnate, that in all things their King might become manifest.”<sup>9</sup>*

Irenaeus insists that there is one God, the Father, the creator, but also makes Jesus God, since he was the Word of God, which is God. When describing the gifts brought to the child Jesus by the Magi he says of their meaning “...and frankincense, because He was God, who also “was made known in Judea,” and was “declared to those who sought Him not.”<sup>10</sup>

The Logos theology of Irenaeus wants to have one God, not the multitude of Gods the Marcionites / Gnostics taught. It has been said of Irenaeus that his derivation of the Son from

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<sup>8</sup> *Against Heresies, Book 2, Chapter 30, 9*

<sup>9</sup> *Against Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 9, 1*

<sup>10</sup> *Against Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 9, 2*

the Father is an incomprehensible mystery and cannot be explained. He makes Jesus, the Word of God, and the Son of God all synonymous. All three are the vehicle by which the Father reveals Himself to the whole of creation, flesh and spirit. At times the lines get blurred with his emphasis that Jesus being a man, the son of man, refers subordinately to the Father alone as God, and other times Irenaeus refers to Jesus as God being the Word of God. Man, God, or both? Irenaeus filled volumes emphasizing why the teachings of the Marcionites, Gnostics and other heretics were in error. The nature and origin of Jesus was clouded in his Logos theology, but one thing was clear, the Marcionites were wrong. The definition of the nature and person of Jesus Christ was still evolving.

**Tertullian** (A.D. 160-225) taught that Jesus, the Father and the Spirit were inseparable but distinct and different from each other. They are distinct species in one essence. In Tertullian we find a broader teaching that includes the spirit. His association with the Pentecostal like teachings of Montanus influencing his theology. He provides early definitions of a triune description of God as Father, Son and Spirit. These are not precisely the same definitions the Church Councils adopt as dogma 100 years later, but Tertullian outlines their beginnings.

*"Bear always in mind that this is the rule of faith which I profess; by it I testify that the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other, and so will you know in what sense this is said. Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other. This statement is taken in a wrong sense by every uneducated as well as every perversely disposed person, as if it predicated a diversity, in such a sense as to imply a separation among the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. I am, moreover, obliged to say this, when (extolling the Monarchy at the expense of the Economy) they contend for the identity of the Father and Son and Spirit, that it is not by way of diversity that the Son differs from the Father, but by distribution: it is not by division that He is different, but by distinction; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: "My Father is greater than I.""*<sup>11</sup>

He also proposes a threefold hypostatical existence of the Son: (1) pre-existent, eternal immanence of the Son in the Father (even before creation); (2) coming forth of the Son with the Father for the purpose of creation; (3) manifestation of the Son in the world by the incarnation. The technical terms he uses for this Trinity were to become the customary ones in Latin theology: *tres personae, una substantia* (where substantia in Tertullian means "a being", to reinforce the unity of God).

**Hyppolytus** of Rome (A.D. 170-235) battled the Gnostic teachings of Marcion, Valentinus, and Cerinthus. He challenges their Gnostic suppositions for many gods with the biblical proclamation of one God. Yet he struggles to define Jesus' status without stating there is more than one God.

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<sup>11</sup> *Against Praxeas, Chapter 9*

*God, subsisting alone, and having nothing contemporaneous with Himself, determined to create the world. And conceiving the world in mind, and willing and uttering the word, He made it; and straightway it appeared, formed as it had pleased Him. For us, then, it is sufficient simply to know that there was nothing contemporaneous with God. Beside Him there was nothing; but He, while existing alone, yet existed in plurality. For He was neither without reason, nor wisdom, nor power, nor counsel And all things were in Him, and He was the All. When He willed, and as He willed, He manifested His word in the times determined by Him, and by Him He made all things. When He wills, He does; and when He thinks, He executes; and when He speaks, He manifests; when He fashions, He contrives in wisdom. For all things that are made He forms by reason and wisdom—creating them in reason, and arranging them in wisdom. He made them, then, as He pleased, for He was God. And as the Author, and fellow-Counsellor, and Framers of the things that are in formation, He begat the Word; and as He bears this Word in Himself, and that, too, as (yet) invisible to the world which is created, He makes Him visible; (and) uttering the voice first, and begetting Him as Light of Light, He set Him forth to the world as its Lord, (and) His own mind; and whereas He was visible formerly to Himself alone, and invisible to the world which is made, He makes Him visible in order that the world might see Him in His manifestation, and be capable of being saved...*

*These things then, brethren, are declared by the Scriptures. And the blessed John, in the testimony of his Gospel, gives us an account of this economy (disposition) and acknowledges this Word as God, when he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If, then, the Word was with God, and was also God, what follows? Would one say that he speaks of two Gods? I shall not indeed speak of two Gods, but of one; of two Persons however, and of a third economy (disposition), viz., the grace of the Holy Ghost. For the Father indeed is One, but there are two Persons, because there is also the Son; and then there is the third, the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup>*

Hippolytus removes the problem of ditheism introducing the clarification that equality between Father and Son does not mean identification as two gods. Spirit considerations on the third person flow less smoothly.

