

## Controversies, Councils, and Creeds [AD 100 - 500]

### A. Controversies

1. Gnosticism – Responses by *Tertullian & Irenaeus*
2. Literal vs. Allegorical Interpretation
3. *Glossolalia* – Speaking in Tongues [Acts is a Narrative, not a Norm; Principle > Pattern]

**Acts 2:43** - “And many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.”

**Acts 5:12** - “And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people.”

**2 Corinthians 12:12** - “Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.”

#### 4. Baptism [How many requirements, time, if any?]

“Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then ‘baptize’ in running cold water [*purity*], in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ If you cannot in cold, then in warm. Before the baptism moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand. [*The Didache: Purported Teachings of the 12 Apostles* (c. 120-150 AD)]

**Instruction and Preparation:** Early church communities required a period of instruction (*catechumenate*) lasting from a few weeks to several years. Catechumens\* were taught Christian doctrine, required to renounce former ways of life, and expected to demonstrate sincere repentance and moral transformation before being allowed to receive baptism. **Baptisms often took place on major feasts, especially Easter, after a period of fasting and prayer by the candidates and the community.**

**\*Apostolic Tradition (c. 200 AD):** Details a three-year *catechumenate* [instruction], moral examinations, renunciations, triple immersion, anointing, and first communion.

### B. Councils

#### 1. Lessons from the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15

- a. The Issue of works-salvation was taken seriously [*no small dissension* – vs. 2]
- b. Council’s initial response was a focus on the positive joy of Gentile salvation [vs. 3]
- c. Deference to those saved later in life who often carry excess spiritual baggage [vs. 5]
- d. The Scripture was the final authority [15-18, 21]
- e. Each speaker waited his turn [*after they had held their peace, James answered* – vs. 13]
- f. The decision was made graciously [*trouble not them, no greater burden* – vss. 19, 28]
- g. The decision determined not to complicate the simplicity of the Gospel [24]
- h. The goal of the council was unity [25]
- i. The decision was both written and orally delivered to the parties involved [23-27]
- j. The council strived to avoid personality conflicts or *ad hominem* attacks [12, 14, 26]

#### Treatise of Nepos as indisputable proof Christ’s kingdom will be on earth

**Eusebius:** “Now in general I endorse and love Nepos for his faith and industry, his study of Scripture, and his splendid hymnody, which still heartens the brethren, and I fully respect the man, especially now that he has gone to his rest. But truth is paramount, and one must honor what is correct and criticize what appears unsound.”

*When I arrived, as you know, this teaching had long been prevalent and caused schisms and separation of whole churches. I convened a meeting of the presbyters and teachers of the village congregations (and any brethren who wished to attend) and urged them to air the issue in public. In so doing I was greatly impressed by the soundness, sincerity, logic, and intelligence of the brethren as we discussed methodically and with restraint the difficulties and points of agreement. **We refused to cling blindly to prior opinions or avoid problems but tried our utmost to grapple with the issues and master them. Nor were we ashamed to alter our opinions, if convinced, but honestly and trusting in God, we accepted whatever was proven by Holy Scriptures.***

*In the end, **Coracion**, the originator of this teaching, in the presence of all the brethren agreed and promised us that he would no longer adhere to it, debate it, mention it, or teach it, since he was convinced by the counterarguments. As to the rest, many rejoiced at the conference and the concord achieved."*

## 2. Lessons from the Early Church Councils

### Council Details

**Council of Nicæa** (325 AD): Addressed the Arian controversy denying Christ's full divinity and standardized Easter observance. Issued the original Nicene Creed, asserting that Jesus is "of one substance with the Father" – *The Son of same substance with the Father, co-equal & co-substantial*

**Council of Constantinople** (381 AD): Focused on Arianism and debates about the Holy Spirit; refined and expanded the Nicene Creed to include affirmation of the Holy Spirit's divinity - Confirmed Christ's Two Natures: Divine and human

**Council of Ephesus** (431 AD): Defended the title of Mary as "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*) to satisfy Bishop Cyril of Alexandria and condemned Nestorianism (which claimed Christ existed as two separate persons—one divine, one human) in order to satisfy John of Antioch

**Council of Chalcedon** (451 AD): Resolved debates about Christ's nature, confirming he was fully divine and fully human [One Person, two natures, 100% God and 100% man], united "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation," in the Chalcedonian Creed.

