

{Lecture 9}
NICENE CHRISTIANITY
Constantine and the Nicene Era

* * * * *

I. Constantine and the Christianization of Rome

Constantine (272–337)

- After Diocletian's reign ended in 305, a power struggle ensued for control of the Roman Empire
- It would be five years before Constantine I (the Great) gained control of the Western Empire by defeating Maximian at Gaul in 310 and then, two years later, by defeating Maximian's son Maxentius at Milvian in 312
- It was at the Milvian Bridge that Constantine reportedly saw a vision of a cross in the sky and was told to conquer in the name of Christianity
- In 313, Constantine issued the *Edict of Milan* which changed the climate from one of hostile tolerance toward Christianity to one of friendliness and even protection. (The exception to this were the Donatists, who continued to be persecuted under Constantine.)
- It wasn't until 324 that Constantine defeated Licinius in the East and became the sole ruler of the entire Roman Empire
- The next year, in 325, the first general church council (since the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15) convened in Nicea
- Later, under Theodosius the Great (379–395), the inevitable occurred when Christianity was made the *exclusive* religion while others were rejected.



Christianity under Constantine after 324

- Constantine attributed his victory at the Milvian Bridge to the Christian God. As a result, he sought to give toleration and imperial favor to Christianity.
- He abolished all Roman opposition against Christianity.
- He gave large donations to the Church.
- Christian clergy were exempted from military service.
- Military personal were strongly encouraged to be baptized.

- Constantine was not baptized until 337 on his death bed by Eusebius of Nicomedia. His excuse – he wanted to be baptized in the Jordan River. In all likelihood, he wanted his sinful life and then to be baptized at the end.
- This, along with the killing of family members, causes one to doubt the authenticity of his Christian profession.
- He gave his sons a Christian education.
- Constantine’s mother, Saint Helena, built churches on holy sites in Palestine.
- He called the Synod of Arles 314 to address the Donatist question.
- He called the Council of Nicea in 325 to have agreement among the churches.

A Manual of Church History: “He exempted the Christian clergy from military and municipal duties and their property from taxation (313); abolished various pagan customs and ordinances offensive to Christians (315); facilitated the emancipation of Christian slaves (315); legalized bequests to Christian churches, a very important measure (321); enjoined the civil observance of Sunday, though only as the day of the Sun, and in connection with an ordinance requiring the consultation of the soothsayer (321); contributed largely toward the building of Christian houses of worship; and gave his sons a Christian education” (p. 306).

Stephen Tomkins: “But what kind of Christian was Constantine? He ruled with all the bloody brutality of pagan emperors—or Old Testament kings for that matter—killing even his firstborn son to protect his throne. But as well as legalizing Christianity, he Christianized the law: he outlawed crucifixion, the killing of unwanted children, the abuse of slaves and peasants, gladiatorial games and facial branding (because ‘man is made in God’s image’), and he decreed that all prisoners should see the sun every day. Whether a genuine vision lies behind the Milvian Bridge story or simply inspired PR, there is no doubting the sincerity of Constantine’s Christian conversion. Just how Christian it was can be doubted, though” (*A Short History of Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 46).

Results of Constantine’s Rule

- On the positive side, persecution against the church ceased; the church was able to organize church-wide councils which proved useful in discerning doctrine

Henry Chadwick: “The pagan contemporaries of Constantine were not wrong in saying that he had carried through a huge religious and social revolution. To change the religion of the Roman Empire was to change the world” (*The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* [Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 61).

- On the negative side, the connection between church and state soon became inseparable; and nominal Christianity grew as religious freedom (for non-Christians) became non-existent

S. M. Houghton: “The greatest danger threatening Christianity was realized when the emperor decided that he himself would rule the Church. The Lord Jesus Christ is the King in his Church, and no earthly power should ever be allowed to use its influence, much less its authority, in that spiritual dominion where Christ reigns supreme. But Constantine called meetings of bishops and other Church dignitaries, and such meetings were then presided over in his name” (*Sketches from Church History* [Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1980] p. 21)

- Constantine was succeeded by his three sons: Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans (they jointly ruled the empire from 337 to 361, when the last of them died)
- It was during this time that the Arian/Athanasian controversy was in full force.

