



Image from: [Church Father, bronze panel by Lorenzo Ghiberti \(1378-1455\), North Door, Baptistry of San Giovanni Battista, Florence, Italy, 15th century](#) in [Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library](#)

### Summary Article: **Church Fathers**

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The period of the Church Fathers begins with those earliest Christians who were not themselves eyewitnesses to Christ's earthly ministry, yet knew eyewitnesses, and ends sometime after the 5th century — after the Council of Chalcedon and the overthrow of the Western Roman Empire by Germanic invaders — but before the 8th. The Patristic period — so called from the Greek and Latin words for *father* — thus extends from the Apostolic Age to the early Middle Ages, and *Patristics* is the study of those early Christian leaders, affectionately termed *Fathers*, who negotiated the doctrinal controversies that arose during this time. The best way to understand the controversies of the period, and the disputants in the controversies, is to consult the writings of the Fathers themselves. Considering that this age spans hundreds of years, this entry presents at best an introduction into a lively, exciting period in the history of the church, and the world.

Several major doctrinal struggles captivated the Christians of this age, precipitating a number of councils that attempted to clarify doctrinal disputes and resolve the controversies through a clear declaration of Christian orthodoxy. Arianism in the 4th century led to controversies over the doctrine of the Trinity and to the two councils that resolved them, held at Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381. Nestorianism in the 5th century precipitated a council at Ephesus in 431 and, along with Eutychianism, another one at Chalcedon in 451, in order to resolve the ensuing controversies over Christology.

### **Ante-Nicene Fathers**

Yet even before Nicaea, Christians engaged in vigorous debate to discern what beliefs and practices were and were not consistent with the biblical witness. Those consistent with the scriptures were deemed orthodox; a view at variance with orthodoxy was deemed heretical.

The ante-Nicene church confronted Docetism, Gnosticism, and Montanism, among many other teachings and practices. Docetists denied the bodily sufferings of Jesus; they believed that Christ's human body, his sufferings, and his death only *appeared* to be genuine even though they were not — hence the name Docetism, from the Greek verb *dokeō* (seem). Docetism uses the divinity of Jesus as an argument against his humanity: if Jesus suffered, he was not God; if he was God, he did not suffer; since he was God, he did not suffer. Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-c.107) rejected Docetism, appealing to Christ's genealogical lineage from David, birth, baptism, crucifixion, and resurrection. That Jesus ate and drank with his disciples after his resurrection especially underscores his full humanity, and Ignatius notes how Christ's own resurrection from the dead gave the disciples courage to face their own deaths. Ignatius does not exclude Christ's divinity, however, being careful to ascribe to Christ both divine and human attributes, e.g. he is both begotten and unbegotten.

Gnosticism takes its name from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnōsis*, because Gnostics believed that salvation was attained through knowledge and not by faith; this knowledge was not given in the scriptures but preserved orally by the Gnostics. Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-c.200) opposed the Gnostics

in his *Against Heresies*. Marcion of Pontus came under special censure. He despised the God of the Law and the Prophets, suggesting that he worked evil, loved war, judged unreliably, and contradicted himself. Marcion believed that salvation was only for souls, not bodies — and only for those souls who had learned his teaching. Irenaeus denied Marcion's claim that the God of the Law and the Prophets should be abandoned. Christians use the Law and the Prophets as well as their own scriptures, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Irenaeus also criticized Gnostic texts in circulation, thereby ensuring that they would not be read as authoritative scripture.

Around the middle of the 2nd century, a recent convert named Montanus professed a special revelation from the Holy Spirit, accompanied with trances and ecstatic utterances. Two women prophesied with him, and the three believed that they had been given special authority to teach and the ability to prophesy. The Second Coming was near, they said, and everyone should follow an ascetic lifestyle, including, according to Hippolytus of Rome (c.170-c.236), diets of radishes. Hippolytus, in his *Refutation of All Heresies*, presents the Montanist belief that Montanus and the two women can give information in addition to the scriptural witness as preposterous. Before the end of the 2nd century, they were condemned.

