

The Triumph of Christianity

According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity. We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of divine condemnation, and in the second the punishment which our authority, in accordance with the will of Heaven, shall decide to inflict.

Theodosius I, Code of Theodosius 16.1.2

In this chapter

With Constantine ruling as the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, Christianity spread more rapidly than ever, especially, but not exclusively, within the boundaries of the empire. Christian leaders from all around the Mediterranean world gathered in great councils—first at Nicaea, then at Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon—to define the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Constantine, meanwhile, moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople, and the empire itself was divided into an eastern and a western half, to make it more manageable. Finally, under the emperor Theodosius I, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. While most Christians were thrilled with this turn of events, some Christians believed that Christianity was becoming too worldly, so they left their settled lives and fled to the deserts to live solitary lives of piety in search of God.

Main topics covered

- Overview of the reigns of the [emperors Constantine, Julian the Apostate, and Theodosius I](#), especially their decisions regarding Christianity

- [The Council of Nicaea, the Arian controversy, and the Nicene creed](#)
- [Semi-Arianism, the Council of Constantinople, and the revision of the Nicene creed](#)
- [The Great Cappadocians and John Chrysostom in the East](#)
- [Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome in the West](#)
- [The rise of the monastic movement](#)
- [The relation of the divine and human in Christ, and the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon](#)

Three early emperors

Thus, like a faithful and good servant, did [Constantine] act and testify, openly declaring and confessing himself the obedient minister of the supreme King. And God forthwith rewarded him, by making him ruler and sovereign, and victorious to such a degree that he alone of all rulers pursued a continual course of conquest, unsubdued and invincible, and through his trophies a greater ruler than tradition records ever to have been before. So dear was he to God, and so blessed; so pious and so fortunate in all that he undertook, that with the greatest facility he obtained the authority over more nations than any who had preceded him, and yet retained his power, undisturbed, to the very close of his life.

Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 6

[Constantine](#)'s defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge and his conversion to Christianity guaranteed that serious persecutions against Christians would cease. His defeat of Licinius twelve years later assured Christians a favored status within the empire. Constantine's level of personal commitment to Christianity is a matter of debate. His mother Helena was a devout Christian (famous for her later discovery of the "true cross"), but his father Constantius, though favorably disposed toward Christians, was a pagan. In his early days as a



Though not yet a Christian at the time, the emperor Constantine attributed his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge to Christ's intervention on his behalf. Seventeenth century artist Pieter Lastman produced this depiction of the battle.

soldier, general, and emperor, Constantine worshiped Sol Invictus, "the undefeated Sun(-god)." Even after the traditional date of his conversion in 312, Roman coins bearing Constantine's name continued to carry a legend honoring Sol Invictus. It was only in 325, the year that the Council of Nicaea met, that Constantine had the Roman mint stop including the legend on official coinage. Furthermore, Constantine retained his title of Pontifex Maximus, or high priest of the Roman pantheon of gods, until his death in 337, and traditional pagan festivals and customs continued to be observed

under the oversight of the emperor. Finally, Constantine was not baptized until shortly before his death, though it was a fairly common practice at the time to postpone baptism, in order to assure that the maximum number of sins would be washed away by the sacrament. At the same time, Constantine was a great benefactor of the church, donating large amounts of money and land. In particular, he donated the land on which the current Lateran Palace and Basilica of St. John Lateran stand, and he built a great church in honor of St. Peter, on the site of the current Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican. He was also intimately involved in some of the most important decisions in the life of the fourth century Church, summoning bishops to discuss disputes involving the Donatist and Arian controversies.

The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea wrote the *[Life of Constantine](#)* shortly after Constantine's death. He considered the emperor to be a great Christian, a man blessed by God for his faithfulness and virtuous life. In fact, Eusebius said, God appointed Constantine to be emperor because he was a friend of God, an opponent of idolatry, a man of prayer, and a promoter of the Christian faith. Modern historians consider many of Eusebius's comments about Constantine to be fanciful exaggerations, and some doubt the emperor's personal commitment to the faith. They point to his execution of his son and wife, among others, as evidence of Constantine's failure to embrace the teachings of Christ. It is likely, they say, that Constantine saw Christianity as a tool by which he could cement his empire together, taking the place of the now obsolete pagan religious practices. Christianity would only serve the purpose of unifying his empire, however, if its doctrines and practices were standardized, so he attempted to settle disputed matters by decree. When that failed, he summoned the bishops together and charged them to settle their

differences for the good of the church and the empire. The most important of these gatherings was the Council of Nicaea, which met in 325 to decide the Arian controversy, among other matters (see below). The question of Constantine's sincerity is impossible to answer with any certainty, but it seems likely that Constantine was indeed a convinced Christian, albeit one whose level of conviction grew over time and whose understanding of the fine points of Christian doctrine was limited at best. His commitment to the prosperity of the Roman Empire was at least as important to him as the prosperity of the Church. In fact, it is likely that he saw the two as intertwined. Constantine saw no contradiction between building the kingdom of Rome and building the kingdom of God, and many Christian leaders of his day agreed with him.

One of Constantine's most important acts as emperor was moving his capital from Rome in the West to Byzantium in the East. He commissioned a new city on the site of Byzantium, and he christened it [Constantinople](#), the city of Constantine. Constantine saw the long-term danger of leaving the capital of the empire in Rome, because of the encroachment of the barbarian tribes that were growing ever stronger and more numerous. Constantine dreamed of a New Rome, whose wealth and prosperity would be the envy of every other city in the world. He not only moved his court to Constantinople, but he strongly urged many of the leading families of Rome, including the families of senators, to do the same. Within a hundred years, Constantinople was indeed a great city, rivaling and eventually surpassing Rome in wealth and power. At the same time as he moved his capital, he divided the empire into two halves: the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, ruled over by *augusti* (co-emperors) and *caesars*, with the most powerful *augustus* usually reigning from Con-

stantinople. Constantine's transfer of the capital to Constantinople allowed a portion of the Roman Empire to survive the fall of the city of Rome, along with the Western Roman Empire, more than a century later. The emperor's presence in Constantinople raised the importance of the city in ecclesiastical terms as well, and the rivalry between Rome and Constantinople during the days of the empire foreshadowed the rivalry that would develop between the eastern and western branches of the church as well.

Constantine was followed to the throne by his sons Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius, who divided the empire among themselves. The first two considered themselves Nicene Christians, that is, Christians who fully supported the positions favored by a majority of bishops at the Council of Nicaea concerning the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Constantius, who ruled in the East, favored a slightly different understanding of the divine interrelationship, one supported by many Eastern bishops and based in large part on Origen's earlier formulation. It is hard to tell how seriously they held to these religious niceties, but they, and many emperors who followed them, used the religious differences to their advantage in gaining support against their adversaries from the bishops, the army, and the common people. Before long the three sons of Constantine were at war with one another, primarily over territory, though their religious differences played some role as well. Constantius accused members of his father's court, which included many family members, of plotting to overthrow his father, and he had many of them killed, sparing only young children, one of whom was his six-year-old cousin Julian.