## C. Creeds [Formation of the "Rules of Faith"]

### The Apostles' Creed [200 AD]

"I believe in God the Father Almighty Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hades, the third day he rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead; And I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic [universal] church; the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

### Nicene Creed [AD 325]

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, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; by whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end, And in the Holy Spirit. [But those who say: "There was a time when he was not," and "He was not before he was begotten," and "He was made out of nothing," or who assert that the Son of God is of a different substance or essence, or is created, or subject to alteration or change—these the catholic (universal) and apostolic Church anathematizes.]

## D. Conclusions [Applications from Early Church History – AD 100-500]

*The first five centuries of church history were not just theological squabbles; they shaped how Christians think, worship, and confess their faith even today.*

### 1. Truth Matters – Precision in Doctrine Protects Faith

- a. Early controversies forced believers to define truth carefully.
- b. Heresies like *Arianism*, *Gnosticism*, and *Pelagianism* prompted the Church to clarify what Scripture clearly taught about Christ, salvation, and the Trinity.
- c. The early Church learned to distinguish fundamentals of the faith from preferences.
- d. The Apostles' and Nicene creeds remind us that fuzzy theology leads to weak faith.
- e. The central question of every council: "What think ye of Christ?" [Matt. 22:42]

### 2. Unity must be grounded in Truth [Eph. 4:13 – "till we all come in **the unity of the faith.**"]

- a. The Church sought Unity, but not at the expense of Truth.
- b. Councils like Nicæa and Chalcedon were meetings of leaders seeking Unity around Truth, without compromise. ["contend for the faith which was once delivered"- Jude 3]
- c. Unity is far more than institutional harmony. [Acts 15:25; 1 Cor. 11:19]

### 3. Scripture is the Final Authority [Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17]

- a. Whereas tradition and reason played roles, Scripture remained the "rule of faith."
- b. When disputes arose, the question was not "What's New?" but "What's Scriptural?"
- c. Scripture is the Final Authority in ALL matters of Faith and Practice. [*Sola Scriptura*]
- d. God magnifies His Word above all else, even above His holy name.

*"For thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name." (Ps. 138:2b)*

### 4. Scripture consistently declares its superiority over Experiences and Visions.

#### *Romans 10:17 & 2 Timothy 3:16 - Sufficiency of Scripture*

#### a. **Experience** - Is Experience a Valid Test of Truth?

A woman came to **John MacArthur**, seething: "You resort to Greek translations and fancy words to explain away what the Holy Spirit is doing in the church today. Let me give you a piece of advice that might just save you from the wrath of almighty God; put away your Bible and your books and stop studying. **You have no right to question something you have never experienced.**" [MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, p. 25]

**Clark Pinnock:** "Experience alone is too flimsy a base on which to rest the Christian system ... However unique an experience may be, it is capable of a number of radically differing interpretations. It may be only an encounter with one's own subconscious. Those who place all their emphasis on a subjective validating process ... eventually reduce the content of revelation and fit it to their taste. The new theologian abandons confidence in the intellectual and historical content of the Christian message and places his trust in a subjective man-centered experience which is indistinguishable from gastric upset." [Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 1967 - *Christianity Today* (8/8/1986)]

## b. Visions

### (1) Examples of Alleged Visions in Church History

#### (a) Constantine

**Eusebius:** “On October 28, 312 AD, Constantine [of the western Roman empire] and Maxentius [ruler of Italy and Africa] fought the battle of the Milvian Bridge, one of the most momentous events in church or secular history. According to Lactantius [contemporary of Eusebius] Constantine had a dream the night before the battle in which he saw the first two letters – the *chi* and the *rho* – of Christ’s name in Greek superimposed and heard the words *in hoc signo vinces*, ‘By this sign you will conquer.’ The next morning, he had his soldiers paint this symbol [*chi-rho*] on their shields and on Constantine’s helmet, a monogram that was later incorporated into the imperial standard. When the battle was joined, Constantine’s forces quickly broke through the enemy lines resulting in Maxentius’s hasty retreat across the Milvian Bridge. The weight of his soldiers crowding onto that bridge caused it to collapse with thousands drowning, including Maxentius himself. The victor, probably a convert to Christianity even before the battle, but certainly after it, deemed himself the servant that God had chosen to convert the Roman Empire to the Christian faith.”