In addition to intramural debate, Christianity increasingly had to defend itself in the face of an ambivalent or hostile Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165) defends the Christian faith before criticisms from the Greco-Roman world in two *Apologies* and from the Jewish one in *Dialogue with Trypho*. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, for example, Justin responds to the accusation that the crucified Jesus was sinful because, according to Deuteronomy 21:23, anyone hung on a tree is under the curse of God. Justin responds not by criticizing Jewish law but by accepting it, and even applying it to the death of Jesus: the innocent Christ was accursed not on account of his sin, but ours.

Justin believed that whatever is true — including what has been uttered by pagan philosophers — has God as its author. (The pagans did not return the favor: Justin was martyred in Rome, around 165.) Like Justin, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215) saw philosophy as a schoolmaster for the Greeks, even as the law was a school-master for the Jews (cf. Gal. 3:24-25). Tertullian (c.155/160-c.220) viewed the relationship very differently, lamenting the baneful influence of philosophy, a veritable breeding ground for heresies. Tertullian famously asked what Jerusalem has in common with Athens, and his answer was straightforward: nothing.

In the 3rd century, the church also rejected various errant views about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, including adoptionism, the view that Jesus had a miraculous, but nevertheless simply human, birth and became the Son of God later due to an influx of divine power and wisdom. The church also rejected Sabellianism as unorthodox: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not, contra Sabellius, merely three manifestations (*prosōpa*) of the one God.

## **The Nicene Fathers**

Sabellianism was a grave heresy that raised a serious question: how are the Son and the Father distinguished? Arius (c.250-336) proposed one possible resolution to the difficulty. When Arius publicly accused Alexander of Alexandria (d. 326) of Sabellianism, he divulged his anti-Sabellian formula: “there was when the Son was not,” i.e. though created before the existence of time, the Son was nevertheless created. In a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341/342), responding to allegations of heresy by Alexander of Alexandria, Arius explains his view that the Son has a beginning, but God (the Father) does not.

In clamoring against Alexander, Arius lent his name to a heresy that was at least as bad as — and certainly more infamous than — Sabellianism, the heresy he wanted desperately to avoid. In 325, the Council of Nicaea — assembled by Roman Emperor Constantine I (c.272-337) — found the Arian views heretical. Not every bishop attended, e.g. Sylvester I of Rome (d. 335) was absent; nevertheless, over 300 were in attendance, giving the decision of Nicaea considerable weight. The council condemned Arius and his followers explicitly and anathematized his statements, such as “the Son of God is from what is not” and “there was when he was not,” as well as his teachings, e.g. that Christ could have done evil, that he was a creature, and that he was a work.

Positively, Nicaea addressed the precise nature of the relationship of the Son to the Father. The council authorized the technical use of a Greek word, *homoousios* (of one or the same substance) to describe the Son in relation to the Father. Only Arius and two others disagreed with the use of the word. Western bishops were unanimous in their acceptance, many of them taking the Greek word as equivalent to the Latin word *substantia*, a word that had been used previously by Tertullian to describe Christ's two natures. The council vindicated the position of Alexander of Alexandria and his successor Athanasius (c.293-373) over and against the position of Arius and his followers.

The Arians responded by showing how the creed could be read as decidedly unorthodox. Even some who were not Arians were concerned. Two phrases were especially worrying: *ek tēs ousias* (of the substance) and *homoousion tō patri* (of one substance with the Father), two expressions about Jesus that had been inserted by the council into the creed with which they began, the creed of Eusebius of Caesarea's (c.263-c.340) church. The Greek word *ousia* means essence or substance. It can be used to describe a universal or to describe an individual substance, i.e. what makes this particular thing what it is. If *ousia* is taken in this second, particular sense, then the creed defends the Sabellian heresy: the Father just is the Son, because they are the same individual, particular entity. Eusebius of Nicomedia outmaneuvered Nicaea's advocates politically, and Arius was reinstated in 335. Eusebius also campaigned against Athanasius, who was examined by unfriendly bishops in 335 and exiled in 336. Athanasius returned in 337, but the Roman emperor Constantius II (317-361), Constantine's son, banished Athanasius again in 338, installing an Arian bishop at Alexandria in his place.

