

FORERUNNERS
OF THE
FAITH

Lesson 5



Defending the Deity of Christ

SETTING THE STAGE

1st Century

Apostolic Era

Pentecost

Peter

Paul

John

2nd Century

101–200

Apostolic

Fathers

Justin Martyr

Irenaeus

3rd Century

201–300

Tertullian

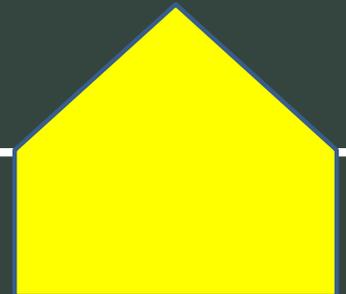
Origen

4th Century

301–400

Council of
Nicaea (325)

Ante-Nicene Period (1–3 Centuries)



A MAJOR TURNING POINT

- In the first few centuries of church history, Christians faced threats both from within (in the form of false teaching) and from without (in the form of persecution).
- The internal threat of false teaching compelled believers to contend earnestly for the truth.

A MAJOR TURNING POINT

- The external threat of persecution meant that believers needed to be always ready to give a defense for the hope that was in them.
- At the beginning of the fourth century, Christianity was the target of imperial persecution by the Roman government.

A MAJOR TURNING POINT

- The situation dramatically changed when Constantine converted to Christianity in the year 312 at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.
- The next year, he issued the Edict of Milan which brought peace and protection to Christians living in the Roman Empire.

A MAJOR TURNING POINT



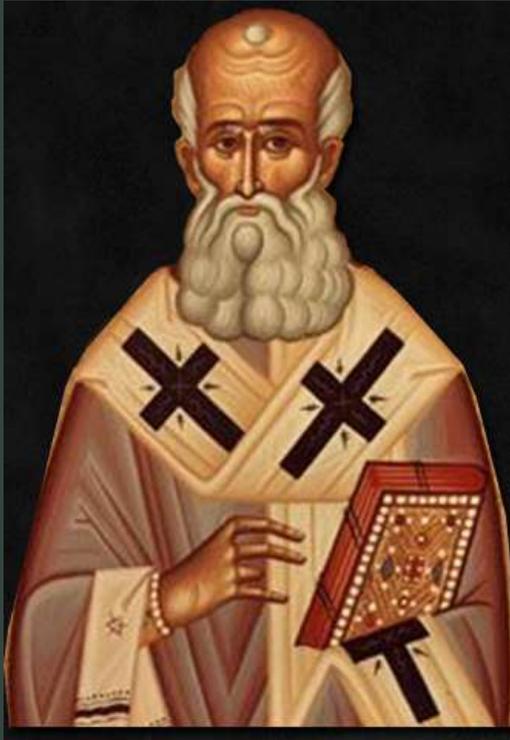
- In 324, Constantine defeated Licinius, to become the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.
- This set the stage for the Council of Nicaea.

Athanasius & the Council of Nicaea

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

- In the fourth century, a new heresy threatened the church. It was called Arianism (named after a false teacher named Arius).
- Like modern Jehovah's Witnesses, Arianism attacked the doctrine of the deity of Christ, by claiming the Son of God was a created being.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA



- Standing against Arius was a man named Athanasius.
- The controversy with Arianism resulted in the first empire-wide church council: the Council of Nicaea in 325.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

- The council addressed a vital doctrinal question:

Is the Son of God co-eternal, co-essential, and co-equal with God the Father? Or is He a created being who is less than fully God?

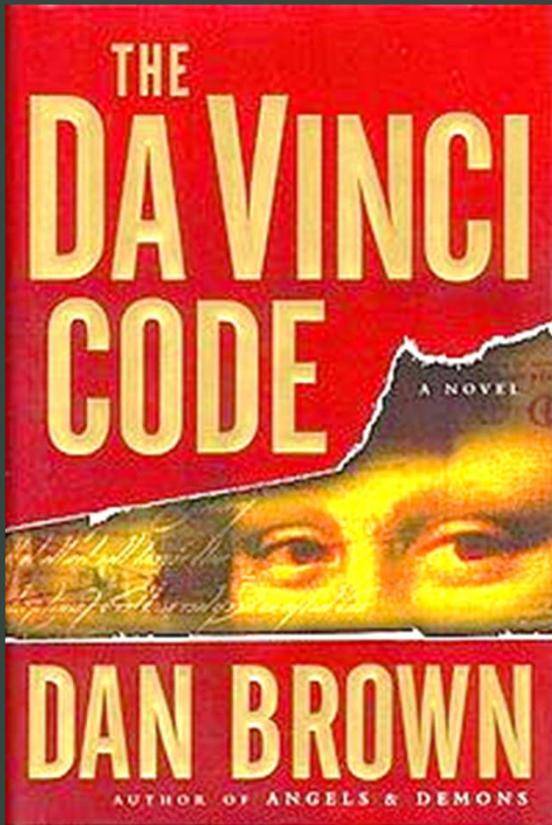
THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