Julian the Apostate

- Flavius Claudius Julianus (reigned from 361–63) was the last pagan Roman emperor. He tried to restore traditional Roman paganism to a position of prominence within the Empire.
- He was the Nephew of Constantine I
- He was called “The Apostate” by Christians because he rejected Christianity and instead embraced Theurgy, a form of Neoplatonism
- Julian himself claimed that he had been forced to become a Christian as a child, and that his acceptance of paganism came of his own volition after reading the poems of Homer

- As emperor, Julian attempted to change the state of Rome’s religious landscape; he thought that by restoring the old Roman faith, he would bring strength back to the empire
- Part of his efforts included an edict to guarantee freedom of religion (issued in 362); it reverted the edicts made by Constantius II (issued in 353 and 356) which made Christianity the primary religion of Rome

Theodosius the Great

- Flavius Theodosius (347–395) reigned from 379 until his death in 395
- Theodosius co-ruled with two of the sons of Valentinian I (Valentinian II and Gratian). He became the sole emperor in 394.
- He made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire
- He also established Nicene (Trinitarian) Christianity as the official religion (as opposed to Arianism). He worked hard to uproot paganism
- He called the Council of Constantinople in 381 to deal a final blow to Arianism
- He was the last emperor of the united empire; after his death the Roman empire was permanently split between East and West (though the church would not split between East and West until the 11th century)
- On February 27, 380, he declared that “Catholic Christianity” was the only legitimate imperial religion, ending any state support for the traditional Roman religion.



Roland H. Bainton: “Julian lasted as emperor only two years, from 361 to 363. The Arian-Athanasian controversy was then resumed until it was definitively resolved by the accession to the imperial dignity of the Spaniard Theodosius I, who was responsible for the final victory of the Nicene view. It was he who summoned the Second Ecumenical Council, at Constantinople in 381, where with slight modification the Creed of Nicaea was reaffirmed. Theodosius did much more. He established what even Constantine had never envisaged: the Christian state. Heretics of every sort were forbidden to assemble and their churches were confiscated; they even lost the right to inherit property. As for paganism, once the official religion of the empire, its rituals were proscribed, though its adherents were not treated violently or deprived of their civil rights. Half a century later, in 438, Theodosius II issued the Theodosian Code, which inflicted the penalty of death on those who denied the Trinity (the Arians) and on those who repeated baptism (the Donatists, who would not recognize Catholic baptism)” (*Christianity* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987], 100)

II. The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325)

- Nicea (also spelled Nicaea) was also known as New Constantinople
- This was the first eccumenical since the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 (in A.D. 49)
- The primary controversy surrounded the nature of Christ—was He equal with God in the essence of His deity, or was He a created being who was not equal with God?

Franklin H. Littell: “Arianism taught that Jesus Christ was not eternal but made by the Father to do His creative work. Some taught he was elevated to the position of Son of God because of his great virtue. The teaching appealed to both strict monotheists and to tribesmen who knew all about great men who were elected to be gods. The chief theological champion of what finally became official was Athanasius (c 296–373), exiled five times as the tides of political influence and controversy in church synods ebbed away or flowed toward his defense of the true deity of God the Son” (*Illustrated History of Christianity* [New York: Continuum, 2003], p. 44)

- Constantine convened the council in order to bring unity to the Christian church. He was attempting to put an end to the doctrinal controversies caused by the different viewpoints.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia: “Captivated by Christianity, Constantine wanted to give it the protection of the state; for, in line with the old Roman idea, he regarded himself as Pontifex Maximus of Christianity, ‘bishop in matters external’ (Vita Const. 4.24). As such, he thought it his task to settle a controversy that was upsetting the politico religious unity of his Christian empire. . . . When another synod in Antioch late in 324 failed to effect the desired unity, the Emperor decided to settle the controversy by a general synod of the more important bishops of the world” (vol. 10, p. 432)

- Three different positions on the deity of Christ were put forward at Nicea.
 - **Hetero-ousious** (“of a different substance”) – This was the view of Arius (256-336) and Eusebius of Nicomedia (not to be confused with the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea).
 - Logos (Christ) is not co-eternal, co-essential with, or co-equal with the Father. He was a son born, such that there was a moment before the creation of the world when the Son was begotten or

created. A “logical” position; “If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows that he had his subsistence from nothing.”

- **Homo-ousious** (“of the same substance”) – This was the view of Alexander of Alexandria as well as Athanasius (who was only a deacon at the time of the Council).
 - Logos (Christ) is co-eternal with the Father, never to change.
- **Homoi-ousios** (“of a similar substance”) – This view was an attempt to mediate between the other two views. It taught that the Son was divine but not deity in the sense of being of the same nature as the Father. Eusebius of Caesarea, for example, was one who held this view but then (upon fully understanding the Arian position) was convinced of the orthodox position.

- The Council

- The disputing first led to a council called by Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria. 100 bishops of Egypt attended who excommunicated Arius and his followers (including Eusebius of Nicomedia.)

