

TRINITY CONTROVERSY OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

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Introduction

It has been said the Trinitarian Godhead is humanly indescribable. One anonymous writer gives the following conjecture: “Try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; but try to deny it and you’ll lose your soul.”¹ Christian Evangelical Fundamentalists of today define the Trinitarian Godhead as: one self-existent, infinite, incomprehensible God who exists in the Godhead where there are three eternal and co-equal Persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This modern-day definition is a historical development of multiple theological debates involving: dedicated theologians, collective Christian councils; and, social, governmental, and religious influences. The underlying framework of the Trinitarian conception was actively addressed during the fourth-century Arian Controversy; where the relationship between the Father God and the Son Jesus became a poignant point of differentiation. The purpose of this paper is to lay a foundational overlay regarding the development of the Trinity, focusing primarily upon the fourth century, on what is commonly known as the Arian Controversy. Once we examine this historical Christological controversy it will provide a capacious appreciation regarding the diligence taken when standardizing the modern-day fundamental evangelical conception of the Trinitarian Godhead.

The Biblical term “Trinity” is somewhat of an oddity because it can be found nowhere in Scripture. Additionally, the staunch Monotheism of Judaism, and of their God “Jehovah,” would lead one to believe, especially the fourth-century mind, that the idea of a Trinity would be regarded as a form of paganistic pluralism. These are some of the challenges the fourth-century Christian adherents encountered as they struggled to define the Trinitarian Godhead. In their quest, the true believers looked to the Scriptures for resolution of such doctrinal difficulties.

¹ Milliard Erickson: *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 1998) 367.

Wright highlights some of the Trinitarian qualities found in the Apostle's writings: "Jesus forgave sins (Mark 2:5–7); Paul was led to declare that in Christ 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13; confessions like that of Thomas, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28); or of John the Evangelist, 'the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1)."² To acquaint the reader with this controversial fourth century doctrine we will examine, regarding the Trinity: definition; historical development; fourth century debate; "key" persons involved; important fourth century councils; and, terminologies used to describe.

Trinity Defined

The Trinity is a perplexing theological truth; therefore, it is imperative to properly define the foundational constituents before progression is made regarding its historical roots. Keith uses a "grid," borrowed from Roger Nicole that is simple and suffices befittingly for our purpose: "(1) There is one God and one only; (2) This God exists eternally in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; (3) These three are fully equal in every divine perfection."³ Wright provides a superb, and necessary, description regarding the etymological make-up of the English word, Trinity: "The word "Trinity" is a compound formed from the Latin words for "three" and "one." It captures the Christian belief that God is tri-unity; that he is in one sense three, and in another sense one."⁴ Armed with this foundational etymological understanding, regarding the word "Trinity," a regression back into the pages of history is warranted. It should be understood that the Christological debate of the early fourth century, regarding the Trinity, was initially more of a "binatarian" battle. Ferguson emphasizes, "Early thinkers may have been 'Trinitarian' in

² David F Wright. 2001. *The Formation Of The Doctrine Of The Trinity In The Early Church*. RAR 10:3 (Summer 2001) 2.

³ Graham, Keith. 2003. *Our Knowledge of God: Insights from the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Controversies*. RAR 12:1 (Winter 2003) 2.

⁴ Wright, 1.

thought, but they were ‘binatarian’ in passion.”⁵ Additionally, understand the fourth century Christological debate festered as an immediate response to their current Arian Controversy. Importantly, a “somewhat” stabilized final agreement was reached only after a series of multiple councils (Antioch; Nicaea; Alexandria; and Constantinople). Though the “somewhat” refined creed was established at Constantinople (381 A.D.); thus, the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) served as the nuts and bolts of the ensuing finality. Haykin describes some of this Nicene, “nuts and bolts,” verbiage: “Jesus Christ is unequivocally declared to be ‘true God’ and ‘of one being (homoousios) with the Father’ and the Holy Spirit is said to be the ‘Lord and Giver of life,’ who ‘together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.’”⁶ Conclusively, the foundational doctrine of the Trinity was laid at Nicaea (325 A.D.); but, as aforementioned it will not be widely accepted until much later in the Council of Constantinople (381A.D.).