- Three views were put forward at the council:
 - Hetero-ousios – “Of a different substance”
 - Homo-ousios – “Of the same substance”
 - Homoi-ousios – “Of a similar substance”

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

- Modern skeptics and heretical movements continue to deny the doctrine of the deity of Christ.
- Along with it, they reject the doctrine of the Trinity.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA



The Da Vinci Code

“Jesus’ establishment as ‘the Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea. . . . [It was] a relatively close vote at that.”

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Jehovah's Witnesses

“For many years, there had been much opposition . . . to the developing idea that Jesus was God. To try to solve the dispute, Roman emperor Constantine summoned all bishops to Nicaea. . . . Constantine’s role was crucial. After two months of furious religious debate, this pagan politician intervened and decided in favor of those who said that Jesus was God.”

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Key Question

Was the doctrine of Christ's deity (along with the doctrine of the Trinity) invented in the fourth century?

The answer to that question requires looking at both the *biblical* and *historical* evidence.

Biblical Authority

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

NOTE: Early Christian leaders understood that Scripture must be their highest authority.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395): “Let the inspired Scripture, then, be our umpire, and the vote of truth will surely be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words.”

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Scripture clearly teaches the deity of Christ. Here are ten lines of evidence that demonstrate that truth.

1. **Divine Prophecy**: In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah foretold the Messiah would be “Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6; cf. Matt. 1:23). Other OT passages also imply the truth of the Trinity (cf. Gen. 1:26; 11:7; 19:24; Psalm 2:6–7, 12; Prov. 30:4; Isaiah 48:16–17; etc.).

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

2. **Divine Existence**: Jesus explained that He was with the Father in eternity past, before the world began (John 17:5; see also John 1:1-2; 6:62; 8:23; 16:28).

3. **The Divine Name**: By calling Himself “I Am” in John 8:58, Jesus identified Himself as Yahweh, the covenant name for God in the Old Testament (see also John 6:51; 10:9, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1).

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

4. **Divine Authority**: Jesus claimed authority over the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5) and over the ultimate destinies of people (John 8:24; cf. Luke 12:8–9; John 5:22, 27–29). He also claimed the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5–11).

5. **Divine Power**: With nothing more than a word, Jesus calmed storms, cast out demons, and healed diseases and infirmities.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

6. **Divine Ownership**: Jesus claimed possession of that which belongs to God alone, including the angels, the elect, and the kingdom of God.

7. **Divine Exaltation**: The Old Testament forbids the worship of anyone but God alone (Ex. 20:3). Yet, the New Testament declares Jesus to be worthy of worship (Matt. 14:33; 28:9; Luke 24:53; Phil. 2:10–11; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:17). The clear implication is that Jesus is God.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

8. **Divine Titles**: Jesus applied divine titles to Himself. He called Himself the Son of Man, a title with divine implications (Dan. 7:13–14). He also called Himself the Son of God (Matt. 27:43; John 5:18; 10:46; 19:7).

9. **Divine Unity**: Jesus explained that He is in perfect unity with the Father (John 14:9–10; cf. 10:30; 12:45). If Jesus were not co-equal with the Father, He could never make such a claim.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

10. **Divine Affirmation**: The rest of the New Testament writings, beyond the four gospels, repeatedly affirm that Jesus is God. The collective evidence from the New Testament provides an insurmountable case for affirming the deity of Christ (John 1:1; Acts 20:28; Rom. 9:5; 1 Cor. 1:24; 2 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 2:6; Col. 2:9; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:3, 8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20).

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

- The biblical evidence for the doctrine of the deity of Christ is overwhelming. It is the reason we embrace this truth.
- Armed with the truth of God's Word, the pastors who attended the council of Nicaea upheld this biblical doctrine. Conversely, they condemned the teachings of Arius as heretical and dangerous.

Patristic Affirmation

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

(c. 50–117)

“We have also as a Physician the Lord our God Jesus the Christ the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For ‘the Word was made flesh.’”

