

Forming the doctrine of the Trinity...historical background

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most difficult concepts to understand; its definition seems logically impossible. This doctrine emerges after careful study of the Bible, but the word "Trinity" itself was never used in the Bible.

We do not know who initiated the term "Trinity," but Theophilus of Antioch in 180 AD is recorded as using this term. Critics of this doctrine will point to its genesis in the Nicene (325 AD) and Athanasius Creed (400-545 AD date uncertain), which they believe were the result of political maneuvering and expediency. Was this really true? Did the Trinity doctrine begin at the Nicene Creed almost 300 years after Christ?

Son of Constantius Chlorus (Constantius I), an emperor of the Western Roman Empire under Emperor Diocletian, Flavius Valerius Constantius (285?-337 AD), known also as Constantine the Great, was a cunning and distinguished military leader. With the death of his father in 306 AD, Constantine took his place and became the Roman emperor of Britain, Gaul (now France), and Spain.

Initially, Constantine did not participate in the wars taking place with the other Roman emperors. Fearful of losing their status, the Roman senate elected a new emperor, Maxentius (308 AD), to challenge Diocletian who was the Emperor of the entire Roman Empire. The usurper Maxentius brought his father Maximian, a former emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, in as a general to defend against the allies of Emperor Diocletian. Fearing the possibility of Constantine entering the fray, Maximian negotiated with Constantine and gave him his daughter Fausta.

However, Maximian died and in 311 AD, the usurper Maxentius and his brother Maximinus, emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, began to destroy and undermine the authority of Constantine. Despite overwhelming infantry numbers (in some cases possibly up to 7 soldiers of Maxentius to 1 soldier of Constantine), Constantine went to war and began his conquest in the spring of 312 AD. In the fall of 312 AD, upon his approach to Rome, Constantine had a "religious vision." He was to make a standard of Christ's name and his soldiers were to have the symbol of Christ on their shield for protection. Shortly after, Constantine was victorious at the Battle of Milvian Bridge defeating the usurper Maxentius and by spring of 313 AD, an ally of Constantine defeated Maximinus.

In less than a year, Constantine was undisputed emperor of the Western Roman Empire. In gratitude for his victories, Constantine supported Christianity, and in 313 AD, he made the Edict of Milan, which formally ended the persecution of Christians. By 323 AD, Constantine became the sole emperor of the entire Roman Empire. Thus, within ten years of the Edict of Milan, Christian churches were built with public money, the clergy became wealthy with public money, and Christianity became the religion of state; it was fashionable to be a Christian.

For the New Testament church the changes that Constantine wrought were mind-boggling. Until the Edit of Milan of 313 AD, the church was contending with 1) murderous persecution since its inception by the Roman government (it began with Nero's use of Christians as a scapegoat for the burning of Rome since 64 AD), orthodox Judaism, and hostile pagan religions, and 2) heresies, in particular, with the Trinity doctrine. From a small minority persecuted religion, Christianity suddenly found itself on the world stage.

With the persecution of Christians declining, theological discussions became more public. Around 311 AD, a priest named Arius was appointed to a large church in Alexandria. He promoted the idea that: 1) Only God the Father was eternal, 2) Jesus was a creature created in the perfect image of God, 3) Jesus was not as the same substance of God, 4) Jesus was subordinate to God, and 5) Jesus was called God as a respective title. With his Greek language skills and his artistic flair as poet and musician, Arius and his theology became very popular.

Forming the doctrine of the Trinity...historical background (page 2)

Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and Athanasius, secretary and successor to Alexander, opposed this. The theological war was very divisive; it wasn't just theologians and religious leaders taking sides but also the public. About 320 AD, Alexander convened a meeting of about one hundred local bishops where Arias' view was condemned and Arias excommunicated. But Arias appealed upon his friends like Eusebius of Nichomedia, friend of Emperor Constantine. With a divisive threat to his empire and persuaded by Eusebius of Nichomedia, Constantine called for council to meet in Nicea 325 AD. The central question: was Jesus fully God or a subordinate creature? Arias lost the theological debate, and the Nicene Creed resulted. However, the Nicene Creed did not end the Arian theology and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was still undefined.

Imperial politics weighed in. Critics today charge that Constantine was pro-Athanasius, yet Constantine replaced Athanasius with an Arian Bishop. Just prior to his death, Constantine was baptized by an Arian Bishop, and upon his death, Constantine's son, Constantius was clearly in the Arian camp. The debate spanned 60 years, and Arian theology again became prominent. However, in the end, at the Council of Constantinople (381 AD), Arianism was firmly defeated, the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed, and the deity of the Holy Spirit was affirmed.

Today critics also charge that the Trinitarian emperor, Theodosius, orchestrated the Council of Constantinople and that the council was composed of Trinitarian bishops. Whether or not this was true, critics cannot answer the core issue at hand, namely why Arian theology over the 60 years, could not find the biblical evidence to support its position. The Trinity doctrine was well understood during the time of the apostles and church fathers. The Trinity doctrine did not originate from the Nicene Creed; it originated from and was the result of careful study of the Bible. Lastly the formal doctrine of the Trinity was the direct response to Arian hearsay.