In 341, rivals to the Nicene Creed proposed a creed of their own, at the dedication of a church in Antioch. It is known as the Dedication Creed, and it contains neither *ek tēs ousias* (of the substance) nor *homoousion tō patri* (of one substance with the Father). Instead, the Lord Jesus Christ is proclaimed “whole from whole.” The Nicene Creed's *ousia* could be taken to mean *hulē* (material substance), which would imply division in God, i.e. *of one substance with the Father* could be read as *from the same stuff as the Father*. So the Dedication Creed's “whole from whole” implicitly criticized the language of *ousia* in the Nicene Creed. Superficially, though, the Dedication Creed allows a Nicene or an Arian reading; it only excludes a Sabellian one — the heresy that Arians were endeavoring zealously to avoid.

The Dedication Creed even attempted to appear critical of Arianism, through the use of anathemas against, e.g. those who say that there was a *time* before the begetting of the Son of God. But these anathemas were easily avoided by the Arians because, e.g., Arius did not say that there was a *time* when the Son was not but, instead, that there was when he was not. That is, Christ was not created in time but from eternity, being an eternal creature. The Dedication Creed was used as the Arian creed in the east, but the west upheld the Nicene Creed in 343, at Sardica. In response, the Arians produced yet another creed, known as the Macrostich, for its wordiness.

Athanasius was allowed to return to Alexandria in 346, due to the influence of Constans (c.323-350), the emperor in the west (and the brother of Constantius). At around this time, Athanasius completed his *Apology Against the Arians*. His time of peace did not last long, however. Soon after the death of Constans, Athanasius was forced to leave Alexandria again, barely escaping an attempt to arrest him in 356.

In 357, a council at Sirmium approved an Arian creed that Hilary of Poitiers (c.315-c.367), in his *On the Synods*, called the Blasphemy of Sirmium. The creed forbids discussion of *ousia*, *homoousion* (of one substance), and *homoiousion* (of like substance) because they are not taught in the scriptures and because they are beyond human understanding.

Another creed was proposed in 359. This Dated Creed — so called because it gives the date of its creation in its preface — contained a declaration against the use of the word *ousia* (essence), because, according to this creed, it gives offense and because it is not found in the scriptures. This compromise was accepted by the west, with a modification, at Ariminum (Rimini, Italy), and by the east, at Seleucia. After a council of east and west at Constantinople, the compromised creed was issued publicly in 360, causing Jerome (c.347-419/420) to quip, in *The Dialogue Against the Luciferians*, that the whole world groaned, astonished to find itself Arian.

Defenders of the Nicene Creed persevered. In exile, Athanasius had finished *Four Orations Against the Arians*, *Apology to Constantius*, and *Apology for his Flight*. Reports of persecution by the Arians prompted *History of the Arians*. In *Four Orations Against the Arians*, Athanasius carefully explains how the Son is eternally begotten from the Father and one with him. Restored to Alexandria in 362, he campaigned assiduously against the compromise.

And Athanasius did not struggle against the Arians by himself. Gregory of Nazianzus (329/330-389/390), Basil the Great (329-379), and Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.394) — known as the Cappadocian Fathers, from the region in which they lived — also criticized the Arianism of their day. They developed a Trinitarian formula to explain God's threeness and his oneness: God is three *hypostaseis* in one *ousia*. *Hypostasis* initially had the same ambiguity as *ousia*, with both a general and a particular meaning. Speaking of three *hypostaseis* smacked of tritheism, yet using *prosōpon* was out of the question, given the heretical use of the word by the Sabellians. So the Cappadocian Fathers labored to reserve the word *ousia* for the general essence and to reserve *hypostasis* for the particular essence of an individual.

At Constantinople in 381, the Arians were decisively routed. Damasus I of Rome (c.304-384) did not attend the council, but he accepted its deliverance: the divinity of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is affirmed in no uncertain terms. The creed affirmed at Constantinople is recited in churches as the Nicene Creed.

## **The Post-Nicene and Chalcedonian Fathers**

The early church recognized the full divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, along with the Father; the church also wrestled with how one person — Jesus — can be both human and divine simultaneously. Theologians at Antioch emphasized the humanity of Christ, while those at Alexandria emphasized his divinity. For Antioch, the Word was united to a whole human person; for Alexandria, the Word became flesh. The potential danger of the Antiochene view was the conceptual division of Christ into two persons, one human and one divine; the potential problem for the Alexandrian view was the loss of

Christ's human soul, with the body of Jesus being controlled by the Word. Everyone wanted to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God; the question was *how*.

