



THE TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY

October 29 / 30, 2025

Matthew 1:18-25; Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 28:19-20;

Gonzalez, chapter 17

- I. Knowing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: The Struggle to Speak Truthfully about God
 - a. The Trinitarian controversy of the 4th century was not philosophical speculation but a fight for the heart of Christian faith.
 - b. The early Church *discovered* the Trinity in Scripture — it did not invent it.
 - c. Knowing who God is (Father, Son, Spirit) is inseparable from knowing how we are saved and whom we worship.
- II. The Biblical Foundations of the Trinity
 - a. The Triune Pattern in the Gospel of Matthew.
 - b. Matthew 1:18–25 — The Incarnation.
 - c. Matthew 3:13–17 — The Baptism of Jesus.
 - d. Matthew 28:19–20 — The Great Commission: “*In the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*”
 - e. González: The doctrine of the Trinity was born out of *faithfulness to experience* — not an attempt to complicate God, but to describe God truthfully.
- III. The Beginnings of the Controversy (c. 318): Alexander and Arius
 - a. Arius’s Teaching: “There was when the Son was not.”
 - i. The Son was a created being — exalted, but not eternal.
 - ii. Motivated by reverence for God’s transcendence but undermined salvation.
 - b. The Response of Alexander (Bishop of Alexandria). If the Son is not truly God, He cannot truly save.
 - c. The Church faced a crisis: Is Jesus God or not?
- IV. The Crisis Spreads
 - a. Arius’s songs and slogans popularized his views.
 - b. Constantine called the Council of Nicaea (325) to restore unity.

- V. The Council of Nicaea (325)
 - a. The Problem of Language: How can Jesus be both Son and God without violating monotheism?
 - b. Options:
 - i. Partial divinity (divided God).
 - ii. Two Gods.
 - iii. One God with different roles (Sabellianism).
 - iv. A created Son (Arianism).
 - c. The Role of Athanasius
 - i. Young deacon and secretary to Bishop Alexander.
 - ii. Clarified the eternal generation of the Son.
 - iii. Helped secure the term *homoousios* — “of one substance with the Father.”
 - d. The Nicene Solution
 - i. The Son is “begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father.”
 - ii. Fully divine, co-eternal, consubstantial.
 - iii. “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”
 - e. Why It Mattered
 - i. Only the true God can save.
 - ii. If Christ is not fully God, redemption collapses.

- VI. The Struggle Continues: Mid-Century Conflict
 - a. Division in the Church
 - i. Western Church: emphasized unity of essence.
 - ii. Eastern Church: emphasized personal distinctions.
 - iii. Confusion led to ongoing disputes.
 - b. Athanasius of Alexandria
 - i. Became bishop (328 AD).
 - ii. Defender of Nicene faith — “Athanasius contra mundum.”
 - iii. “He became what we are that we might become what He is.”
 - iv. Emphasized salvation as *theosis* — sharing in divine life.
 - c. Anti-Nicene Parties
 - i. Anomoios: unlike the Father.
 - ii. Homoiousios: similar substance.
 - iii. Homoios: like the Father generally.
 - d. Athanasius refused compromise — truth, not terminology, was at stake.

- VII. The Great Cappadocians and the Triumph of Nicene Faith
 - a. The Cappadocian Fathers
 - i. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa.
 - ii. Clarified terminology:
 - 1. One essence (*ousia*)
 - 2. Three persons (*hypostases*)
 - iii. Their Contributions
 - 1. Father: unbegotten.
 - 2. Son: begotten.
 - 3. Spirit: proceeds.

- 4. Each fully God — yet one divine being.
- 5. Avoided modalism and tritheism.
- iv. Gregory of Nazianzus's Reflection: *"No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Three; No sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back into the One."*

VIII. The Council of Constantinople (381)

- a. Convened by Emperor Theodosius.
- b. Reaffirmed Nicaea and expanded the creed to include the Holy Spirit:
 - i. *"The Lord, the giver of life... who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified."*
 - ii. Clarified the classic formula: *One substance in three persons — coequal, coeternal, consubstantial.*

IX. The Practical and Spiritual Meaning of the Trinity

- a. The Trinity Reveals How We Know God
 - i. We know the Father through the Son in the Spirit.
 - ii. Prayer is participation in divine communion.
 - iii. The Trinity is not a puzzle — it is a relationship to enter.
- b. The Trinity Shows the Pattern of Salvation
 - i. The Father sends, the Son saves, the Spirit sanctifies.
 - ii. Salvation is an outpouring of love, not a transaction.
- c. The Trinity Models Christian Community
 - i. Unity in diversity — love in relationship.
 - ii. The Church, family, and discipleship reflect the triune pattern of mutual self-giving.

X. What Happened to Arius and Athanasius

- a. Arius
 - i. Condemned at Nicaea (325).
 - ii. Briefly restored, then died suddenly (336) — viewed as divine judgment.
 - iii. Arianism persisted, especially among Eastern and Gothic Christians.
- b. Athanasius
 - i. Became Bishop of Alexandria (328).
 - ii. Exiled five times under four emperors.
 - iii. Defender of Nicene orthodoxy through writings: *On the Incarnation, Orations Against the Arians, Life of Antony.*
 - iv. Authored first list of 27 New Testament books (Festal Letter 39). Died in 373 AD, honored as "Pillar of Orthodoxy."

XI. Conclusion: The Real Santa Claus — St. Nicholas of Myra

- a. Historical Context
 - i. Bishop of Myra; persecuted, imprisoned, and later freed under Constantine.
 - ii. Famous for acts of charity and justice — dowries for the poor, defense of the innocent.

b. Defender of Truth

- i. At Nicaea, Nicholas could not bear Arius's false teaching — reputedly struck him.
- ii. Imprisoned, stripped of vestments, but later restored after a divine vision.
- iii. Symbol of holy zeal for the truth of Christ's divinity.

XII. Why It Matters

- a. Nicholas defended what we celebrate today: that Jesus Christ is *Immanuel* — God with us.
- b. The Trinity is not theory — it is the Gospel itself.
- c. As González writes, the doctrine of the Trinity “was the Church's effort to be faithful to the experience of God's saving action in history.”

XIII. The Eternal Invitation

- a. To confess the Trinity is to confess love itself.
- b. Every act of Christian love echoes the eternal life of the Triune God.
- c. To follow Jesus is to be drawn into that divine fellowship — to glorify and enjoy God forever.