Although [Julian](#) was raised as a Christian, he was interested in Greek philosophy and became a follower of Neo-Platonism sometime before his twentieth birthday.

The fact that almost his whole family had been slaughtered by a self-proclaimed Christian emperor may have played a role in Julian's rejection of Christianity. Nevertheless, though he harbored animosity toward Constantius and other family members because of their role in the massacre of his own family, his attitude toward Christianity was not wholly negative. A few years after his adoption of Neo-Platonism, in 355, Julian was appointed caesar in the West, where he had a great deal of success in subduing the Germanic tribes. When the emperor Constantius died in 361, Julian became the new augustus and openly declared his adherence to paganism.

One of Julian's first acts was to remove the privileges that Christians had enjoyed in civil society, and he prohibited them from teaching rhetoric, grammar, and other classical disciplines, since they did not hold to the religious underpinnings of the courses they taught (i.e., paganism). He also ordered that exiled Christians be allowed to return home, probably to focus the church's attention on old, internal feuds rather than his own actions. Next, Julian organized the traditional pagan religion into a hierarchical structure modeled on the Christian churches, and he ordered all the priests and other cultic functionaries to live honorable lives, like the Christians. He further demanded that they show compassion for the poor and care for the dead as their Christian neighbors did, in part so that Christians could no longer win converts by pointing to their own holy lifestyles. Third, Julian, a skilled rhetorician, wrote treatises seeking to discredit Christianity as a recent, aberrant form of Judaism, a religion that was inferior to paganism but that at least had an ancient pedigree.

Julian had no interest in killing Christians simply for their faith, but he believed that paganism, if properly reformed and organized, would defeat Christianity



The emperor known to history as Julian the Apostate was the last non-Christian emperor of Rome. His attempts to replace Christianity with a reformed version of paganism as the dominant religion in the empire failed. He is represented in this 1875 painting by Edward Armitage presiding at a conference of opponents of orthodox Christianity.

in the realm of ideas. Julian's plan was well-conceived in many ways, but its chances of success were minimal from the outset. Christianity had been the favored religion within the empire for almost fifty years when Julian became emperor, and it was by now also the dominant religion in the empire. The fact that Julian sought to mimic its social concern and ecclesiastical organization shows that it was unlikely to be defeated by an old, obsolete religion that had lost its power to inspire its followers, regardless of the facelift that Julian sought to give it. The question of the viability of Julian's plan became moot, however, when Julian led his army east into Persian territory. After a number of initial victories, his forces met stiff resistance outside the city of Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, and Julian was killed in battle, only two years after he assumed the throne. It is ironic that Julian was the last direct

descendant of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, to wear the purple, and he did so as the last pagan emperor. Christian historians who wrote his history saw in his defeat God's hand of judgment, and they gave Julian a new name after his death: Julian the Apostate.

After Julian's death, the empire reverted to Christian rule. Various Germanic tribes—the Alamanni, Burgundians, Franks, Saxons, and Goths, among others—continued to harass the empire in the West, as did a new, non-Germanic tribe, the Huns. Roman emperors fought the barbarians, and they also warred with themselves over issues of land, power, and religion. In 378 a Spaniard, [Theodosius I](#), was appointed emperor in Constantinople. His defeats of the barbarian tribes in battle brought stability to the empire, but he is perhaps most famous for being the emperor who declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in 391. Paganism was outlawed, as was Manichaeism. Non-orthodox or schismatic Christians, such as Arians and Donatists, were forced to convert to Catholic Christianity, and Jews were persecuted as well. The orthodox inhabitants of many locales took advantage of the new laws to loot and burn pagan temples or confiscate them for use as churches. In Athens the Parthenon was converted to a church. In Alexandria the Serapeum, the temple dedicated to Serapis, was destroyed by a combination of Roman soldiers and monks from the desert. It is possible that much of the Alexandrian library was destroyed at the same time.

The other important event associated with Theodosius that relates directly to the development of Christianity is the Council of Constantinople, which he summoned in 381 to address doctrinal matters that persisted or had developed since Nicaea (this council will be discussed in the next section). Near the end of his life, Theodosius divided his empire between his two sons,

naming Arcadius his successor in the East and Honorius emperor in the West. When he died in 395, Theodosius was the last emperor of the whole Roman Empire.

The three emperors discussed in this section were the most important of the fourth century in terms of the development of Christianity and its relation with the Roman Empire. When Constantine began his rule in 306, Christianity was still an illicit religion, although sanctions against Christians were rarely enforced in the westernmost part of the empire, where Constantine began his rule. During his long reign—the longest reign of any emperor since Augustus—Christianity went from being illegal, to officially tolerated, to legal, to favored. The church grew enormously in wealth, influence, and popularity, as many people abandoned paganism to embrace Christianity. Julian's brief reign marked the last official resistance to Christianity from a Roman emperor, and though Julian failed in his effort to bring paganism back to a place of honor in the empire, the inability of a highly intelligent, well organized, powerful opponent of Christianity to make a significant dent in its hold on the people illustrates the heights to which Christianity had risen by the middle of the fourth century. In Theodosius, the pendulum which had briefly swung toward paganism during the reign of Julian swung back toward Christianity, this time for good. Theodosius carried the empire's attitude toward Christianity to its apparently logical conclusion, and the dream of Constantine that the empire would adopt a single religion that could bind its people together was realized. Christianity would continue to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in the East until its fall in 1453, and it would quickly regain its official status in the West after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and its reconstitution in various Germanic kingdoms.

The Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople

[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Col 1:15-20

Constantine saw Christianity as a potentially stabilizing force in the empire, but only if it was unified. Unfortunately, Constantine ruled over an empire in which Christians did not always agree with one another on doctrinal or practical issues. One example was the [Donatists](#), a group of North African Christians who refused to readmit to the church other Christians who had recanted their faith, offered sacrifices to the pagan gods, or surrendered scripture to Roman officials during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. Like the Novatianists before them, the Donatists were not really heretics, for they accepted standard orthodox doctrine, but they were schismatics, who refused to accept the authority of the church at large. The Donatists also claimed that the sacraments administered by lapsed priests and bishops were invalid, and they rebaptized those who joined their churches after being baptized in Catholic churches. Many Donatists were sharply critical of wealthy bishops and churches, and they advocated a redistribution of wealth. One group of Donatists, the [Circumcellions](#), sought the overthrow of the existing

social order and were especially opposed to wealthy landowners who owned slaves. Constantine called a regional council at Arles in Gaul to deal with the Donatists, and the bishops decided against them, but the Donatists refused to accept the decree of the bishops. In response, Constantine sent imperial troops into Carthage to destroy Donatist churches and arrest, banish, and even execute Donatist Christians. Constantine succeeded in wreaking havoc among the Donatists, but the movement continued to grow in many areas, so his efforts to bring unity by the sword were unsuccessful.