Apollinaris of Laodicea (c.310-c.390) proposed that the union was achieved through the replacement of the human rational soul of Jesus of Nazareth with the divine Logos (cf. John 1:1). Gregory of Nazianzus rejected this proposal; the man Jesus was not fashioned first and then infused with God. The text “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14) does not prove this unorthodox position; the word “flesh” is a synecdoche referring to full humanity, not an exact reference to a body without a soul. The Son must assume full humanity, Gregory believes, because the unassumed is the unsaved: Christ must assume a rational human soul and body to save rational human souls and bodies. Apollinarianism was condemned at Alexandria, in 362; later at Rome; and, in 381, at Constantinople.

In 428, Nestorius of Constantinople (c.381-c.451) expressed his desire to call Mary *Christotokos* (Christ-bearing) instead of *Theotokos* (God-bearer). Cyril of Alexandria (c.375-444) saw in this preference a rejection of the orthodox faith concerning the Incarnation. He procured the condemnation of Nestorius at Rome in 430. A synod at Alexandria concurred with this judgment, and Cyril sent a letter to Constantinople with a series of anathemas. For Cyril, a key issue was whether or not the person born of Mary was indeed God; if so, then Mary was the God-bearer. If not, then she was not. Nestorius denied the title to Mary, Cyril maintained, only because he saw the Christ born to her as human, not divine. Cyril rejects any attempt to divide Christ between two *prosōpa* or *hypostaseis*, and he centers the union of the Word with his flesh in the one person, Christ, the Son of God. The Council of Ephesus endorsed the body of Cyril's letter and its anathemas in 431. Cyril's view was recognized as a faithful description of the Incarnation: the Son of God united himself personally to flesh animated with a rational soul, in Mary's womb. The human and divine natures were brought together in the one Christ.

Eutyches (c.378-c.454) also championed the anti-Nestorian cause. Nestorius was clearly wrong to keep the divine and human natures of Christ separate, and, after the Incarnation — according to Eutyches — there was only one nature. Eutyches was condemned at Constantinople for this view in 448. He appealed to Leo I (c.390-461), but Leo agreed with Constantinople's judgment against him. Yet Eutyches found vindication for his views when Emperor Theodosius II (401-450) called a council at Ephesus, in 449. This council approved Eutychianism, with the emperor's consent, and it became known as the Robber Council, after Leo's characterization of it as *latrocinium* (brigandage, robbery).

Leo excoriates the Eutychian position in a letter, known as the *Tome of Leo*. The two natures are preserved in the Incarnation, according to Leo. The union is in the one person. Each nature performs what is proper to it, in perfect communion with the other nature, and Christ's humanity is like ours in every way except sin.

Theodosius died in 450, providing the opportunity for a new council to meet at Chalcedon in 451. At Chalcedon, the Nestorian view was condemned: Mary is described as the *Theotokos* (God-bearer), and Christ is one person, not two. The Eutychian view is similarly condemned: the distinction between humanity and divinity is not annulled at the Incarnation. Christ is one person (*prosōpon*) in two natures, without confusion, change, division, or separation.

## **Augustine and the Manichaeans, Donatists, and Pelagians**

Over 100 works of Augustine (354-430) survive, and his importance to the Christian tradition, especially to Western Christianity, remains undiminished after one and a half millennia. Augustine's



autobiographical work, the *Confessions*, is a literary masterpiece, and his *City of God* outlines a philosophical history of the world that is, at the same time, a defense of Christianity and a comprehensive theology. Augustine's most famous opponents were the Manichaeans, the Donatists, and, most of all, the Pelagians.

Augustine himself was a Manichaean for a time, before his Christian conversion. The Manichaeans were Gnostics who believed that the world was a battleground for — and indeed a result of — the attack by darkness on light. In the *Confessions*, Augustine relates how his pride delighted in the Manichaean view that he was not responsible for his sin because it was the result of a greater, cosmic conflict. However, Augustine came to see that his sin was his own. The Manichaeans were wrong. They were also incompetent: philosophers could predict astronomical events such as solar and lunar eclipses, but the Manichaeans, who wrote excessively on similar matters, produced only fables.