Everett Ferguson: “Arius was a Libyan by birth but received his religious education from Lucian of Antioch (a martyr in 312). He was already a popular preacher in Alexandria when he challenged his bishop Alexander’s teaching that the Father and the Son possess equal eternity.

Arius affirmed, “There was (once) when Christ was not.” Understanding “begetting” as equivalent to “creating,” Arius taught that Jesus Christ was not derived from the substance of the Father, but, as the first and highest of God’s creations, became the instrument of all the rest of creation.

Bishop Alexander secured a condemnation of Arius’s teaching at a synod in Alexandria (317 or 318) that sent a letter to other bishops concerning the exclusion of Arius from fellowship. Arius put his views in writing and appealed to his friends, notably Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, for support. Both sides circulated conflicting correspondence” (*Church History*, 193).

Mark Noll: “When in 318 [Arius] communicated his views to his bishop, Alexander, he so stressed the unified, eternal character of God the Father that the Son was reduced to a lower status. Arius, who called Alexander a Sabellian for stressing the unity of the Father and

the Son, for his part thoroughly subordinated the Son to the Father. In response, many in the church wondered how such a subordinated Christ—who was more than human, yet less than fully God—could impart salvation to humanity. To Arius, however, the transcendence of the Father and the need to pursue logically the meaning of divine unity mattered more than anything else” (*Turning Points* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 49).

- More disputing occurred causing the Emperor Constantine to call a major council in Nicea. 318 bishops attended along with presbyters and deacons—totaled 2,000 church leaders in all. The event lasted 41 days.

Mark Noll: “On May 20, 325, the Christian church entered a new era. On that day about 320 bishops gathered at Nicaea, then a major city in Bithynia (now small-town Iznik in Turkey). The occasion marked the first “ecumenical,” or worldwide, council of the church. Its business—to adjudicate the meaning of Jesus’ divinity—dealt with the very heart of the Christian faith. What made the council such an extraordinarily important turning point was not just the doctrinal question at stake but the way in which political and social forces combined with the critical theological issue. The idea for the council did not come from the bishops. Rather, they had been summoned by the great Roman emperor himself, Constantine (ca. 288–337). After such a summons and after dealing with such an issue, the church would never be the same” (p. 49).

New Catholic Encyclopedia: “The Council opened at Nicaea in Bithynia (modern Iznik, northwestern Turkey in Asia), in Constantine’s palace, with an address by the Emperor. About 300 bishops were present . . . more than 100 came from Asia Minor, about 30 from Syria-Phoenicia, fewer than 20 from Palestine and Egypt. (vol. 10; p. 432)

- The position of Arius was immediately rejected by the council.

Robert Baker and John Landers: “After preliminary matters had been addressed, a confession of faith by Arius was presented. It defined the nature of Christ as being different from that of God and viewed Christ as a created being, greater than humans and worthy of worship but less than God. The council promptly and vehemently rejected this creed. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea offered a creed that he said had been used previously in the church. The wording of this creed was ambiguous. When the orthodox party saw that the Arians were willing to accept the creed of Eusebius, they led a movement to

reject it because it was not explicit enough. Athanasius, a young deacon from the church in Alexandria and the champion of the orthodox view, presented the [Nicene] creed to the council” (A *Summary of Christian History* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005], p. 62)

- The emperor wavered back and forth (motivated primarily by political ends) as the two major positions were debated—he leaned toward the third position of Eusebius of Caesarea. It became obvious that this compromise position would not pass as Homo-ousios supporters insisted on the inclusion of this word. Eventually, Constantine approved of the Nicene Creed.

Robert Baker and John Landers: “With Constantine’s approval the creed was adopted and a decree of banishment was issued against Arius and those who followed his view. Christians who had been victims of imperial power a few years before used imperial power to persecute one another. Constantine later changed his mind and recalled Arius, banishing Athanasius. This complete doctrinal reversal meant nothing to his political mind. Constantine probably had little grasp of Christian doctrine. His deferred baptism, moral and ethical standards, and retention of the pagan office that guaranteed his place as a Roman god after death were evidence of his spiritual character” (p. 63)

- The Results of the Council

- The council thus adopted the *Nicene Creed* with its short but direct statement of deity but which lacked precision. It did not speak to the question of the deity of the Holy Spirit (primarily because that was not the issue being debated at the time) giving rise to future controversy about the Trinity.
- From a political standpoint, Constantine's purpose was unity—not purity.
- The position of Arius was rejected with only two bishops (Theognis of Nicaea and Eusebius of Nicomedia) and Arius not signing the creed. These were banished to Illyria. Arius' books were burned.
- But the controversy was not fully settled at Nicea.
 - Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria and the leading spokesman for the orthodox view. Due to opposition from Arius, he was deposed and restored five times until his death.
 - Arius was still very influential and even Eusebius of Caesarea

(who held the half way position) persuaded Constantine to be more favorable to Arius yet remaining orthodox.