Constantine tried another approach to deal with the Arian controversy. [Arius](#), a priest from Alexandria, was a strong proponent of Origen's teachings regarding the distinction between the Father and the Son, which Origen had promulgated in opposition to monarchianism. Arius, however, went further than Origen had gone, stating that since the Son was begotten, "there was a time when he was not," and he also spoke of the Son as created. He was opposed by his own bishop Alexander, who, though he was also an Origenist, was uncomfortable with the language Arius used. He was also opposed by the entire Western (Latin-speaking) church, and by the monks from the Egyptian desert, whose theology tended toward modalism. Arius argued forcefully from scripture that his view was correct, and he had several influential supporters, most notably Eusebius of Nicomedia (not to be confused with the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea), who would become Constantine's personal chaplain and instructor in the faith. The opposition to Arius was led by another Alexandrian, the deacon Athanasius, who would soon become bishop of Alexandria. Before the Council of Nicaea met, Constantine tried to persuade Alexander and Arius to settle their differences and focus on their common faith, but they were unable or unwilling to do so.

Constantine was determined to force unity, so he summoned bishops from all over the empire to [Nicaea](#) in 325. Most of the 250 or so bishops who attended were from the East, though an influential Western bishop, Hosius of Córdoba, Spain, presided. Sylvester I, bishop of Rome, declined to attend because of his advanced age, but he sent two priests to represent him.

Because Arius himself was unable to speak at the council, since he was not a bishop, his views were represented by proxy. The issue boiled down to a description of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Constantine proposed that the Greek term *homoousios*, “of the same substance,” be used to describe the common faith, and the churches of the West immediately accepted the proposal, for they had long used Tertullian’s Latin formulation “three persons in one substance.” The term was less popular with the bishops from the East, in part because the same term was used by the adoptionist bishop of Antioch Paul of Samosata, a contemporary and opponent of Origen, but because the emperor insisted on using the term, all but two eventually accepted it. Some Eastern bishops, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, did not understand the term in exactly the same way as the Western bishops, an issue that would lead to future divisions within the church. In the end, the council produced a statement of faith, the Nicene Creed (see Appendix), which declared, among other things, its faith 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.*” Arius’s views—that “there was a time when [Christ] was not,” that “before being born he was not,” and that “he was of a different substance [*heteroousios*] from the Father”—were explicitly condemned. The term

homoiousios, “of a similar substance to the Father,” was favored by many Eastern bishops, who used it in place of *homoousios*. Other Eastern bishops wanted to avoid the troublesome *ousios*, “substance,” altogether, preferring to say that the Son was “like” the Father, without any further specificity. (Those who preferred the terms *homoiousios* or *homoios* are often labeled semi-Arian, and in lieu of a better term, it will be used here, with the caveat that it is not particularly accurate.) Even the Spanish bishop Hosius agreed to this last formulation, which many believed could bring peace to the Church. In reality, further debate in the wake of the council’s decision angered those who strongly supported the term *homoousios*, and arguments, banishments, and even wars were waged over the next half century over the inclusion or exclusion of the letter *i*. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, a strong proponent of the Nicene *homoousios* doctrine, was sent into exile and recalled no less than five times over his long tenure. The *homoousios/homoiousios* issue would not be finally resolved until the Council of Constantinople in 381.

In addition to the Arian question, the Council of Nicaea also dealt with other, less problematic issues. Some of the more important decisions were these:

- The bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria were recognized as having regional authority over other bishops.
- The bishop of Jerusalem was to be honored for the historic importance of the city but was not considered equivalent in status to the three bishops just mentioned.
- Bishops could not move from see to see (a see was a region ruled over by a bishop).
- Easter was to be celebrated on Sunday, on a day to be determined by a consensus of the churches, rather than by reference to the Jewish calendar.



The emperor Constantine, depicted in the center of this icon wearing a crown and surrounded by leaders of the Church, called the Council of Nicaea in order to resolve various controversies among Christians.

The Council of Nicaea is recognized today as the first of many ecumenical councils—the Roman Catholic Church reckons the number at twenty-one, but only three since the Protestant Reformation—that is, a council whose findings are considered binding on all Christians. Other councils have often been held, sometimes small regional councils and sometimes large councils with broad representation, but those councils deemed

ecumenical have had the greatest influence on the development of Christian faith and practice.

The debate over Arianism, or, more accurately, "semi-Arianism," embroiled the church in a great debate from the moment the Council of Nicaea was closed. Under the influence of the two Eusebiuses, and despite the determination of the Council of Nicaea, Constantine adopted a semi-Arian understanding of the relationship between Father and Son. In the following century the great scholar Jerome said of that moment that the world awoke with a groan to find itself Arian! As already noted, true Arianism was rejected by most influential Christians, so Jerome's comment refers to the so-called semi-Arian position. Constantine's semi-Arianism was also held by his son Constantius and other emperors. Constantine's two other sons, in contrast, were Nicene Christians. Christians called regional councils and local synods to promote one position and condemn the other, and the battle raged in many areas for fifty years. Finally, in 381, the emperor Theodosius decided to summon bishops to Constantinople to deal with the matter once and for all.

The first order of business for the [Council of Constantinople](#) was to declare that no authoritative council had been held since Nicaea in 325 and that contrary decisions at earlier councils held in Sirmium, Ancyra, Constantinople, Antioch, and elsewhere were to be discarded. The council reaffirmed the use of the term *homoousios* and the Nicene Creed, but it made several changes to the latter. While the Nicene Creed (N) had said that Christ was the "begotten from the Father," the Constantinopolitan Creed (C) said "begotten from the Father *before all ages*," a direct contradiction of Arius's claim that "there was a time when he was not." C added specific details to N's treatment of Christ's incarnation, saying that he was "incarnate *from the Holy*

Spirit and the Virgin Mary." In place of N's "he suffered," C has "*he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried.*" C also adds the details that Christ's resurrection was predicted by scripture and that "*of his kingdom there will be no end.*" The largest addition by far comes at the end of the creed. Whereas N ends simply with "[We believe in] the Holy Spirit," C elaborates extensively on the nature of the Spirit and the Spirit's relationship with the Father and the Son, additions that reflect the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the interim since Nicaea and also serve as condemnation of *Macedonianism*, which denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. C also adds a statement about "*one holy catholic and apostolic Church,*" a clear condemnation of the Donatists and other schismatic groups.

Ecumenical Creeds

The Nicene Creed (original 325 version)

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, 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, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men, and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead;
And in the Holy Spirit.