#### (b) Roman Catholic

*Lady of Guadalupe* (1531) – Mary allegedly appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico, her image on his cloak  
*Lourdes, France* (1858) – Mary’s alleged appearance reinforced the *Immaculate Conception* view (1854)  
*Fatima* (1917) – Mary allegedly appeared to 3 children in Portugal delivering prophetic warnings and confirming the Roman Catholic role of Mary in salvation history

#### (c) Charismatic

At a charismatic businessmen’s meeting in Chicago a Catholic priest testified that Mary had given him the gift of tongues while he was saying the rosary. [*Chaos*, p. 17]

“Everything God created upon the earth is in heaven – one difference: animals are perfect; the dogs do not bark ... Plus, you can eat all you want.” - Dr. Percy Collette [*after an “out-of-body experience”* – *Chaos*, p. 28]

#### (d) Mormonism and other Cults

In the *First Vision Account* [Spring 1820], Joseph Smith went into a New York grove of trees to pray about which church to join. He described experiencing a theophany—an appearance of God—where both God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him as distinct personages. During this vision, he was told that all the existing churches were teaching incorrect doctrines and that he should join none of them. This vision is considered the foundational event for the LDS Church and is regarded by its members as the restoration of true Christianity following centuries of apostasy.

### (2) Responses to Visions of Deity in Scripture [Fear and Trembling]

**Jacob at Peniel** - "For I have seen God face to face and **my life is preserved**" [Gen. 32:30]

**Moses** - "Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, **and live**?" [Deut. 4:33]

**Manoah to wife** - "We shall surely die, because we have seen God." [Judg. 13:22]

**Paul’s Vision of Christ** – “And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus; and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven; And he fell to the earth, ... And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? ... And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man ... And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.” [Acts 9:3-9]

### (3) Human Nature often prefers Spectacular Visions more than the Word of God.

**Mark 13:22** – “For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shew signs and wonders, **to seduce**, if it were possible, even the elect.”

**John 4:48** – “Then said Jesus unto him, **Except ye see signs and wonders**, ye will not believe.”

- (a) **Philip** responds to the words of Christ by requesting a Vision of the Father.

**John 14:6, 8** - “Philip saith unto him, Lord, **shew us the Father, and it sufficeth (satisfies) us.**”

- (b) **Thomas** responds to the words of the disciples by requesting a Vision of Christ.

**John 20:24-25a** – “But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord, But he said unto them, **Except I shall see** (his hands, nail prints, side) **I will not believe.**”

- (4) Before the New Testament was available, God used Visions to direct the seeker to God’s gospel messenger. [Rom. 10:14 - “how hear without a preacher (messenger)”]

- (a) Christ directs **Saul** (Paul) to His messenger, **Ananias**, in Damascus.

**Acts 9:6b** – “Arise, and go into the city, and **it shall be told thee** (by Ananias) what thou must do.”

- (b) The Visions of **Cornelius** and **Peter** direct the seeker to the messenger.

**Acts 10:17** – “Now while Peter **doubted in himself what this vision** which he had seen **should mean**, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon’s house, and stood before the gate.

**Acts 10:33, 36-37, 43** – [Cornelius said] “we all are here present before God, **to hear all things that are commanded thee of God ...** Then Peter opened his mouth, **The word which God sent ... That word, I say, ye know which was published throughout all Judaea ... To [Christ] gave all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.**”

- (5) The Apostles magnified the Word of God while minimizing Visions

- (a) Paul minimized his Vision of Christ [Acts 9:3] while reasoning from Scripture

**Acts 9:20, 22, 29** – “straightway he preached Christ” – “proving very Christ” – “spake boldly in the name of Christ”

**Acts 17:2** – “And Paul, **as his manner was**, went in unto them [Thessalonians], and three sabbath days **reasoned with them out of the scriptures**, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.”