- **The Nicene Creed**

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousios consubstantialem*] with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence (from the Father) or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion – all that so say, the Catholic [Universal] and Apostolic Church anathematizes them."

- The Significance of the Nicene Creed

Everett Ferguson: "Nicaea marked a crucial development in doctrinal history. By adopting a creed backed up by anathemas, it made creeds into something more than confessions of faith. Instead of being summaries of catechetical instruction to be confessed at baptism, as they had been, creeds in the fourth century became formulations of councils. At Nicaea it was not catechumens who needed a creed, but bishops. . . . Instead of being only a confession of faith, the creed of Nicaea became a test of fellowship" (*Church History* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 1.197).

- The Council of Nicea and the Celebration of Easter

Robert H. Brumback: "The council of Nice also fixed the date for the observance of Easter. The name "Easter" comes from Ostra, goddess of the morning light or of the return of the sun in the spring. The eastern church and the western church differed upon the observance of the date of this festival. Many of the churches observed it on the Sunday after that day. The Council of Nicea settled the matter by fixing the day to be observed as the first Sunday after the first full moon which appears next after March 21" (*History of the Church through the Ages*, [Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957], 43).

The Plain Truth Magazine, p. 21: “The Council of Nicea confronts two major issues. It deals firstly with a dispute over the relationship of Christ to God the Father. The dispute is called the Arian controversy. Arius, a priest of Alexandria, has been teaching that Christ was created, not eternal and divine like the Father. The Council condemns him and his doctrine and exiles Arian teachers. (The movement, however, continues strong in many areas. When Gothic and Germanic invaders are converted to Christianity, it is frequently to the Arian form.) The other major issue at the Council is the proper date for the celebration of Passover. Many Christians especially those in Asia Minor still commemorate Jesus' death on the 14th day of the Hebrew month Nisan the day the "Jewish" Passover lambs had been slain. In contrast, Rome and the Western churches emphasize the resurrection, rather than the death of Jesus. They celebrate an annual Passover feast but always on a Sunday. The Council rules that the ancient Christian Passover commemorating the death of Jesus must no longer be kept on pain of death. The Western custom is to be observed throughout the Empire, on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. It is later to be called ‘Easter’ when the Germanic tribes are converted en masse to Christianity.”

- In a letter to those not present at the Council (from Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, 3.18-20), Constantine explained the decision regarding Easter:

“When the question relative to the sacred festival of Easter arose, it was universally thought that it would be convenient that all should keep the feast on one day; for what could be more beautiful and more desirable, than to see this festival, through which we receive the hope of immortality, celebrated by all with one accord, and in the same manner? It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom (the calculation) of the Jews, who have soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. . . . We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course; and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews, for it is truly shameful for us to hear them boast that without their direction we could not keep this feast. How can they be in the right, they who, after the death of the Saviour, have no longer been led by reason but by wild violence, as their delusion may urge them? . . . [It is] your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people. Our Saviour has left us only one festival day of our redemption. . . . Think then how unseemly it is that on the same day some should be fasting whilst others are seated at a banquet; and that after Easter, some should be rejoicing at feasts, whilst others are still observing a strict fast. For this reason, Divine Providence wills that this custom should be rectified and regulated in a uniform way; and everyone, I hope,

will agree upon this point. As, on the one hand, it is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord; and as, on the other, the custom now followed by the Churches of the West, of the South and of the North, and by some of those of the East, is the most acceptable. . . . You should consider not only that the number of churches in these provinces makes a majority, but also that it is right we should have nothing in common with the Jews. To sum up in few words: By the unanimous judgment of all, it has been decided that the most holy festival of Easter should be everywhere celebrated on one and the same day, and it is not seemly that in so holy a thing there should be any division. As this is the state of the case, accept joyfully the divine favour, and this truly divine command; for all which takes place in assemblies of the bishops ought to be regarded as proceeding from the will of God.”

Important Note: Our confidence in the full deity of Christ is not based on the Council of Nicea, it is only affirmed by it. Thus, it is like anything else from church history. The authoritative basis comes from Scripture. Church history simply affirms what we know to be true from God’s Word.

- The biblical backing for this doctrine is fully discussed in other classes here at the seminary. (Cf. passages like Isaiah 7:14 with Matthew 1:23; and Isaiah 9:6 among many others.)
- However, here is a brief citation from Dr. MacArthur’s commentary on John 1–11 that sums up some of the evidence.