Kelly 1972: 215-216

The Nicene Creed (as modified at Constantinople in 381)

We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there will be no end; And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is together worshiped and together glorified, who spoke through the prophets; In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Kelly 1972: 297-298

In addition to the changes to the creed, the Council of Constantinople rejected the teaching of [Apollinaris](#), priest of Laodicea, who said that Christ had a human body but a divine mind. Apollinaris had based his belief in a divine mind on the assumption that if Jesus had had a human mind, he would have been subject to the possibility of sin, but the council rejected his logic because it diminished the humanity of Christ. The council also declared that the bishop of Constantinople should join the ranks of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria as one of the principal rulers of the church, second in authority only to Rome. Ecumenical councils like Nicaea and Constantinople were very important in shaping the doctrine of the church, but any formulation put together by a committee was likely to be somewhat stodgy, less communicative, less innovative, and ultimately less

influential than the theological reflections of brilliant theologians.

Theological reflection, East and West

In the fourth century, in the province of Cappadocia in eastern Asia Minor, a remarkable family lived. Two brothers, Basil and Gregory, lived with their older sister, Macrina, and the rest of their family. The family had deep Christian roots-their relatives had suffered during the Decian persecution, and one was a bishop-and they were both financially well off and educated. Macrina had been promised to a young man by her parents, but when he suddenly died, she declared her intention to live a solitary life devoted to God. She tried to convince her brother Basil to do the same, but Basil, who had studied in Athens with his friend Gregory (who would become bishop of Nazianzus) and the future emperor Julian the Apostate, had no time for such things. However, when his brother Naucratus died unexpectedly, Basil was devastated, and he decided to take Macrina's advice. Meanwhile, Macrina retired to some family land, along with her mother and several other women, and led a life of devotion. Her knowledge was so vast and her didactic skills so keen that she became known simply as the Teacher. She remained in retirement for the rest of her life, touching the lives of many women directly, and the lives of many men indirectly through the influence she had on her brothers.

Macrina's brother [Basil](#), shaken by Naucratus's death, went to Egypt and other outlying areas of the Roman Empire to learn the monastic life from the desert saints. He returned and set up a monastery for men with his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, near the location of Macrina's retreat for women. After spending about six years as a monk, he was ordained a priest in

Caesarea in 362, and he became bishop there in 370. Although he was an admirer of Origen, he came to believe strongly that the word *homoousios* was the term that was necessary for all orthodox Christians to accept in order to fight full-blown (*heteroousios* or *anomoios*, “not similar”) Arianism, but he understood *homoousios* in a way similar to many who preferred *homoiousios*, that is, as a term that did not blur the distinction between Father and Son. Basil also believed in the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, writing an important book on the subject. He combined his understanding of the relationship between Father and Son with his emphasis on the full divinity of the Spirit to arrive at a formulation concerning the Trinity: one substance (*ousia*) but three persons, or identifying qualities (*hypostases*). Basil's Greek explanation of the Trinity was roughly equivalent to Tertullian's earlier Latin formulation of one substance (*substantia*) in three persons (*personae*). However, whereas Tertullian came at the problem of the Trinity by beginning with unity of substance, Basil began with an emphasis on the distinction of persons. Basil explained the difference between substance and person as the same as the difference between the general and the particular. For example, the human race represents the general, whereas the individual person represents the particular. Moreover, the *hypostases* were distinct in their relationship to one another: the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds (from the Father).

Despite his numerous books and letters devoted to theological topics, Basil was a monk at heart, and he felt himself dragged into the theological debates of his day against his will, though he accepted his role as bishop and theologian as part of his service to God. Basil used his interest and experience in the monastic life to draw up a set of guidelines for monastic communities to fol-

low. The guidelines he create served as the “rule” for monks in the region, and Basil became known as the father of eastern monasticism. Basil regularly suffered from bad health, as a child and as an adult, and he died sometime before reaching his fiftieth birthday, in 379. His accomplishments as bishop, theologian, and monastic organizer were such that he was honored in his own time for his erudition and commitment to fighting for orthodoxy, and he became known after his death as Basil the Great.

Macrina and Basil had a younger brother named [Gregory](#), known as Gregory of Nyssa to distinguish him from Basil’s friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory, although devout, was not interested in the monastic life when he was young, so he married and may have fathered children. After his wife died, however, the pain of her loss drove him to a life of contemplation like his siblings. His abilities did not allow him to remain in the monastic life, however, and in about 371 his brother Basil recruited him as bishop of the town of Nyssa, near Caesarea. He worked closely with both Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus on developing the doctrine of the Trinity from an orthodox perspective. He was an ardent admirer of Origen, but he had no qualms about modifying Origen’s teaching if he felt it needed to be updated. For example, like Origen, Gregory believed that evil, which is the absence of good, is not eternal, and when God eventually encompasses all in all (1 Cor 15:28), evil will no longer exist. Thus, by implication, people who had lived evil lives would be cleansed of their evil and could be reunited with God. Gregory also accepted Origen’s “ransom theory of the atonement,” which states that God gave Jesus to Satan as a ransom for the human race. Whereas Origen had said that God deceived Satan by raising Christ from the dead, Gregory argued that God was not being deceitful at all.

Christ contained the fullness of divinity within him, and Satan was simply unable to hold him.

Gregory was not a very good administrator, and he longed to return to the life of a monk. Nevertheless, like Basil, he accepted his role as a defender of orthodoxy, and after Basil's death, he attended the second ecumenical council in Constantinople to represent the orthodox position. He remained a bishop for several years after the council, writing many books and letters on both theological and spiritual themes. An example of the latter is his commentary on the Song of Songs, which he interpreted allegorically. After some time, when he was convinced that orthodoxy was firmly established, he retired to pursue a life of contemplation and passed from the public stage.

[Gregory of Nazianzus](#) was the son of the bishop of Nazianzus, and like Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, he felt drawn to the solitary life. Nevertheless, Basil appointed him bishop of Sasima, a small town in Cappadocia. Although he did not remain long in the post, fleeing back to the monastic life, he accepted the position of bishop of the most important see in the East, Constantinople, in 379, where he was the first orthodox Nicene bishop in forty years. Although he only remained there for two years, he was present when the new Nicene emperor Theodosius I first entered the city, and he was present at the opening of the Council of Constantinople in 381. During Gregory's brief tenure in Constantinople, he secured the return of all church property to the Nicene party. Famous for his rhetoric, his fiery sermons on the divinity of the *Logos* gained immediate notoriety. After bishops from Egypt and Macedonia objected to his appointment as bishop of Constantinople, he resigned and returned to Nazianzus, where he worked for a few years. He spent his last few years engaged in literary pursuits and monastic duties.

