

Trinitarian & Christological Controversies

Sources

Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (2014)

Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils* (1983)

Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order* (1978)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3

I. Introduction

A. Doctrinal Emphases in Controversies

1. Emphasis by Eras
 - a. Early Church: Person of Christ
 - b. Reformation: Work of Christ
2. Salvation Emphasis of Councils
 - a. Only God can save humanity
 - b. Only a human can redeem humanity

B. Questions

1. How is Christ God?
2. How is Christ both God and man?
3. Recall the foreshadowing of Tertullian
 - a. Trinity: 3 persons in one substance
 - b. Christ: 2 substances (natures) in one person

C. How we view councils

1. Pattern: Challenge and Response
 - a. Church previously believed in deity & humanity of Christ
 - b. Church *defined* teaching in response to heresy
2. Alleged pattern of Council of Jerusalem
3. Philosophy vs. precision
 - a. Charge: Councils mixed in Greek philosophy
 - b. Reply: Councils achieved defined, precise language
4. Authority
 - a. Not an inherent authority
 - b. Affirm their general biblical correctness
 - c. Appreciate divine providence amid human corruption

II. Trinitarian Controversy

A. Parties

1. Arians
 - a. Founder: Arius, presbyter in Egypt
 - b. Teaching: Christ is the greatest creature
 - c. “There was a time when the Son was not”
2. Orthodox
 - a. Spokesman: Athanasius
 - b. Father and Son are the same essence or substance (*homoousios* or *consubstantial*)
3. Middle Party
 - a. Spokesman: Eusebius of Caesarea
 - b. Feared Arianism
 - c. But also feared modalism (Patripassianism)

- B. Council of Nicea (325)
 - 1. Called by Constantine to settle controversy
 - 2. Work
 - a. Condemned Arius
 - b. Issued first version of Nicene Creed
 - 3. First “ecumenical” council
 - C. Ongoing Controversy
 - 1. Emperors weighed in
 - a. Constantine switched sides
 - b. Constantius II backed Arians
 - 2. Athanasius of Alexandria defended Nicene orthodoxy
 - a. “Athanasius against the world”: Exiled 5 times
 - b. Key Idea: Christ as the savior & restorer of humanity
 - 3. Others took up the Nicene cause
 - a. Three Cappadocians refined the terminology
 - b. Basil the Great defended the Holy Spirit
 - 4. Arianism spread to barbarians
 - D. Council of Constantinople (381)
 - 1. Issued final version of Nicene Creed
 - 2. Teaching concerning Christ
 - a. “God of God, ... very [true] God of very [true] God.”
 - b. “Begotten”: Defining terms
 - 1) “Begotten of the Father before all worlds.”
 - 2) “Begotten, not made.”
 - c. “Of one substance with the Father”
 - 3. Affirmed deity of the Holy Spirit
 - E. Ongoing challenge of Arianism in barbarian kingdoms
- III. Christological Controversies
 - A. Overview
 - 1. Shift: Nature of Trinity to person of Christ
 - 2. Challenge: Relating Christ’s deity & humanity
 - 3. Schools
 - a. Alexandrian: Stressed Christ’s deity
 - b. Antiochian: Stressed Christ’s humanity
 - B. Nestorians
 - 1. Reflected Antiochian emphasis: distinctness of Christ’s natures
 - 2. Leader: Nestorius
 - a. Archbishop of Constantinople (428-31)
 - b. Accusation: Separated the natures of Christ almost to make Him two persons
 - c. Formula: *Theotokos* vs. *Christotokos*
 - 1) Nestorius called Mary *Christotokos*, or “Christ-bearer”
 - 2) Rejected traditional *Theotokos*, “God-bearer,” or “mother of God”
 - a) On one hand, an affirmation of Christ’s full deity
 - b) On other hand, danger of “Mariolatry”
 - d. Charge: Too much distinction between natures
 - 3. Addressed at Council of Ephesus (431)

- a. Correct outcome, but a political travesty
 - b. Results
 - 1) Condemned Nestorianism
 - 2) Condemned Pelagianism
- C. Monophysites (Eutychians)
- 1. Reflected Alexandrian emphasis: unity of Christ's natures
 - 2. Teaching
 - a. *Mono* "one" + *physis* "nature"
 - b. Christ's two natures blended into one mostly divine nature
 - c. Charge: Too little distinction between natures
 - 3. Marked by intervention of Pope Leo I
 - 4. Addressed at Council of Chalcedon (451)
 - a. Formula of Chalcedon
 - 1) Four "fences" on Christ's two natures: "Without confusion; without change; without division; without separation"
 - 2) Christ "perfect in divinity, perfect in humanity"
 - b. Became accepted language of orthodoxy: Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 21): "The Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and Man, in two distinct natures, and one person forever."
- D. Ongoing Challenges
- 1. Nestorian Church of the East (Asia)
 - 2. Monophysite churches of Middle East (e.g., Coptic, Armenian)