Historical Development of the Trinity

The predominant schools of thought in fourth century Christendom were: Alexandrian (Alexandria Egypt); and Antiochian (Antioch Asia); with Rome hanging in the balance though mostly favoring the Alexandrians. Alexandrians gave greater emphasis to the Divine nature of Jesus; while the Antiochian stressed the humanity of Jesus. Though the personalities involved in this controversy were numerous; the following men were considered pioneering voices of their day. Ignatius, (died c. 110), Bishop of Antioch and student of Apostle John, is notably known for writing seven letters on his way to his martyrdom. Ignatius equated Jesus with the Father by making reference to “Jesus as God and Savior” with additional mention of the “Spirit” in regards

⁵ Everett Ferguson. *Church History Volume One; From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 145.

⁶ Michael Haykin. 2001. *The Undivided Three: The Doctrine Of The Trinity In Church History*. RAR 10:3 (Summer 2001).

to “Salvation.”⁷ Justin Martyr (103-165), a Christian apologist, developed a theological concept identifying “the philosophical Logos as the Incarnate Son of God . . . who is numerically distinct from the Father as the agent of his will, but is unified with him as well.”⁸ Irenaeus (2nd century), Bishop of Lyons, a hearer of Polycarp (a disciple of Apostle John) is best known for his literary work *Against Heresies* which is a refutation of Gnosticism. Tinder describes Irenaeus’ Christological concept as one that concentrated upon an “economic” Trinity, one that concentrates on “how the distinctions within the Godhead work out our salvation”; vice, the subject of the “ontological” Trinity.⁹ Tertullian (c. 160- c. 220 A.D.), was an affluent Christian writer from Carthage, well versed in Greek and Latin. Litfin identifies Tertullian as, “The first known writer to use the term ‘trinity’ to express the relationship of three-in-one that characterizes the Christian God.”¹⁰ Origen of Alexandria (c. 185- c. 254 A.D.), scholar and theologian; known as the father of allegorical interpretative methodologies. Regarding the Trinity, Tinder attributes Origen as the “first to use the key term homoousios to indicate that the Son and the Spirit are of the same essence or substance, as the Father. But he still saw the Father as the principle source of deity, which the Son and Spirit have in some sense eternally derived from the Father.”¹¹ It is clear by the diversity of thought represented in these church fathers the conceptual formulation of the Trinity is at best convoluted by the fourth century. What about the fourth century Christian scholars view towards the Holy Spirit? Kelly divulges: “The Spirit was

⁷ Donald Tinder. *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Its Historical Development and Departures*. *Emmaus Journal*. *EMJ* 13:1 (Summer 2004) 3.

⁸ Bryan M. Litfin. *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007) 66.

⁹ Tinder, 4.

¹⁰ Litfin, 112.

¹¹ Tinder, 5.

for them the Spirit of God; like the Word, He shared the divine nature, being (in Athenagora's words) an 'effluence' from the Deity."¹² Regarding God the Father, Keith tells us, "fourth century Christians regularly stressed the incomprehensibility of God" and this is the mind-set that ushered in Arius and the Arian Controversy of the fourth century.¹³

Fourth Century Debate

The question at hand was this: what is the relationship between the Son and the Father? The stakes were high and the outcome would reign as standard for centuries to follow. Tinder summarizes the debate as follows: "what was argued about was whether the three distinctions were eternal or something else, and whether they were genuinely equal or whether one—the Father—was pre-eminent, and if so, how."¹⁴ The "key" persons involved are numerous; but, the three pivotal figures leading the charge were: Arius (representing the Antiochian camp); and, Alexander (Bishop of Alexandria) and Athanasius (representing the Alexandrian camp). The first shots are fired, Piper describes, "The war was sparked in A.D. 319. A deacon in Alexandria named Arius, who had been born in 256 in Libya, presented a letter to Bishop Alexander arguing that if the Son of God were truly a Son, he must have had a beginning."¹⁵

Arius, Presbyter in Alexandria (256-336 A.D.)

Today, there are only three known surviving letters written by Arius. What we learn about Arius is primarily through the letters of his enemies (Athanasius) or his followers. Hanson notes:

¹² J.N.D Kelly. *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1978) 103.

¹³ Keith, 3.

¹⁴ Tinder, 2.

¹⁵ John Piper. 2008. *Contending for Christ "Contra Mundum": Exile and Incarnation in the Life of Athanasius*. SBJT 12:2 (Summer 2008) 2.