Of the Great Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazianzus was the most skilled orator and the only poet. He composed about 30,000 verses of poetry and songs, about a third of which survive. Gregory's song and poems were lyrical and theological at the same time, as this [morning hymn](#) demonstrates:

'Tis dawn: to God I lift my hand,
To regulate my way;
My passions rule, and unmoved stand,
And give to Thee the day
Not one dark word or deed of sin,
Nor one base thought allow;
But watch all avenues within,
And wholly keep my vow.
Shamed were my age, should I decline;
Shamed were Thy table too,
At which I stand:—the will is mine:
Give grace, my Christ, to do.

Because Gregory worked closely with his friends Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, his views on the Trinity and the nature of Christ were identical, as his five [Theological Orations](#) (sermons) show. For example, in his [Third Theological Oration](#), he says,

When did these come into being? They are above all "When." But, if I am to speak with something more of boldness,—when the Father did. And when did the Father come into being? There never was a time when He was not. And the same thing is true of the Son and the Holy Ghost. Ask me again, and again I will answer you, When was the Son begotten? When the Father was not begotten. And when did the Holy Ghost proceed? When the Son was, not proceeding but, begotten—beyond the sphere of time, and above the grasp of reason; although we cannot set forth that which is above time, if we avoid as we desire any expression which conveys the idea of time.

Gregory's beautiful rhetoric and theological acumen earned him the title Gregory the Theologian in the Eastern church.

If Gregory of Nazianzus was the most skilled orator of the Great Cappadocians, the most skilled orator of the entire history of the Eastern church, and some would argue the greatest preacher in the history of the church, East or West, was their younger contemporary, [John Chrysostom](#), whose name means "golden mouth," an appellation he earned for the sermons he preached while bishop of Constantinople. Born in Antioch about 347, he was raised in a wealthy Christian family, so he had both a theological and a classical education. After completing his education, he spent a few years leading a monastic life, after which he returned to Antioch to serve as a deacon, then a priest for several years. He answered the call to become bishop of Constantinople somewhat reluctantly, but after his installation as bishop in 398, he threw himself into the job. His somewhat choleric temperament, combined with his skill with words, made him a popular preacher to the masses of people, but the emperor and others in power, including many in the clergy, grew to dislike his moralistic outbursts. The emperor Arcadius, and especially the empress Eudoxia, took great offense when Chrysostom railed against the rich, calling on them to use their wealth for the benefit of the poor. He also made an enemy of Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria. After several antagonistic encounters with members of the court and clergy, and after several sermons in which Chrysostom criticized the empress directly, he was forbidden access to the church facilities and expelled from the city, and he died in exile.

Chrysostom did not possess the sharp intellect of Basil or the lyrical talents of Gregory of Nazianzus, but he had a tremendous oratorical gift, which he used to

full advantage. He also had a deep compassion for the common people, and they loved him for it. In fact, his tenure as bishop of Constantinople would undoubtedly have ended sooner except for the intervention of the masses. Chrysostom was also a prolific writer, and his sermons, letters, and other writings take up eighteen volumes in the standard scholarly collection of the writings of the Greek “fathers,” far more than any other author represented in the 161 volume work. The three Great Cappadocians, their sister Macrina, and John Chrysostom are honored by both the Eastern and Western churches as saints. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Chrysostom are also recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as doctors (that is, teachers) of the church, and they are referred to as the Three Hierarchs, or premier teachers and fathers, of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

If the East was blessed with many important bishops and theologians during the fourth and fifth centuries, the West was hardly bereft of them. Like their counterparts in the East, the western theologians that are today considered the most important were strong champions of Nicene orthodoxy. Unlike those in the East, they often wielded a surprising degree of political as well as ecclesiastical power, due to the fragile state of the Western Roman Empire and the relative weakness of the Western emperors, in comparison with their Byzantine colleagues.

The first important theologian in the West after the time of Constantine was [Ambrose](#), bishop of Milan. When the previous bishop died in 373, Ambrose was an unbaptized layman and governor of Milan, which served for a time in the late fourth century as capital of the Western Roman Empire. A strong advocate for the Nicene position even as a *catechumen* (student of the faith), he was baptized, then ordained

as deacon, priest, and bishop within one week, when he was only 34 years old. His governmental experience made him comfortable dealing with other political leaders, including emperors. He influenced the young emperor Gratian to stamp out all remnant of Arianism and semi-Arianism in his realm, and he was not afraid to appoint Nicene bishops even in territories controlled by the semi-Arian emperor Valentinian II and his mother Justina. On one occasion he intervened with the general (later emperor) Magnus Maximus of behalf of Valentinian II to keep the former from invading Italy. On another occasion he refused Justina's order to surrender the basilica of Milan to semi-Arian bishops and prevailed. On yet another occasion he harshly reprimanded the emperor Theodosius I for slaughtering 7,000 inhabitants of Thessalonica after one of his officers had been killed in the city, excommunicating him from the church and forcing him to do public penance for eight months before Ambrose readmitted him to communion. Ambrose believed in the superiority of the church to the state, stating that "bishops ought to judge Christian emperors, and not emperors bishops" (Ambrose, *To Valentinian* 21.4).

Before Ambrose came to power, the Western church considered the ascetic, or monastic, lifestyle, so frequently practiced in the East, to be an excessive and fanatical way of living the Christian life. Ambrose was also instrumental in validating asceticism as acceptable to those living in the West, and asceticism became increasingly more popular in the West, though it never had the following that it had in the East. Ambrose was a strong and forceful individual, unafraid to wield the power of his office, and undaunted by imperial power. His greatest contribution to Christianity, however, came about through his influence on a young teacher of rhetoric who settled in Milan, Augustine.

[Augustine](#) was born in Latin-speaking North Africa to an orthodox mother and a pagan father in 354. He went to Carthage when he was seventeen to study, and he became interested in philosophy, especially the writings of Cicero. He read the Bible, but he failed to find value in the crude anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament. While in Carthage he took a mistress, who bore him a son. Augustine was a deeply spiritual and introspective man, in search of truth from an early age. He turned to Manichaeism, which taught a strict dualism of light and darkness, soul and body, good and evil. It also stressed Christ as savior, especially as revealed through the Apostle Paul. Augustine spent nine years as a Manichaean “hearer,” never seeking full-fledged acceptance among “the perfect.” He became a vegetarian, as Manichaeism taught, but he retained his mistress, thus violating one of the principal teachings of Manichaeism, celibacy (childbirth brought about a new mixture of light and darkness, which the Manichaeans sought to separate). After some time he became dissatisfied with some Manichaean teachings, and when the great Manichaean teacher Faustus was unable to answer some of his questions, he left the sect. He moved to Rome in 382 to teach rhetoric and soon became a Neo-Platonist.

[Neo-Platonism](#) was a spiritual form of Platonism based on the system of Plotinus. Augustine was drawn to it because it claimed to offer personal salvation, which Augustine deeply believed he needed. Plotinus described “the One” as that which exists in and of itself through its own thought processes. When the One begins to consider itself as “other,” it becomes divided, and Being is created. These aspects of Neo-Platonic thought were fascinating to Augustine, and they were formative in the development of his thinking about the Trinity later in his life.