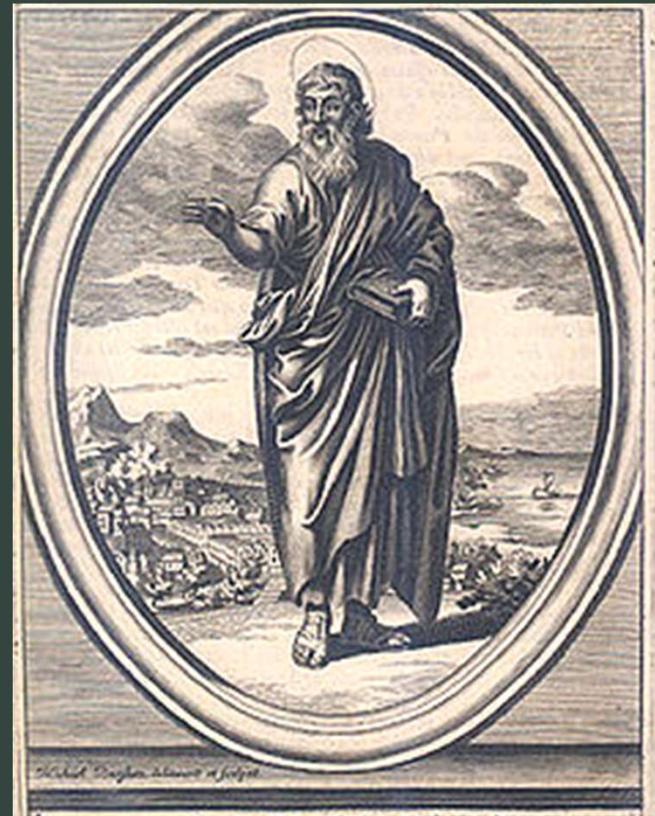
(Ephesians, 7)

POLYCARP OF SMYRNA

(c. 69–155)

“... to all those under heaven who will yet believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father who raised him from the dead.”

(Philippians, 12.2)



JUSTIN MARTYR

(c. 100–165)



“Permit me first to recount the prophecies, which I wish to do in order to prove that Christ is called both God and Lord of hosts.”

(Dialogue with Trypho)

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

(c. 120–202)

“That He is Himself in His own right, beyond all men who ever lived, God, and Lord, and King Eternal, and the Incarnate Word, proclaimed by all the prophets, the apostles, and by the Spirit Himself, may be seen by all who have attained to even a small portion of the truth.”

(Against Heresies, 3.19.2)

TERTULLIAN OF CARTHAGE

(c. 160–225)

“For God alone is without sin;
and the only man without sin
is Christ, since Christ is also
God.”

(Treatise on the Soul, 41)



CAIUS OF MILAN

(c. 180–217 – in response to those who deny Christ’s deity)

“The Holy Scriptures, in the first place, contradict them. And then, besides, there are writings of . . . Justin and Miltiades, and Tatian and Clement, and many others, in all of which divinity is ascribed to Christ. For who is ignorant of the books of Irenaeus and Melito, and the rest, which declare Christ to be God and man? All the psalms, too, and hymns of brethren, which have been written from the beginning by the faithful, celebrate Christ the Word of God, ascribing divinity to Him.”

(Against the Heresy of Artemon, 2.1)

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

- From their reading of Scripture, the early church fathers (who lived long before the Council of Nicaea) embraced and taught the deity of Christ.
- Their testimony provides a compelling historical witness to the church's affirmation of this biblical doctrine.

Creedal Articulation

CREEDAL ARTICULATION

- The Council of Nicaea did not determine or establish the doctrine of Christ's deity.
- It rather affirmed and defended the doctrine that had always been taught by the church going back to the time of the apostles and being established in Scripture.

CREEDAL ARTICULATION

- In response to claims that the Council of Nicaea determined the deity of Christ by a “relatively close vote,” the following points can be made:
- *First*, this doctrine is determined by Scripture. The pastors at the Council of Nicaea understood that they were defending biblical truth, not inventing something new.

CREEDAL ARTICULATION

- *Second*, this doctrine was clearly affirmed by Christian leaders in the centuries *prior to* the Council of Nicaea, going back to the apostles.
- *Third*, it was not a “close vote.” Of the 318 bishops who attended the council, all but two signed the Nicene Creed, which articulated the biblical truth about the deity of Christ.

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 with the Father.