“ . . . when Athanasius first began writing against the views of Arius, at the end of the fourth decade of the fourth century (*Orationes con. Arianos 339/40*), Arius had already been dead a few years (*ob. 336*).”¹⁶ The point Hanson is making is that much of what is commonly attributed to Arius is likely the teachings of his disciples, known as Athanasius’ Arians. Gwatkin provides an insightful description of Arius’ idea of the Trinity: “the Arian trinity of divine persons forms a descending series, separated by infinite degrees of honor and glory, resembling a philosophical triad of orders of spiritual existence, extending outwards in concentric circles.”¹⁷ Arius, well known for his heretical concepts, taught there was a time when Jesus did not exist; thus, alluding to God’s creative act of Jesus. We find in Arius’ earliest “known” letter (around 318 A.D.), written to his ally Eusebius bishop of Nicomedia, the following comments:

That the Son is not unbegotten (ἀγέννητος) not in any way a part of an Unbegotten, not derived from some (alien) substratum (ὑποκειμένου τινος), but that he exists by will and counsel before times and before ages, full of truth, and grace, God, Only-begotten, unflinching (ἀναλλοίωτος). And before he was begotten, or created or determined or established, he did not exist. For he was not unbegotten (or unoriginated).¹⁸

Arius, in his second “known letter,” Profession of Faith, states: “Consequently there are three existing realities (ὑποστάσεις). And God is the cause of them all for he is supremely sole (μονώτατος) without beginning (ἀναρχος), and the Son, having been begotten timelessly by the Father and created and established before aeons, did not exist before he was begotten, but, begotten.”¹⁹ So, from Arius’ own words the Trinity certainly did not attribute *homoousios* (one substance) to Jesus; but, considered Him a creation of God the Father.

¹⁶ R.P.C. Hanson. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2007) 19.

¹⁷ Henry M. Gwatkin. *The Arian Controversy: Epochs of Church History Classic Reprint*. Edited By Mandell Creighton. (Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 2007) 7.

¹⁸ Hanson, 6.

Alexander of Alexandria (died 326-328 A.D.)

Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, was opposed to Arius and his heretical Anomoean (the Son is unlike the Father) tendencies. Rusch describes Alexander as: a follower of Origen who “regarded the Logos as two *hypostasis*, sharing the same nature . . . the Father alone is unoriginate, but the Son is co-eternal with the Father, since God cannot be without the Word. The Sonship of the Logos is real and natural.”²⁰ The belief Alexander indefatigably defended was that the Son has always been with the Father; and, he was eternally generated from the Father. Bromiley defines eternal generation as:

Deriving from Origen, this is the phrase used to denote the inter-Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son as is taught by the Bible. “Generation” makes it plain that there is a divine sonship prior to the incarnation (cf. John 1:18; 1 John 4:9), that there is a distinction of persons within the one Godhead (John 5:26), and that between these persons there is a superiority and subordination of order (cf. John 5:19; 8:28). “Eternal” reinforces the fact that the generation is not merely economic (i.e., for the purpose of human salvation as in the incarnation, cf. Luke 1:35), but essential, and that as such it cannot be construed in the categories of natural or human generation.²¹

Hall describes Alexander’s insistence as follows: “there is no instant . . . when the Father was without the Son. Indeed to be a Father is to have a Son: “always God, always Son.”²² So Alexander, who died in 326 A.D., laid the groundwork for his successor Athanasius who takes up the helm. Athanasius’ primary contention will be with the disciples of Arius, since Arius

¹⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁰ William Rusch (ed/trans). *The Trinitarian Controversy: Sources of Early Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980) 18.

²¹ G.W. Bromiley. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2001) 393-394.

²² Christopher A. Hall. *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 36.

dies in 336 A.D. Eusebius of Nicomedia becomes the new spokesperson for the Arian side of this controversy.

Athanasius (296-373 A.D.)