In 384 Augustine moved to Milan, and in order to appear respectable, he enrolled as a catechumen under the tutelage of Bishop Ambrose. As a rhetorician, he was also interested in evaluating Ambrose's rhetorical style. Augustine was amazed that Ambrose was able to harmonize the Bible with much Platonic thought through allegory, making it more palatable to him. He sent his mistress and son back to Carthage to await a proper marriage, but Augustine became more and more drawn to Christianity. He was especially impressed when he heard that a famous Neo-Platonist philosopher had been converted to Christianity through reading Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, a biography of the desert saint. In 386, while he was in a garden struggling with a decision concerning Christianity, he heard a child playing a game, saying "take and read, take and read." He opened a Bible to Rom 13:13-14, and read, "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." His seeking at an end, he was baptized by Ambrose on Easter 387.

After returning to North Africa, Augustine sent his mistress away. Shortly thereafter both his mother and his son died, leaving him heartbroken. In 391 Valerius, bishop of Hippo, a nearby city, ordained him as a priest. He quickly became famous for his intellect, and he delighted in challenging Manichaeans who lived in the area to public debates, where he regularly got the better of them. He played a leading role in the regional Council of Hippo in 393, and in 395 he was elected co-bishop of Hippo. He became sole bishop after Valerius died, and he served in that capacity for the remainder of his life. During his tenure, he became the most influential theologian of the Western church, influencing both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology centuries after his death.

Augustine was a determined opponent of the Donatists, who were present in great numbers in North Africa. He considered them schismatics who were outside the church, and he supported the imperial edict which the emperor Honorius issued in 412 suppressing the Donatists. In a letter to a Roman general who was trying to persuade a Donatist bishop to give up his church, he said it was better that the bishop and his associates perish in the flames than that all Donatists should burn in hell. Augustine's willingness to use the power of the state to enforce religious conformity shows a clear dependence on the example of Ambrose.

Augustine's most famous theological argument was with a British monk named Pelagius, who was forced to flee his residence in Rome when Alaric the Goth sacked the city in 410. Pelagius taught that the whole gospel should be obeyed, including Jesus' saying, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Pelagius saw sins as individuals failings, not as indicative of a fallen nature inherited from Adam. Since sin was the result of habit, not nature, Pelagius said, the individual believer should be able to overcome it. Augustine himself had struggled with sin and been *unable* to overcome it for years prior to his conversion to Christianity, so he believed in the doctrine of "original sin," which states that a sin nature is passed on through birth and can be traced back to Adam. He read Rom 5:12 as saying that all people sinned in Adam; that is, as a direct result of Adam's disobedience, all are guilty of Adam's sin. He emphasized the necessity of God's grace in the conversion experience, because the human will is not free to choose to follow God in and of itself. On the other hand, Augustine said, God's grace is irresistible and is directed toward those predestined for salvation. Pelagius had a particular problem with Augustine's statement (from *The Confessions*), "O God, give what you command and

command what you will," because he thought it was ridiculous that God would command something that humans were unable to follow, then condemn them for not following it. Augustine countered that in his own experience, he was unable even to believe in God, which is the foundation of Christianity, but his mother's prayers caused God's grace to shine on him. Pelagius settled in the East, where people were more open to his point of view. "God is [the will's] helper whenever it chooses good; while man is himself in fault when he sins, as being under the influence of a free will," Pelagius said (Augustine, *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 8). Pelagius was condemned at the Council of Carthage in 416. Although it declared Augustine's position orthodox, the later church actually taught a compromise between the strict Augustinian view and the teaching of Pelagius, a view sometimes called semi-Pelagianism. Because of Augustine's teaching on original sin, which was universally accepted in the West, infant baptism, which was seen as washing away original sin, became increasingly popular.

Unlike the Cappadocians, whose discussions of the Trinity began with the notion of the distinctions among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and moved toward unity of substance, Augustine began with the concept of the unity of God, influenced by his Neo-Platonic background, and then developed the idea of three separate persons sharing the same essence. He agreed with the Cappadocians that the three persons of the Trinity are defined by their relationships with one another, not by any difference in essence: the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Trinity is an internal relationship within God, he said, independent of God's revelation to humanity or of salvation through Christ. The Trinity exists before creation and is independent of it.

Augustine is best known for two works, *The Confessions* and *The City of God*. In *The Confessions*, Augustine wrote a spiritual autobiography that was unique in the ancient world and remains a classic today. In it he traces his spiritual formation, his dalliances with sin, and his interest in various philosophies and religions. The form of the book is a confession to God, in which Augustine highlights his own foolish behavior and sin, and also that of all those who reject Christianity. He offers a particularly scathing critique of Manichaeism, to which he was formerly attracted. The book is a confession in two senses. First, it is an actual confession of sins (lust, pride, etc.). Second, it is a confession, or statement, of faith.

After the sack of Rome by the Goths, and with the Vandals and other Germanic tribes destroying the last vestiges of the Roman Empire all around him, Augustine wrote a book that expressed his political and theological theory of government. He proposed the idea of two cities, the City of God, built on love of God, and the Earthly City, built on love of self. Though the two cities are mingled with one another throughout history, they are in constant struggle, and in the end only the City of God will remain. All earthly cities, like Rome, will eventually fall. God preserved Rome to spread the gospel, Augustine said, but now that that has been accomplished, God allowed the city to fall. Christians, as citizens of the City of God, must remember that heaven is the Christian's true home, so excessive loyalty to any earthly city should be avoided. The purpose of the book was not primarily philosophical or political but pastoral. Christians throughout the West did not understand why God would let Rome fall, but Augustine counsels them to have hope for the future, thus showing the importance of interpreting current events in the light of theology.

If Augustine was the most important theologian in the West, the leading biblical scholar was his contemporary Hieronymus, usually known in English as [Jerome](#). Jerome was drawn to asceticism in the West at a time when ascetics were not yet fully accepted by western society. He was highly educated, but he saw little value in pagan literature, with which he was very familiar. He saw a sharp distinction between Christianity and all aspects of pagan culture, and he was highly critical of those with whom he disagreed. He traveled widely in the East, where he failed to win many friends because of his harsh judgments. He was criticized in the West for excessive asceticism, which he observed and urged others to follow as well. Jerome was vigorously opposed to sex, believing that a holy life required perpetual virginity. He said that Adam and Eve did not engage in sexual activity before the Fall (i.e., the first sin), and marriage was inferior to perpetual virginity.