THE NICENE CREED

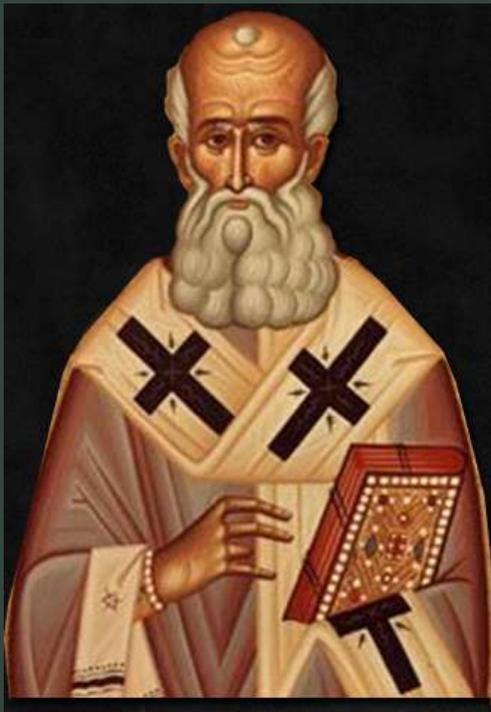
(continued) “Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day He rose again, and ascended into heaven. And He shall come again to judge both the living and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.”

Standing Against the World

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD

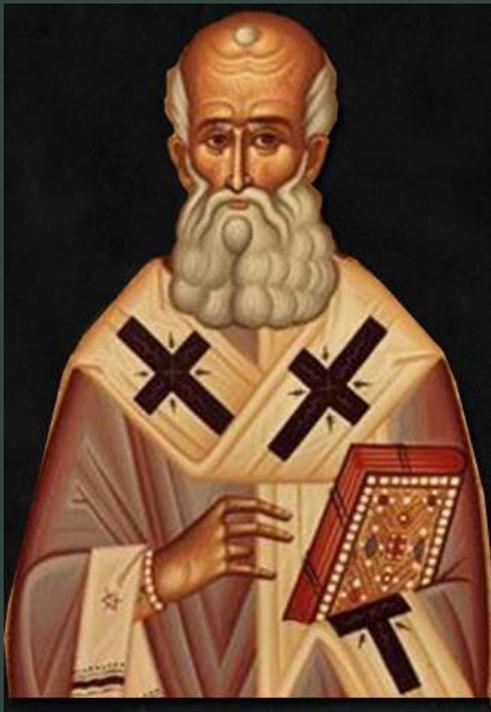
- Though the victory at Nicaea had been overwhelming, the controversy with Arianism still raged in the Roman Empire for another 50 years.
- In 381, at the Council of Constantinople, Arianism was finally defeated. An expanded version of the Nicene Creed was adopted, giving more detail regarding the Person and work of the Holy Spirit.

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD



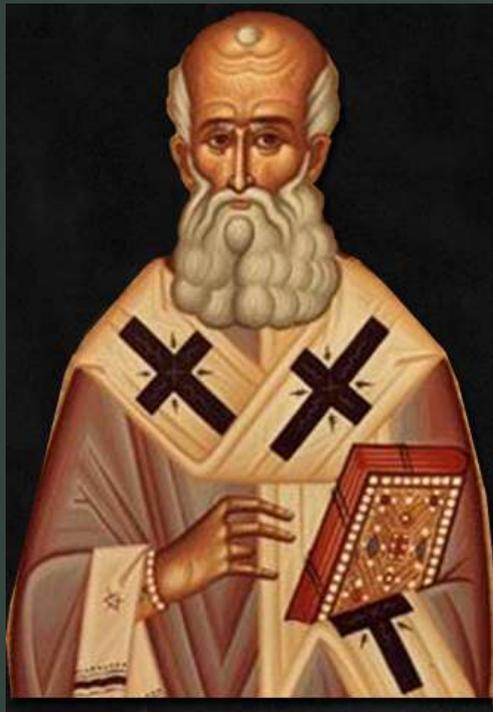
- Though he was only a deacon at the time of the Council of Nicaea (325), Athanasius spent most of the fourth century fighting against Arianism.
- He became the bishop of Alexandria just a few years after the Council of Nicaea (in 328).

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD



- Athanasius was banished from his church no less than five times (for a total of 17 years) during his ministry career.
- At times, it seemed like he was all alone. He became known by the famous motto, *contra mundum* (“Against the world.”)