**Acts 18:9-11** - “Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a **vision**, ... And he continued there a year and six months, **teaching the word of God among them.**”

- (b) Twenty-five years later, Paul used His vision, not to replace Scripture, but to remind his audience of the power of the gospel to change lives. [Acts 22, 26]

**Acts 26:19, 22** – “Whereupon, O king Agrippa, **I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision ...** but I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, **saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come**; That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.”

- (c) Paul minimized his Macedonian Vision which directed him to Europe.

**Acts 16:10** – “And after [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, **assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.**”

**Acts 16:32** – “And they [Paul and Silas] spake unto him [the Philippian jailer] **the word of the Lord**, and to all that were in his house.”

- (d) Paul minimized his Heavenly Vision since its emphasis was disallowed by God.

**2 Cor. 12:1-4** – “It is not expedient [appropriate] for me doubtless to glory. I will come to **visions and revelations of the Lord** ... whether in the body, or out of the body, **I cannot tell**; God knoweth. How that he was caught up into paradise, and **heard unspeakable [inexpressible] words**, which **it is not lawful [allowed] for a man to utter.**”

- (e) Peter mistakenly elevated his Vision of the Transfiguration above the Word from God the Father. [Voice > Vision – “*Tell the vision to no man*” (Matt. 17:9)]

**Luke 9:33, 35-36** – “Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias; **not knowing what he said** ... And there came a **voice** out of the cloud, saying, **This is my beloved Son; hear him** ... And they kept it close and **told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.**” [Kept a Vision secret; Peter would later prioritize – 2 Pet. 1:16-21]

- (f) By inspiration, Peter clearly wrote of the priority of Scripture over fables and human experiences (eyewitness accounts). [2 Peter 1:16-21]

#### **Eyewitness accounts > Fables**

**2 Peter 1:16** - “For **we have not followed cunningly devised fables**, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, **but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.**”

#### **Transfiguration = Eyewitness account [Peter’s Experience/Vision]**

**2 Peter 1:17-18** - “For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such **a voice** to him from the excellent glory, **This is my beloved Son**, in whom I am well pleased. And **this voice which came from heaven we heard**, when we were with him in the holy mount.” [Voice > Vision]

#### **Scripture > Transfiguration Vision**

**2 Peter 1:19-21** – “**We have also a more sure word of prophecy** ... Knowing this first, that **no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man**; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

### **(6) Valid (Biblical) View of Visions**

- (a) God uses Visions/Dreams before [Gen. 15:1; 46:2], during [Acts 9, 10, 16; 1 Cor. 12:1-4], and prophetically after [Acts 2:17-21] Scriptural revelation.

**Acts 2:17-21** – “And your young **men shall see visions**, and your old men shall dream dreams; ... And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

- (b) The Old Testament word “vision” often refers to the Word of God

**2 Chron. 26:5** – “[he] had understanding in the **visions of God**; and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper.”

**Prov. 29:18** – “**Where there is no vision [revelation], the people perish.**”

- (c) True Visions from God will never contradict Scripture.
- (d) Whether modern-day Visions are legitimate or not, ministries to the Muslims are using their commonality to their advantage in reaching the lost.
- (e) Old Testament Visions were often used by God to further His plans.
- (f) New Testament Visions often led the seeker to the Scriptural plan of salvation.

(7) Questions for Discussion

- (a) True/False: Once the Scripture was given, visions were done away.
- (b) Are we not constantly admonished to “*Get ‘em in the Word*”?
- (c) Are we only opposed to visions that do not support our theological system?
- (d) Scripture is the “more sure word of prophecy” but what if it is not available or the seeker is illiterate?
- (e) Is there a balanced position between the two extremes of ignoring supernatural visions completely or obsessing with them?
- (f) Can Visions be, not an end, but the means to an end: salvation?
- (g) Can we classify Visions as part of the *conscience* described as general revelation in Romans 2:14-15? [General revelation leads the unbeliever to Scripture]
- (h) Does God speak through visions today? Can he direct?

**“I have long ago given up telling God what He can and cannot do.” - Bere (AI plagiarism checked)**

- (i) If we allow exceptions to our “Vision Theology”, do we open the floodgates to all manner of dreams and visions?

