

Ryrie: Summary of Church Councils & Heretical Doctrines; Heresy Must Be Met by Polemics; Carthage, 397, Closes the Canon; Problems Faced by Church Fathers

The issue that led to the dispute over *filioque* was how to define the three Persons of the Trinity. An excellent summary analysis of the events associated with the Great Schism is provided by:

Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 384-87:

The Council of Nicea: Orthodox Witness. Doctrinal formulation of the Christian faith did not occur all at once at some point in the history of the church. Nor did a definition of all Christian doctrines take place at any equal rate. Sometimes one doctrine came in for attention; at other times the spotlight would focus on a different doctrine.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit did not receive much attention in the early centuries as far as formal definition was concerned. The use of the threefold name of Father, Son, and Spirit shows that implicitly and in practice the deity and personality of the Spirit were acknowledged by the early church.

Montanism (170). It was in Montanism \mān'-ta-ni-zem\ that the subject of the Holy Spirit came into more prominence. The original impetus for this movement grew out of a reaction against the increasing rigidity and fridity of the organized church. (p. 383)

It should be remembered that Montanism was an orthodox movement in contrast to Gnosticism. It was also a reaction against Gnosticism with its intellectualism, which seemingly raised a barrier against the soul's personal communication with God. For many, Montanism stood for the active presence and ministry of the Spirit in the church and for a more spiritual type of church life. However, Montanism was officially rejected because of its insistence on additional revelation, and in so doing, the church affirmed the belief that the Spirit does not give new revelations apart from the Scriptures.

Sabellianism (215). Monarchianism \ma-nār'-kē-a-ni-zem\ was the predecessor of Sabellianism \sa-beh'-lē-a-ni-zem\. It taught that the Son was merely another mode of expression of the Father. Sabellius \sa-beh'-lē-as\ taught that God is a unity but that He revealed Himself in three different modes or forms. These three forms were not three hypostases but three roles or parts played by one God. Sabellianism was the first major error concerning the Trinity which gained a large following in the church.

Arianism (325). The Arian controversy is thus called because it was occasioned by the anti-Trinitarian views of Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria. The monotheistic principle of Monarchianism was a dominant concept in his view. However, he distinguished the one eternal God from the Son who was generated by the Father and who had a beginning. He also believed that the Holy Spirit was the first thing created by the Son, for all things were made by the Son. Arius was opposed by Athanasius \ath-a-nā'-zhē-as\, and the Council of Nicea was called to discuss the dispute.

The principle statement of the council concerned the deity of the Second Person, and the conclusion was that Christ was "of the same substance [ὁμοούσιος, *homoousias*]" as the Father. (p. 384)

NOTE: It is from this Council that the Nicene Creed originated, but minus *filioque*.

The Council of Constantinople (381). All was not settled at the Nicene Council. Although Athanasius' own teaching was clearly orthodox and detailed, the Nicene Creed had been indefinite concerning the Spirit. A new controversy arose and people began to assert their unbelief in the deity of the Spirit. As a result, there arose the Macedonians, whose founder Macedonius \mas-a-dō'-nē-as\, bishop of Constantinople, maintained that the Spirit was a creature subordinate to the Son.

The controversy grew to such proportions that Emperor Theodosius had to call a council at Constantinople consisting of 150 orthodox bishops representing the Eastern church only. In 381 the council met and formulated the following statement concerning the Holy Spirit: "And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-giving, who proceeds from the Father, who is to be glorified with the Father and the Son, and who speaks through the prophets." The statement did counter the Macedonians, even though it did not assert the consubstantiality of the Spirit with the Father or define the relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son; and it settled the question of the deity of the Spirit just as the Nicene Council had settled the question of the deity of Christ.

Augustine (354-430). *De Trinitate* [*On the Trinity* (400-416)]. The concept of the Trinity in the Western church reached a final formulation in this work by Augustine. His interest in the doctrine of grace would naturally lead to a consideration of the Spirit, for his own experiences taught him how necessary the power of the Spirit is to the believer. In this treatise he stated that each of the three Persons of the Trinity possesses the entire essence and that all are interdependent on the others. In his conception of the Trinity, the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. (p. 385)

The Council of Chalcedon (451). In 451 the Council of Chalcedon representing the sees of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem, confirmed the decisions of Nicea and Constantinople. The council explicitly stated that the Nicene Creed was sufficient as a proper statement of the doctrine of the Trinity and that the clauses added by the Council of Constantinople in 381 were only intended to clarify, not change the Nicene Creed. This firmly established the doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit.