John MacArthur: Jesus frequently spoke of His unique, otherworldly origin, of having preexisted in heaven before coming into this world. To the hostile Jews He declared, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world” (John 8:23). “What then,” He asked, “if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” (John 6:62). In His high-priestly prayer Jesus spoke of the glory which He had with the Father before the world existed (John 17:5). In John 16:28 He told His disciples, “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father.” Thus, John described Jesus in the prologue of his gospel with these words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

Amazingly, Jesus assumed the prerogatives of deity. He claimed to have control over the eternal destinies of people (John 8:24; cf. Luke 12:8–9; John 5:22, 27–29), to have authority over the divinely-ordained institution of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5), to have the power to answer prayer (John 14:13–14; cf. Acts 7:59; 9:10–17), and to have the right to receive worship and faith due to God alone (Matt. 21:16; John 14:1; cf. John 5:23). He also assumed the ability to forgive sins

(Mark 2:5–11)—something which, as His shocked opponents correctly understood, only God can do (v. 7).

Jesus also called God’s angels (Gen. 28:12; Luke 12:8–9; 15:10; John 1:51) His angels (Matt. 13:41; 24:30–31); God’s elect (Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33) His elect (Matt. 24:30–31); and God’s kingdom (Matt. 12:28; 19:24; 21:31; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; John 3:3) His kingdom (Matt. 13:41; 16:28; cf. Luke 1:33; 2 Tim. 4:1).

When a Samaritan woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us” (John 4:25) Jesus replied, “I who speak to you am He” (v. 26). In His high-priestly prayer to the Father, He referred to Himself as “Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3); “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word translated “Messiah.” When asked at His trial by the high priest, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” (Mark 14:61) Jesus replied simply, “I am” (v. 62). He also accepted, without correction or amendment, the testimonies of Peter (Matt. 16:16–17), Martha (John 11:27), and others (e.g., Matt. 9:27; 20:30–31) that He was the Messiah. He was the One of whom Isaiah prophesied, “His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

The Lord’s favorite description of Himself was “Son of Man” (cf. Matt. 8:20; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:22; John 9:35–37, etc.). Although that title seems to stress His humanity, it also speaks of His deity. Jesus’ use of the term derives from Daniel 7:13–14, where the Son of Man is on equal terms with God the Father, the Ancient of Days.

The Jews viewed themselves collectively as sons of God. Jesus, however, claimed to be God’s Son in a unique sense. “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father,” Jesus affirmed, “and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matt. 11:27). In John 5:25–26 He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.” After receiving word that Lazarus was ill Jesus said to the disciples, “This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it” (John 11:4). When asked at His trial, “Are You the Son of God, then?” Jesus replied, “Yes, I am” (Luke 22:70; cf. Mark 14:61–62). Instead of rejecting the title, the Lord embraced it without apology or embarrassment (Matt. 4:3, 6; 8:29; Mark 3:11–12; Luke 4:41; John 1:49–50; 11:27).

The hostile authorities clearly understood that Jesus’ use of the title Son of God was a claim to deity. Otherwise, they would not have accused Him of blasphemy (cf. John 10:46). In fact, it was Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God that led the Jews to demand His death: “The Jews answered [Pilate], ‘We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God’” (John 19:7). And in John 5:18 —

“The Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.” Even while He was on the cross, some mocked Him, sneering, “He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Matt. 27:43).

Jesus further outraged the unbelieving Jews by taking for Himself the covenant name of God, “I am” (Yahweh). That name was so sacred to the Jews that they refused to even pronounce it, lest they take it vain (cf. Exod. 20:7). In John 8:24 Jesus warned that those who refuse to believe He is Yahweh will perish eternally: “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” (The word “He” is not in the original Greek.) Later in that chapter “Jesus said to [His hearers], ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am’” (v. 58). Unlike many modern deniers of His deity, the Jews knew exactly what He was claiming, as their subsequent attempt to stone Him for blasphemy makes clear (v. 59). In John 13:19 Jesus told His disciples that when what He predicted came to pass, they would believe that He is Yahweh. Even His enemies, coming to arrest Him in Gethsemane, were overwhelmed by His divine power and fell to the ground when Jesus said “I am” (John 18:5–8).

All of the above lines of evidence converge on one inescapable point: Jesus Christ claimed absolute equality with God. Thus He could say, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30); “He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me” (John 12:45); and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (14:9–10). And thus we can conclude that “in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9), and we can worship Him accordingly as “our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:13).