Athanasius was well versed in philosophy and rhetoric; but, is best known as an exemplary theologian who had an extraordinary command of biblical doctrine. Piper, while referencing Gregory's comments, states: "Athanasius' contribution to the theology of the Trinity can scarcely be overestimated . . . He turned discussion away from philosophical speculation and back to a biblical and theological basis."²³ Athanasius was a tireless supporter of the Nicene Creed and his steadfastness was vitally important to the refinement and preservation of the future Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381A.D.). Athanasius is to be commended for his personal exertions in defense of the Nicene Trinitarian doctrine; his efforts cost him tremendous personal hardships. Piper gives the following account of Athanasius' hardships: . . . "Athanasius was driven out of his church and office five times by the powers of the Roman Empire. Seventeen of his forty-five years as bishop were spent in exile."²⁴

Theologically, Athanasius was Alexandrian in doctrine. Wright describes Athanasius' doctrine as one that taught: ". . . the Son fully shared the Father's divine substance, and that, since the divine nature was indivisible, the Godhead of Father and Son was a single entity."²⁵ It is with Athanasius we begin to notice greater emphasis being placed on Greek words (primarily *ousia* and *homoousios*) when referring to the Trinitarian conceptualization. Note the following quote by Athanasius himself: "The Word was not hedged in by His body, nor did His presence in the body prevent His being present elsewhere as well. When He moved His body He did not

²³ Piper, 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

²⁵ Wright, 7.

cease also to direct the universe by His Mind and might. No. The marvelous truth is, that being the Word, so far from being Himself contained by anything, He actually contained all things Himself” (Athanasius 3.17).²⁶

Important Fourth Century Councils

The Council’s of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.) are the most widely recognized council’s when evaluating the Christological differentiations in the Arian Controversy. Hanson suggests a pre-Nicene Council, the Synod of Antioch (early 325 A.D.), which involved Constantine’s closest Christian advisor (Hosius) and Antiochian Bishop Eustathius. We find the outcome of this council documented in a letter from the Synod of Antioch, to Alexander the Bishop of Thessalonica. Much of the political groundwork for eventual success of the Nicaea Council was formulated in this pre-Nicene council (Antioch). Hanson hints that much of “the doctrine promulgated in the *Statement*” was quite similar to Bishop Alexander’s (of Alexandria) and summarizes it as follows: “The most important points of the *Statement of Belief* are thus expressed: . . . he (i.e. Christ) who always exists and did not formerly not exist . . . for he is the image not of the will nor anything else except the actual *hypostasis* of the Father.”²⁷

Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.)

It was through a series of councils that these principal creeds, Nicene and Constantinople, were formulated. The first ecumenical (universal) council in Nicaea (325 A.D.) was the Roman Emperor Constantine’s measure for finding resolution for this Arian Controversy which was

²⁶ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. *NPNF2-02. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Series II, Volume 4: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters. The Incarnation of the Word, Chapter 3 (17)*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204>. Accessed April 10, 2011.

²⁷ Hanson, 149.

causing instability for his newly founded Christian religion of the Roman Empire. The creed that was developed in Nicaea, though slightly altered in language in Constantinople of 381, was a milestone; and, is the primary basis for today's orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Wright makes the following observation regarding the Nicene Creed's durability: "The Creed itself enjoys wider official recognition than any other statement of Christian belief (more than the so-called Apostles' Creed) and is used in worship in major traditions worldwide."²⁸ Kelly provides some primary portions of the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God . . . And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father . . ."²⁹ The Nicene Creed concluded by declaring that anyone who followed Arius' teachings, "there was once when he was not' or 'he was not before he was begotten' or 'he came into existence from nothing' or 'who affirm that the Son of God is of another *hypostasis* or substance' or 'mutable or subject to change," was anathematized.³⁰

Council of Alexandria (362 A.D.)

During the Council of Alexandria (362 A.D.), in which Bishop Athanasius presided, the divinity of the Holy Spirit was a major focal point. Additionally, the terms, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, which were utilized in the Council of Nicaea, were re-defined for additional clarity. Rusch states, "The formula of one *hypostasis* was endorsed as a means of stating the unity of nature between Father and Son."³¹ Ferguson, who saw the problem as being one of semantics, adds: "The terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* had been used interchangeably at Nicaea . . . A

²⁸ Wright, 6.

²⁹ Kelly, 232.

³⁰ Rusch, 49.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

compromise emerged to use *ousia* for the common nature of the Father and Son and to use *hypostasis* for the individual identity of each.”³² Another difficulty the groups were experiencing had to do with the interpretation of these terms in Latin vice Greek. Ferguson states, “Latin used *substantia* for the common ‘substance’ or nature of the Godhead. The etymological equivalent in the Greek was *hypostasis*, a word coming to be commonly used by the Homoiousians for the individual persons in the Godhead . . . A clarification of the different senses in which the two words were being used facilitated mutual understanding.”³³

The Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.)