The Synod of Toledo (589). Though the question of the deity of the Spirit had been settled at Constantinople and Chalcedon, there still remained the important and mysterious question of the Spirit's precise relation to the Father and the Son. This was a problem that developed in the West (the matter of the deity of the Spirit was Eastern). The term "generation" was used to describe the relation of the Son to the Father, while the term "procession" was employed to denote the relation of the Spirit. The question was: did the Spirit proceed from the Father only, or from the Father and the Son? Though the Council of Constantinople did not declare that the Spirit proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father, this was the belief of many church leaders. It was felt necessary to believe that, lest procession from the Father only look like a denial of the essential oneness of the Son with the Father. However, there was not unanimity on this point, for others felt that to say that the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son would mean that the Spirit was dependent on the Son and would thus infringe on His deity.

The Western theologians held to the procession from the Father and the Son, and they added the famous "filioque" ("the Son") clause to the Constantinopolitan Creed at the Synod of Toledo. The clause stated that the Spirit "proceedeth from the Father and the Son." How the "filioque" clause came into the creed is a matter of discussion. Some think it was the "blunder" of a copyist. In any case, the clause never caused suspicion but was repeated synod after synod as orthodox doctrine. Leaders in the Eastern church felt that the Western church was tampering with the creed set at Constantinople and never adopted the "filioque" addition, declaring it heresy to this day. (p. 386)

Thus three things concerning the Trinity were settled beyond all question, at least in the Western church. The deity of the Son was settled at the Council of Nicea; the deity of the Spirit at Constantinople; and the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son at the Synod of Toledo. The presence of heresy had forced the church to settle these great doctrinal matters. (pp. 386-87)

It may appear from our cursory examination of the early church councils that the church fathers were awful shaky on a number of essential doctrines of the faith. But what must be remembered is that these men were restricted in ways we have difficulty imagining.

The final certification of the New Testament canon was a process that was completed between the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Carthage in 397. The men who met at these and subsequent councils were dealing with texts that either had not been identified as part of the canon or were recently so realized.

It is common for people to ask about the validity of a corpus that took almost 400 years to compile following the ascension of Christ. But one must remember it was the first century. The original Christians were not only under pressure from the Roman government but also from many of their Jewish relatives and fellow citizens who viewed them as heretical toward the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The initial responsibility of the apostles was to first evangelize, then teach. Their initial duties included the founding of churches so that new believers could gather and receive consistent instruction. The duty of distilling divine revelation into writing was not begun until the 40s.

In all probability, the first book of the New Testament to be written was James, completed somewhere between the years 40 and 48. The last book is Revelation, completed by the apostle John no later than 96.

Believers in the early decades of the church were taught through oral communication, enjoying the luxury of having the apostles, and the pastors they trained, for face-to-face teaching. As the development of the canon was underway, many epistles and manuscripts were circulated among the various churches. But the idea of collecting them into a single volume was apparently never done. The reason is simple. Through oral communication many things were taught that the God did not wish to retain in the New Testament.

Let's develop a hypothetical time line for the development of New Testament books. Let's assume for the sake of illustration that all the New Testament's writers were born January 1, A.D. 1. They were age 30 in A.D. 30 when the Lord was crucified. Ten years later was A.D. 40 and eighteen years later it was A.D. 48. These last two dates give you a perspective of the approximate time lapse between the resurrection of Christ and the writing of the book of James. James was the Lord's half-brother. He grew up with Jesus, his oldest sibling. He came to recognize Him as Messiah. His memory of the Lord's teachings was fresh in his mind. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit James wrote his Epistle as early as ten years following the Lord's ascension.

Let's take the time line out to when John completed the book of Revelation, which, at the most, was 66 years after the resurrection. That takes us to the year A.D. 96. The completion of the canon occurred in the lifetime of John and he was an eyewitness to all the reveals in his writings.

My dad was born in 1916 and can recall details of things he experienced as a child in the 1920s. Biblical writers had superior recall under the doctrine of inspiration.

Recognition of which books were to be included in the New Testament took time. But, by the time John had completed Revelation, Clement of Rome was quoting passages from Matthew, John's Gospel, Romans, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, James, and 2 Peter in his writings.

Between the years 130-200, Irenaeus \i-rē-nē'-as\ had identified 17 of the 27 books for the canon of the New Testament. Eusebius, the Greek historian of the early church and who attended the Council of Nicaea in 325, had discovered 22 of the 27 and was considering the other five seriously.

By the year 367 Athanasius \ath-a-nā'-zhē-as\ had assembled all 27 books. Likewise, so did the Councils of Hippo (393), Carthage (397), and Carthage (419).

There was a Luciferian attempt to pervert the canon with books purporting to be inspired writings. Eventually these were proved to be spurious. Examples are *The Acts of Paul*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Revelation of the Twelve*, and *The Epistle of Clement*.

Others are considered to be heretical some of which are absurd. They include *The Gospel of Peter*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Acts of Andrew*, and *The Gospel of Judas*, subject of a recent snow job by the National Geographic Society.