In 382 Jerome was appointed secretary to Damasus, bishop of Rome, who commissioned him to create a new translation of the Bible into Latin. Many Latin translations were already in existence (the Old Latin versions), but they were often quite different from one another, a situation that led to theological confusion in the Latin-speaking world. The Old Testament in the Old Latin versions was translated from the LXX rather than the Hebrew text, so Jerome decided to learn Hebrew so that he could translate his Latin version directly from the original language. After mastering the language, he became the only Western scholar of his day to know Hebrew. In fact, Jerome had an argument by correspondence with Augustine over the importance of resorting to Hebrew when translating the Old Testament. Jerome believed it was very important, while Augustine argued that since the LXX itself was inspired, going back to the Hebrew was unnecessary. Jerome

began his task by revising existing Latin versions of the New Testament and Psalms, but he eventually translated the entire Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin. Jerome's translation, the Latin Vulgate, became the standard Bible of the Latin-speaking church for more than 1,500 years.

The monastic reaction

Many people flocked to the church in the wake of Constantine's conversion and declaration that Christianity was a legal religion. Some saw the Christian message as validated by Constantine's victories in battle. Others saw Christianity as a valuable new philosophy worthy of pursuit. Still others saw Christianity as the newest, preferred religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity was suddenly popular in comparison with other religion in the empire. Elaborate churches were built, and many people sought to become bishops of prestigious sees, such as Rome or Constantinople. In the wake of these changes in the church, many Christians began decrying the increasing worldliness of the church. A large number of them, particularly in the East, fled to the desert in search of a quiet, contemplative life. Although monasticism traces its origins to earlier times, it was after the Decian persecution that it began to grow in popularity. After Athanasius wrote his famous biography of Anthony, many more Christians decided to flee the cities for the solitude of the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine.

The earliest Christian monks were *anchorites*, that is, solitary monks. These monks followed the *eremitic* lifestyle (i.e., the life of a hermit) because they wanted to find solitude in the desert to pray and meditate. Many monks were renowned for their piety and orthodoxy, so they were often sought out by Christians who still lived



St Catherine's Monastery is situated on Jebel Musa, one of the mountains in the Sinai Peninsula identified as the mountain on which Moses received the Ten Commandments. Both male and female monastics fled the ease and temptations of civilized society to seek God in the desert.

in society for their opinions and counsel. They made their living by begging or by weaving mats from reeds. They sometimes had small gardens, but they avoided meat, oil, and wine. Both men and women became monks, and they were sometimes known as Christian "athletes," because of the discipline required to live the life of a monk.

After awhile, many monks began to live near one another in order to worship with one another one or two days a week. These monks were no longer strictly eremitic but had become *semi-eremitic*. Other monks began to gather together in communities, organized around a spiritual leader (abbot). This type of monasticism is called *cenobitic*, from a Greek word meaning "living together." The first organizer of cenobitic

communities, at least the first whose name was preserved, was Pachomius, a fourth century monk. Pachomius insisted on complete obedience to one's superiors within the community, and he emphasized mutual service. His sister Mary formed a similar community for women as well.

The influence of monks on other Christians was great. Examples of leading secular Christians (i.e., those remaining in the world) who were heavily influenced by the monastic life include Athanasius, Jerome, Basil the Great, and Augustine. One of the most unusual developments in the history of the monastic movement was the emergence of *stylites*, or pillar saints, who climbed tall pillars and lived on them for years at a time. The first and most influential stylite was Simeon Stylites, who ascended his pillar in the Syrian desert in 423 and remained there until his death in 459, thirty-six years later. Simeon was known for his wisdom and revered for his saintliness, and people traveled from far and wide to see him. Over the years, Simeon was forced to increase the height of his pillar in order to maintain some measure of isolation. Simeon corresponded with emperors and bishops; his influence was felt in the court of Theodosius II and at the Council of Chalcedon.

Not all monks lived in the desert. In the second half of the fifth century, Patrick established Christian monasteries in Ireland. Irish monks became known for their rigorous asceticism, their customs that differed from the rest of the Western church, and their semi-eremitic communities. In the sixth century, another monk, Columba, took Christianity from Ireland to the Picts in Scotland, establishing monasteries as he worked. Back in Italy, a fifth century monk named Benedict established several monasteries and decided to write a rule for those living in his monasteries. He decreed eight

times of prayer per day, one or two meals, and labor in the fields for his monks. The *Rule* of St. Benedict was copied and used in monasteries throughout Europe over the next several centuries, much as Basil's rule had been used in the East, and Benedict is known today as the father of western monasticism.

The Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon

Two important ecumenical councils were held in the fourth century, both of which dealt further with the central issue arising out of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople: the relation of the divine and the human in Christ. [Nestorius](#), the bishop of Constantinople from 428 to 431, was raised in Antioch, one of the important centers of Christian scholarship. He accepted without question the Nicene doctrine that Christ was fully divine and fully human, and, in keeping with the emphasis of many in the East, particularly in Antioch, he also held that it was vital to avoid mixing the divine and human natures so that they lost their particular characteristics in the person of Christ. Nestorius first drew attention to himself shortly after being appointed bishop of Constantinople. It was common in those days for people to speak of Mary as the *theotokos*, or "mother of God." Nestorius said that the word was inaccurate, for Mary should be called *christotokos*, "mother of Christ" instead, since it was impossible for God to have a mother. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, was incensed by Nestorius's claim, because he believed that Nestorius was trying to separate the divine from the human nature in Christ, perhaps in the manner of the adoptionists, although Nestorius explicitly denied that interpretation of his words. Theological differences were not all that divided Nestorius and Cyril, for the latter, like other bishops of Alexandria, believed that

Alexandria should be considered the preeminent see in the East, just as Rome was in the West. Constantinople may have been the new imperial city, but the Christian pedigree of Alexandria was much older. The Alexandrians had a natural ally in the church of Rome, for Rome was concerned that Constantinople would usurp the rightful place of leadership that Roman bishops believed belonged inherently to them. The bishop of the other major see, Antioch, sided with Nestorius, primarily for theological reasons—for of course, Nestorius was originally from Antioch, and his theology was thoroughly Antiochian.

The core of Nestorius's argument was that the divine and human natures in Christ remained distinct from one another, retaining their individual properties, even though they were inextricably bound together. Nestorius believed that unless the distinctiveness of the two natures was maintained, the result would be a third, combined nature that was neither completely divine nor completely human, but something altogether different. An analogy might be that when sodium and chlorine are combined, the result (salt) is something entirely new, having the properties of neither original element, whereas when salt and water are combined, the two mix together and cannot be separated, but the properties of both the salt and the water remain in the solution. Cyril argued that the two natures were indeed both present in Christ, but they were bound together in a "hypostatic union" that precluded dissolution. Thus, it was impossible for Mary to bear Christ without at the same time bearing God.