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD



- The first time Athanasius was exiled (336–338) represents the challenges he faced in defending sound doctrine.
- Athanasius was accused of kidnapping another bishop (named Arsenius) and cutting off his hand for use in magical incantations.

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD

John Piper, *Contending for Our All*

“[Athanasius’s enemies] bribed Arsenius, a bishop in Hypsele (on the Nile in southern Egypt), to disappear so that the rumor could be started that Athanasius had arranged his murder and cut off one of his hands to use for magic. Constantine was told and asked for a trial to be held in Tyre. →

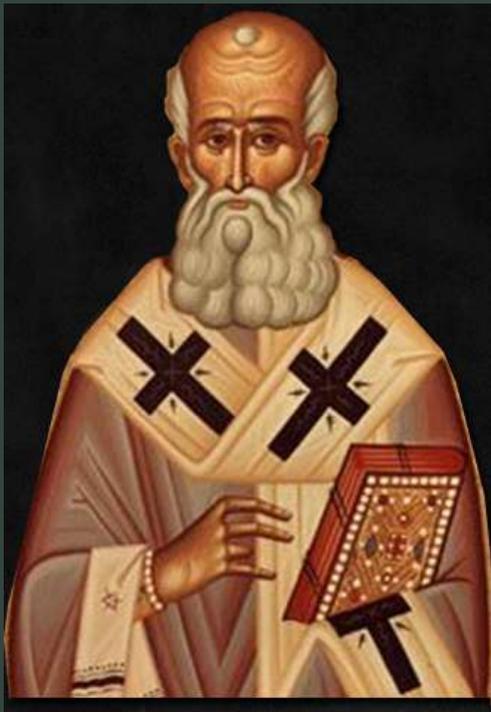
STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD

(continued) Meanwhile one of Athanasius's trusted deacons had found Arsenius hiding in a monastery and had taken him captive and brought him secretly to Tyre. At the trial the accusers produced a human hand to confirm the indictment. But Athanasius was ready. 'Did you know Arsenius personally?' he asked. 'Yes' was the eager reply from many sides. So Arsenius was ushered in alive, wrapped up in a cloak. →

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD

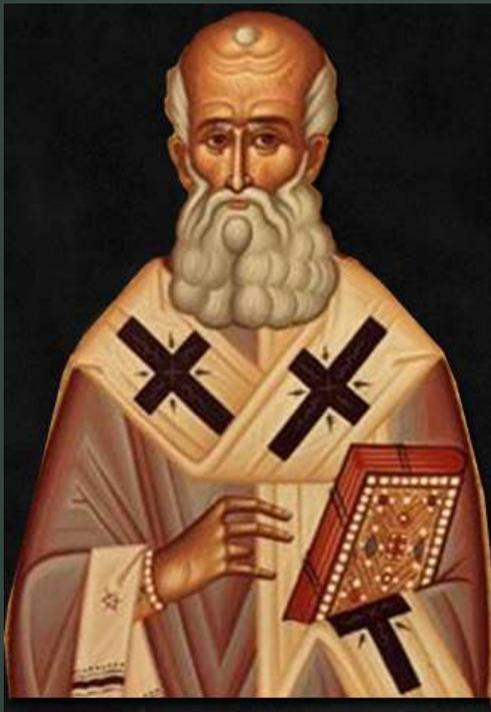
(continued) When he was revealed to them, they were surprised but demanded an explanation of how he had lost his hand. Athanasius turned up his cloak and showed that one hand at least was there. There was a moment of suspense, artfully managed by Athanasius. Then the other hand was exposed, and the accusers were requested to point out whence the third hand had been cut off.”

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD



- Nonetheless, he was still sent into exile when his opponents accused him of interfering with wheat shipments from Alexandria to Rome.
- He was able to return to Alexandria after Constantine died and his sons came to the throne.

STANDING AGAINST THE WORLD



- Athanasius would be forced into exile another four times because he refused to compromise on the doctrine of the deity of Christ.
- His legacy of faithfulness stands as a compelling example for us today, to take a bold stand for the truth.

Lessons for Today

LESSONS FOR TODAY

- We should be willing to contend earnestly for core Christian doctrines (Jude 3–4).
- At times, being faithful means you will also be unpopular.
- The key to honoring God is to hold firmly and faithfully to what the Bible teaches.

LESSONS FOR TODAY

- Superficial unity is false unity; true unity is founded on doctrinal truth.
- The examples of faithful men in generations past should motivate us to stand faithfully against the world in our own generation.

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