The struggle between those who would be the orthodox and those called heretics continues on through the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. We have seen how the nature of the Father, and the nature of the spirit get embroiled in the effort to define the nature and purpose of Jesus. As the fourth century opens a new battle ground develops in Alexandria, Egypt. This time the Gnostics are sidelined, the supposed heretic is a popular Christian presbyter named Arius.

### **The Arian Controversy and Nicea**

The Roman Emperor Constantine, assumed control of the eastern half of the Roman Empire from Licinius in A.D. 324 only to find a debate raging which divided the whole of Licinius' former dominions. The debate is known as the Arian Controversy.

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<sup>12</sup> *Against the Heresy of Noetus, 10 & 14*

The Arian controversy mainly concerned the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, and had its root in the past unclear conception of the Trinity. Development of the orthodox of Christology was usually intermingled with that of the Trinity at that time in history. Arius stressed that there is only one unbegotten God and unoriginated God. He believed that there is a real difference in the essence between the Father and the Son. Christ was neither God nor man, but some being in between. The Son is a created being, he “has a beginning”, and “there was a time when he was not”.<sup>13</sup>

Constantine decided to intervene to maintain peace, and called the Council of Nicea (325 AD). Both Arius’ supporters (e.g., Eusebius of Nicomedia) and strong opponents (e.g., Alexander and Athanasius) were minorities. The majority was the middle party (“semi-Arian” people, e.g., Eusebius of Caesarea). They suggested using the word *homoiousios* to state that the Son is of similar essence as the Father, instead of *homoousios* to state that the Son is of the same essence of the Father. Constantine was actively involved and finally with the emperor’s pressure the Council adopted a statement with “*homoousios*” in it and the party of Alexander and Athanasius had a temporary victory. The Creed of Nicea, with its focus on Christology, is widely regarded as the basis of orthodox Christianity. It affirmed the full divinity of Christ against the Arian view of his creaturely status:

*“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible. And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is from the Father's substance, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father. Through him were made all things, both in heaven and on earth. For us and for our salvation he came down, was incarnate and became human. He suffered, rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens and is coming to judge the living and the dead. And we believe in the Holy Spirit. But those who say, ‘there was once when he was not’ and ‘before he was begotten he was not’, and that ‘he was made out of nothing’, or who affirm that ‘the Son is of a different hypostasis or substance’, or that he is mutable or changeable - these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.”<sup>14</sup>*

The Creed of Nicea was the foundation of the orthodox teaching on Christology today. Arianism came back. Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria and staunch supporter of the Creed, was repeatedly banished and exiled. Constantius became emperor after the death of Constantine. Constantius supported Arianism.

The Cappadocian fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus) did service to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity by drawing a distinction between “*ousios*” and “*hypostasis*”. Their starting point was the three “*hypostasis*” instead of the one divine “*ousia*” of God. By this they made it clear that God is one in essence, but three in persons. In 381 AD

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<sup>13</sup> Arius, “A Letter to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia”, Section 4.6 in McGrath, A. E., Ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> “The Creed of Nicea”, <http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glmps088.shtml> (Nov. 2002)

the Council of Constantinople affirmed the approval of the Creed of Nicea, and marked the final triumph of the Nicene orthodox.

Several more church councils were convened through the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries to further refine the definitions of the nature and person of Jesus Christ. But the majority of the work was done by A.D. 381 at the Council of Constantinople. Jesus was part of a triune God, one in essence, but three in persons. In A.D. 451 at the Council of Chalcedon the orthodox definition of the nature and person of Jesus Christ was complete. In addition to the Creed of Constantinople, the Council of Chalcedon issued its famous statement of the doctrine of the Person of Christ:

*“So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself instructed us, and as the creed of the fathers handed it down to us.”<sup>15</sup>*

Orthodoxy was now secure. Those who disagreed were cast out of the Church, exiled from fellowship with the true believers of the Roman Church. In the centuries to follow this was not enough; they were put to death and set to flame during the times of the Reformation. The tenant of the faith regarding Christology, the litmus test for a true Christian, was now inked in the words of the Church Councils of Constantinople and Chalcedon.

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<sup>15</sup> “Dogmatic Definition of the Council of Chalcedon”, <http://www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/incac2.htm> (Nov. 2002)