**2 Corinthians 11:14** – “And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.

**Judges 17:6; 12:25** – “In those days there was no king in Israel; (but) every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

**c. Inner Impressions**

**Exodus 35:34** – “And he hath **put in his heart** that he may teach, both he, and Aholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan.”

**Nehemiah 2:12** – “And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man **what my God had put in my heart** to do at Jerusalem.”

**Job 38:36** – “Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? Or who hath given understanding to the heart?”

**Rev. 17:17** – “For **God hath put in their hearts** to fulfil his will.”

**F. B. Meyer** - "When the Word of God, the impulse of the Holy Spirit in my heart, and the outward circumstances are in harmony, then I am convinced that I am acting in accordance with the will of God."

**John G. Paton** - "I continually heard about the South Seas. I waited patiently. As I studied all the facts the voice within me sounded like the voice of God."

**John Scudder** - "In my heart I continually heard the message: 'Go, preach the gospel!'"

**Jim Eliot** - "And how do I know? Yea, my heart instructeth me. **No visions, no voices, but the counsel of a heart which desires God.**"

**John MacArthur**: *"I acknowledge that God can providentially guide people and may internally influence thoughts or impressions to draw them to faith, but I insist such experiences are not revelatory or miraculous in the Biblical sense and must never replace gospel preaching as the means of faith."*

5. Heresy often sounds Reasonable [Acts 7:9-11; 17:2] - *Heresy is Truth taken to an Extreme.*

**Acts 8:9-11** – “But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, **giving out that himself was some great one; To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time** he had bewitched them with sorceries.”

**Acts 17:2** – “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days **reasoned with them out of the scriptures.**”

**Col. 2:8** – “**Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.**”

- a. Many heresies arose from attempts to “simplify” Divine mysteries. [Isa. 55:8-9]
- b. Arius wanted to make Christ more personable by believing “there was a time when Christ was not.”
- c. Pelagius sought to make human responsibility more rational by denying original sin.
- d. Faith is not about attempting to make God or Christ fit our logical system but faithfully receiving what God has revealed to us in His Word. [Rom. 10:17]

*Although our system may seem logical, is it theological?*

6. God often uses Conflict in order to strengthen His Church and His people.

- a. Every controversy became a crucible for the clarification of doctrine.

*Augustine’s debates with Pelagius clarified Grace - Arian crisis clarified Christ’s eternal divinity  
Nestorian and Monophysite debates refined the understanding of Christ’s Two Natures*

- b. Doctrinal conflict brought theological clarity and growth to God’s people. [Rom. 8:28]

7. Humility in our understanding of Scripture must bow before the Mystery of Scripture.

**Deuteronomy 29:29** – “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God.”

**Psalm 50:21** – “**thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.**” [*You thought I was like you.*]

**2 Peter 3:16** – “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”

- a. The Apostles and the early church distinguished between **Mastery** and **Mystery**, how far to strive for the **Mastery** of Scripture and when to adore its **Mystery**.

**1 Cor. 9:25** – “*And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.*”

**Every key Doctrine of Scripture ends in a paradox for the human mind; the Christian must maintain the tension, uphold both sides of the paradox, and adore the mind of God.**

- b. The Trinity, Incarnation, and Hypostatic Union cannot be fully explained to the satisfaction of all believers, only faithfully confessed as Scriptural Truth.
- c. Conflict teaches Humility: God transcends our neat little systems and traditions.



8. Leadership and Integrity matter

- a. Early church leaders exemplified how courage and conviction can shape history.
- b. Athanasius stood *contra mundum* (against the world) for Nicene faith while most bishops wavered on the Deity of Christ.
- c. We must stand firm on Truth even when culture or majority opinion contradicts Truth.

**1 Cor. 16:13** – “Watch ye, **stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.**”

9. Orthodoxy must not only be stated; it must be lived out. [James 1:22 – doers, not hearers only]

- a. The creeds were not mere intellectual statements; they guided worship, prayer, baptism, and daily discipleship.
- b. The early Church confessed what she believed in order to shape how she lived.

10. God always preserves His church, albeit occasionally in the shadows of public scrutiny.

- a. The endurance of the church through centuries of persecution confirms God’s promise of Matthew 16:18.
- b. The church endures despite human failure, division, and controversy. [Ps. 76:10]
- c. Truth was tested, but Truth triumphed overall.