

The Fourth Century Church

From Persecution to Power: Constantine, Controversy, and the Councils

I. The Final Persecution — Diocletian and Galerius (284–311)

- Diocletian seized power in AD 284; rose through military ranks; gifted administrator
- Christians enjoyed relative peace for most of his reign
- **Four Edicts of Persecution (303):** church buildings destroyed, Bibles burned, worship forbidden, clergy arrested and forced to sacrifice
- Diocletian split the Empire into East and West — a division with lasting consequences
- Galerius (East, 305) initially sought to eradicate Christianity but issued an Edict of Toleration in 311, ending the persecution

II. Constantine the Great — Conversion, Consolidation, and Consequences

- Constantine became Western emperor in 306; Chi-Rho vision before battle (312)
- **Edict of Milan (313):** full religious freedom for all — first legal recognition of Christianity
- Rapid integration of Church into Roman society: Sunday as day of rest (321), bishops given judicial authority, imperial funding for churches, Constantinople founded (330)
- **The fatal entanglement:** citizenship and Christianity became nearly synonymous — mass "conversions" for social/political gain; baptism as civic enrollment rather than union with Christ
- **Theodosius I (380):** made Catholic Christianity the official religion of the Empire; closed pagan temples, outlawed sacrifices

III. The Arian Controversy — The Greatest Theological Crisis in Church History

The Controversy

- **Arius (256–336):** The Son is a created being — the first and greatest creature, but not truly God (cf. Jehovah's Witnesses today)
- Bishop Alexander of Alexandria deposed Arius at a council of Egyptian bishops (320)

Council of Nicaea (325)

- Constantine summoned the first Ecumenical Council to resolve the dispute
- **Nicene Creed:** the Son is of the same nature and being as the Father — therefore divine, eternal, and uncreated
- Arius refused to sign and was sent into exile

The Aftermath — Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers

- **Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373):** exiled five times; held the Nicene line; "Athanasius contra mundum" — *"If Christ is not fully God, He cannot save us"*
- **Cappadocian Fathers:** Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus — developed Trinitarian language; three persons in one being

Council of Constantinople (381)

- Summoned by Theodosius; Arianism received its decisive defeat
- Produced the Nicene Creed as we recite it today — extended deity language to include the Holy Spirit: "the Lord and the life-giver, worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son"

IV. Scripture, Tradition, and the Canon

- New Testament canon finalized by end of 4th century; disputed books (Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, Revelation) widely acknowledged
- Prevailing view: Old and New Testaments together constitute divinely inspired, infallible Scripture — sufficient for salvation
- Apostolic tradition: unwritten customs handed down through the Church — considered apostolic in origin but not an independent doctrinal source supplementing Scripture

V. Church Organization — Bishops, Patriarchs, and Councils

- 2nd–3rd centuries: simple structure; all bishops equal in principle
- Nicaea (325) established regional synods; bishops of major cities became metropolitans/archbishops
- **Five Patriarchal Sees:** Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem

VI. Piety and Culture — Saints, Relics, and Monasticism

- **Cult of Saints:** "Saint" narrowed from all Christians to martyrs, monks, and ascetics; practice of invoking saints borrowed from Roman patronage system
- Supported by major figures (Basil, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome); opposed by Vigilantius as "paganism in disguise"
- **Monasticism:** Men withdrew from society entirely in protest against the church's cultural compromise — renounced possessions, celibacy, devoted to prayer, fasting, and Scripture

VII. Key Figures of the Fourth Century

Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–397)

- Champion of Western church independence from imperial power
- Pioneer hymn-writer; teacher of Augustine
- **Principle:** *"The emperor is within the Church, not above it"*

John Chrysostom (349–407) — "The Golden Mouth"

- Greatest preacher of the early Church; born Antioch; converted at 18 from law to Scripture
- Trained under Diodore of Tarsus; committed to grammatical-historical, verse-by-verse expository preaching
- Prolific: 90 sermons on Matthew, 88 on John, 55 on Acts, 34 on Hebrews; *On the Priesthood* remains a pastoral classic
- Exiled twice for direct preaching against sin; died 407 on a forced march to Armenia

Jerome (347–420) — Scholar of the Latin Church

- Most accomplished scholar of the early Church; born Dalmatia; hermit in Syrian desert (374)
- **The Vulgate (completed 405):** Latin translation of the entire Bible commissioned by the bishop of Rome; standard Bible of the Western world for over a millennium
- **On the Apocrypha:** argued only books in the Hebrew OT are canonical; apocryphal books useful but not authoritative for doctrine — the Protestant Reformers sided with Jerome against Rome's Council of Trent (1546)
- Spent final decades in Bethlehem writing commentaries and translating Greek theological works; second only to Augustine in influence on the medieval Western church

Conclusion: What the Fourth Century Means for Us

- The church has always lived in tension between faithfulness and compromise, doctrinal clarity and cultural pressure
- The greatest danger to the church is often not persecution from without but compromise from within
- When the church loses its distinction from surrounding culture, it loses its power to transform it
- As Protestant Christians, we are heirs of Athanasius and Jerome — men who believed doctrine matters, Scripture is authoritative and sufficient, and there is no salvation apart from a Christ who is truly and fully God