The emperor Theodosius II called an ecumenical council, which was to meet in Ephesus in 431 to decide the matter. Cyril and his allies arrived first and promptly declared Nestorius a heretic and deposed him from his position as bishop. When Nestorius and his

allies arrived, they held their own meeting and deposed Cyril. Delegates from Rome then arrived and joined Cyril's council, because Cyril had agreed that the council would condemn Pelagianism, the primary concern of Rome, as well as Nestorianism. The emperor was not happy with the council's proceedings, and he imprisoned Nestorius and Cyril, as well as John of Antioch, Nestorius's chief supporter. Cyril soon convinced the emperor to release him and exile Nestorius, so the end result was that Nestorius was removed from his position as bishop of Constantinople, his theological position was condemned as heresy, and he was exiled.

Not surprisingly, the results of the third ecumenical council were not universally accepted, and debate over the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ continued. Many Christians considered Cyril's formulation heretical, for it seemed to subsume the human nature of Jesus under the more powerful divine nature, thus making him somewhat less than fully human. This was an important theological point, for Cyril's opponents argued that if Christ were not fully human, he would be unable to effect salvation for humanity, for he would no longer be a representative of the human race. Some time later [Eutyches](#), a monk in Constantinople, proposed the idea that the flesh of Christ was from some heavenly source rather than derived from Mary. His proposal was intended to safeguard the sinlessness of Jesus by preserving him from any hint of corruption or original sin. He was supported by Dioscorus, Cyril's successor in Alexandria, but much of the church was adamantly opposed to Eutyches' proposal, seeing it as the logical conclusion of Cyril's questionable theological position. Not only was the bishop of Constantinople, Flavian, opposed to Eutyches, but so was Leo, the bishop of Rome. The emperor called another council to meet in Ephesus in 449, run by Dioscorus.

Leo, who did not attend, sent a strongly worded letter condemning Eutyches' position, but the council was stacked with supporters of Eutyches, and Leo's letter (the *Tome* of Leo) was never read. Furthermore Flavian, who did attend, was physically beaten to such an extent that he died a few days later. Not surprisingly, Leo and many others refused to recognize the findings of the council, calling it the "Robber Synod."

After the death of Theodosius in 450, his wife Pulcheria called a new council at Chalcedon in 451. This time the whole Eastern church was represented, and Leo's *Tome* was read and approved by the council. The council decided that Christ did indeed have two natures, and these natures were combined "without confusion, without changeability, without division, and without separation." Still in exile, Nestorius heard the decision of the council and proclaimed himself vindicated. Nevertheless, the council did not lift the condemnation of Nestorius issued by the Council of Ephesus, nor did it condemn the view of the now-deceased Cyril of Alexandria, so the first went down in tradition as a heretic and the second as a saint. The council did condemn the view of Eutyches, and it elevated the role of Leo, the bishop of Rome. In fact, many scholars refer to Leo as the first Roman bishop worthy of the title "pope," or "father," for he asserted his authority to speak for the whole church, and many in the church listened. The power of the Roman bishop had been growing for some time, for while three patriarchs existed in the East, only one existed in the West. When conflicts arose among the Eastern bishops, they often appealed to Rome for support, thus elevating the perceived authority of the bishop of Rome. For example, Athanasius had appealed to Rome against the semi-Arians, the Great Cappadocians had joined Rome against Apollinaris, Cyril had appealed to Rome against

Nestorius, and a majority of the East had agreed with Leo against Dioscorus and Eutyches. In all of these conflicts—as in most previous theological struggles—the Roman position had emerged victorious. Leo’s assertion of the authority of the papacy and his success in dealing with issues such as Pelagianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism, led others to give him the title Leo “the Great,” one of only two popes to be so honored.

The findings of the Council of Chalcedon were rejected by a sizeable minority in the East, centered around Egypt and Syria. The monophysites, whose name means “one nature,” were convinced that Chalcedon’s commitment to two natures in Christ was just another form of Nestorianism. Many Copts (Egyptian-speaking Christians) and Syrians separated themselves from the Chalcedonian definition of the faith, eventually forming what are now called Oriental Orthodox Churches in Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. All attempts to heal the rift between Chalcedonians and monophysites were unsuccessful. The next two ecumenical councils, both held in Constantinople, continued to deal with related issues. Constantinople II (553) condemned Origen and his spiritual heirs Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrillus, and Ibas of Edessa, whom many believed overemphasized the separate natures in Christ, as Nestorius had (all those condemned were already dead). On the other hand, Constantinople III (680-681) condemned monothelism (belief that Christ had only one will) and monenergism (belief that Christ had only one “energy,” or activity), which were both attempts to bridge the gap between the Chalcedonians and the monophysites. It is interesting to note that the monothelite compromise was supported in advance of the latter council by Pope Honorius I of Rome, by Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople, and by Byzantine Emperor Heraclius!

Key points you need to know

- Though he only became a Christian later in life, Constantine favored Christianity from the beginning of his reign as emperor and made it a legal religion for the first time.
- The last pagan Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate, tried to subvert Christianity not through persecution but by taking away Christians' privileges and by organizing the pagan religion after the Christian model.
- Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius I, and Jews, heterodox Christians, and pagans were all denied the same rights as orthodox Christians.
- The Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council, was called to address the Arian controversy, among other items. It produced the Nicene Creed, which defined orthodoxy for most Christians.
- After continuing controversy concerning the semi-Arian position, the Council of Constantinople was called to strengthen the orthodox, Nicene position, and the Nicene Creed was modified accordingly.
- Great scholars in both the East and the West during the fourth and fifth centuries helped to define standard Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ.
- Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, and his Latin Vulgate became the official Bible of the Western Church for centuries.
- Many Christians fled to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine in order to live secluded lives of contemplation.
- Ongoing controversies over the exact relationship between the divine and the human in Christ led to the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. The former's decisions led to a split with the Nestorians, and the latter's led to a split with the Monophysites. As a result of these splits, the Oriental Orthodox Churches remain separated from the rest of the Christian Church to this day.

Additional Material at Christianity Online:
[Class Discussion Questions](#)

Further reading

Athanasius, [Life of Anthony](#).

Augustine, [City of God](#).

Augustine, [On the Proceedings of Pelagius](#).

Augustine, [On the Trinity](#).

Eusebius, [Life of Constantine](#).

Frend, W. H. C. 1984. The Rise of Christianity.
Philadelphia: Fortress.

González, Justo 1984-1985. The Story of Christianity.
2 vols. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.

González, Justo 1987. A History of Christian Thought.
Revised ed. 3 vols. Nashville: Abingdon.

Latourette, Kenneth Scott 1975. A History of
Christianity. Revised ed. 2 vols. New York:
Harper & Row.

Pelikan, Jaroslav 1971-1989. The Christian Tradition:
A History of the Development of Doctrine. 5
vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Quasten, Johannes and Angelo Di Berardino. 1950-
1986. Patrology. 4 vols. Vol. 4 translated by
Placid Solari. Allen, TX: Christian Classics.

Tillich, Paul 1968. A History of Christian Thought.
Edited by Carl E. Braaten. New York: Simon and
Schuster.