The Council of Constantinople was called by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius to re-address the Nicene Creed. It should be noted that by this time the eastern and western portions of the Roman Empire were ruled by two separate emperors. The changes, made to the original Nicene Creed, were minor and perhaps this is why many refer to what we now have as the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Hanson points out twelve changes between the two creeds and notes: “Most of the twelve differences have no significance at all.”³⁴ Here are some of the more pertinent changes with regards to this paper: (ii) ‘only-begotten is added after the ‘Son of God’ in Constantinople (C) instead of after ‘from the Father’ as in (N) Nicene; (iii) ‘that is, from the substance of the Father’ of N is omitted in C (xi) Everything in C after ‘in the Holy Spirit’ is added (xii) C omits the anathemas of N.”³⁵ The other major contribution made by the Council of Constantinople, was the much needed additional emphasis on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This increased emphasis was largely resulting from the labors of the Cappadocian Fathers.

³² Ferguson, 207.

³³ Ibid., 208.

³⁴ Hanson, 816.

³⁵ Ibid.

Tinder tells us the Council of Constantinople was an effort of both emperors “to re-affirm Nicaea and to condemn a movement that had arisen which was denying the deity of the Holy Spirit. The resulting clarifications of the Nicaea Creed are what has been understood as Trinitarian orthodoxy ever since.”³⁶

Terminologies for the Trinitarian Description

Though many Greek and Latin terms were developed for Trinitarian expression, the three primary terms were: *ousia*, *hypostasis* and *homoousios*. The re-defining of these terms, in a way in which the various groups could make application to their particular belief systems, proved to be the pivotal characteristic for greater universal acceptance.

Ousia and Hypostasis

One thing that must be kept in mind, this time period was dotted with major transitional and linguistic changes involving both the Greek and Latin languages. When considering the first uses of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* in regards to the Trinitarian doctrine, this employment is attributed to Origen. Ferguson adds, “Origen used *ousia* and *hypostasis* as interchangeable, but they became the words respectively for the oneness and the individuality in the Godhead.”³⁷

Wright, referring back to the Council of Constantinople, shows how the compromise between these two words helped in the resolution of the conflict: “Agreement was reached at last on the formula ‘one ousia in three hypostaseis,’ which combined the characteristic Eastern emphasis on the three eternally distinct hypostaseis, traditional since Origen, with the more Athanasian stress

³⁶ Tinder, 7.

³⁷ Ferguson, 135-136.

on the single ousia of the Godhead.”³⁸ It seems, at least for a while, everyone but those condemned as heretics were happy.

Homoousios

The key-point when considering the creeds and *homoousios* is that it is a non-Biblical word; even more incredible is that it was previously used by the adherents of Gnosticism.³⁹ Ferguson shows the natural unfolding and distinctive lines of demarcation that resulted from the term *homoousios*: (1) *Homoousians*: the Son is of the same substance with the Father; (2) *Homoiousians*: the Son is of similar substance to the Father; (3) *Homoeans*: the Son is like the Father; (4) *Anomoeans*: the Son is unlike the Father.”⁴⁰ Rusch ascribes the eventual successful acceptance of the term *homoousios* to the interchangeability of the term; thus, allowing each proponent to “interpret in ways comparable with their own theology.”⁴¹

Conclusion

The Trinity, when we truly attempt total conceptualized mastery over the components discussed in this paper; it becomes painfully apparent that man does not possess the rationale capacity to fully understand this phenomenon. Yet, through the power of the Holy Spirit, man is capable of possessing the necessary faith for acceptance. Wright adds, “The doctrine of the Trinity remains a doctrine of faith, which means among other things that believing it, and believing in the triune God is not conditional on understanding it fully.”⁴² We have canvassed

³⁸ Wright, 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰ Ferguson, 201.

⁴¹ Rusch, 20.

⁴² Wright, 11.

some of the greatest Christian minds and theologians; yet, the Trinitarian doctrine remains a mystery in multifarious ways. Tinder provides a sensible conclusive thought: “After sixteen hundred years, it does not appear that we can improve upon the formula agreed to at Constantinople in 381, but we can certainly come to a better consensus on the understanding of it.”⁴³ Perhaps, the most appropriate way to close this paper is to return to the introductory statement from the anonymous writer, “Try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; but try to deny it and you’ll lose your soul.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Tinder, 17.

⁴⁴ Ericson, 367.

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