Donatists believed that sacraments administered by those who compromised their faith during the Diocletian persecutions of 303 to 305 were in no way efficacious. The schism began in 312 over the consecration of a bishop at Carthage in 311. The bishop was ordained by someone who allegedly had, during the Diocletian persecution, handed over copies of the scriptures to the Roman authorities. The Donatists claimed that this bishop's ordination was thus invalid. The controversy raised questions about the relationship between the efficacy of an ecclesiastical action and the ecclesiastical agent. The sacrament of baptism was at the center of the controversy, and in *On Baptism* Augustine states directly that the effectiveness of baptism does not depend on the minister. The Donatists were wrong. A minister can be misguided — he can even be a heretic — yet still administer a true baptism. However, the efficacy of the baptism does depend on the faith of the recipient. If the recipient is misguided, the baptism avails nothing; nevertheless, this very baptism can still be an actual baptism, able to be efficacious to that person — without rebaptism — if the recipient later believes. The recipient's faith, not the officiant's worthiness, is a necessary requirement for the sacrament's efficacy.

Augustine's most famous opponent was Pelagius (c.354-after 418), who came to prominence initially in Rome, and then in Africa, for attributing the slothfulness of Roman Christians to Augustine's view of grace. Pelagius thought Augustine made God responsible for human sinfulness, and his solution was to deny original sin and to assert humanity's ability to will the good perfectly, without divine grace. Augustine replied that humanity unaided by divine grace can indeed will — but can choose only sin. God is the author of salvation, not man. God chooses those he will make holy; he accomplishes their redemption in Christ; and he turns those he has chosen to himself, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Augustine's multivolume criticism of Pelagius ranges widely and deeply over the scriptural evidence. Augustine labors to show how the scriptures teach that Adam's sinfulness corrupted the whole human race, so that everyone is sinful from the start. Only God's miraculous, interior work can cause us to love him. Pelagianism was condemned at a number of synods during Augustine's lifetime. A related view, now known as Semi-Pelagianism, affirmed a kind of original sin but had a more positive view of human willing than Augustine had. It too was condemned, well after Augustine's death, at a council at Orange in 529.

## Conclusion

The early church thus labored to produce, over hundreds of years, statements of faith consistent with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as recorded in the scriptures. At Nicaea and Constantinople, the controversy over the Trinity was resolved by recognizing that there is one God in

three Persons. The Nicene Creed, affirmed at Constantinople, is said in churches today, quite literally throughout the world. At Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, the early church understood the scriptures to say that Christ is one person in two natures — human and divine — without confusion, change, division, or separation. This statement on the Incarnation, now known as the Chalcedonian Formula, is a touchstone for orthodoxy.

The conflicts of the period were not only theological, but political as well; at various times in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries, the Christians faced enormous state persecution. And, of course, the age was not simply one of conflict but of development as well, e.g. Anthony (c.251-356) was a pioneering leader of Egyptian monasticism.

Finally, a cursory survey such as this one cannot do justice to the rich diversity of thought present in the early church. The synods, councils, letters, and tomes considered in this article focus on the major, early disputes and their outcomes. This focus is in the Fathers themselves: burdened with pastoral and administrative responsibilities, and the constant threat of persecution from pagans or heretics, they agitated for orthodoxy only when scriptural positions were being abandoned. Biblical positions that were uniformly accepted did not receive the same sustained defense, because they did not receive the same scrutiny. So, for example, the Atonement — how God achieves our redemption in Christ Jesus — was not a subject of controversy for the Church Fathers, so it received a less prominent place in their writings. Yet the doctrine of the Incarnation was framed with the Atonement in mind: when Gregory of Nazianzus argues that the unassumed is the unsaved, he is using the Atonement — an uncontroversial, accepted doctrine — to defend the contested one, the Incarnation.

So interesting work has been done, and still needs to be done, to reconstruct the theology of the Fathers on other theological topics by gathering together incidental comments from their major works. The Atonement is one such doctrine: Athanasius, when writing *On the Incarnation*, writes that the Son surrendered his body to death in humanity's place, to abolish the law of death. In his death he did away with death by offering himself as a substitute life for all. So Christ's body had to have been a body capable of death. Likewise, in a sermon, John Chrysostom (c.347-407) asks us to imagine a king who gives his own son over to death to rescue a scoundrel from punishment and to promote that man to a prominent position. God, Chrysostom urges, accomplishes a far greater rescue for us through the death of his Son.

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James E. Bruce

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