

THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

To listen to societal elites, to see old derelict church buildings across Europe, and to observe societal breakdown, one might assume that Christianity as a faith and as an influence in the world is all but consigned to history.

Certainly, since the late eighteenth-century Enlightenment there has been a relentless effort across virtually every branch of human learning, first, to redefine Christianity (we access truth by reason and not by faith), then to vanquish it (there is no truth). Indeed, the church has been damaged by the inroads of theological liberalism (the subjugation of the Holy Scriptures to the thoughts and emotions of man), and, thus, many congregations have slowly died.

Yet, flying under the radar are heartening statistics not only for Christians but for those who appreciate the benefits Christianity has brought to the world. According to the Pew Research Center, professing Christians quadrupled in number to over 2 billion between 1918 and 2018, and without waging *Jihad* against those who won't submit, or by bribing parents to convert to Islam in exchange for free education for their children. All the while, Atheism, still vocal, ever struggles to gain traction. Indeed, reports are increasing of mass baptisms in the United States, and of Gen Z in the U.K. reconnecting with the Christian faith. Christianity won't look the same as before with its cathedrals on the marketplaces, but it never existed in its buildings but in its people. That's what the Bible teaches.

It is folly, then, to write off Christianity. Founded on the truth of God's Son, and his promise to be with his followers unto the end of time (Matthew 28:20), the Christian church is one of the few institutions guaranteed a future (along with the divinely ordained family and civil authority). Thus, with confidence in God's power to save and to keep his people, we celebrate in 2025 the 1,700th anniversary of what is known as the first ecumenical council of the Christian church, the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.). It

signaled a manifold triumph for Christianity and indicated that it would not only become a global faith, but had come to stay.

THE TRIUMPH OVER UNBELIEF

Empowered by the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Spirit in his fullness at Pentecost, the church quickly spread from 120 disciples in Jerusalem and 500 disciples in Galilee (Mark 16:7 and I Corinthians 15:6; Acts 1:15), as the gospel of Christ, by his direction, made its way from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria unto the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). Indeed, by the end of the life of the apostle Paul, the gospel had reached the capital of the known world, Rome, and over the next three centuries spread throughout the Roman Empire, turning the known world upside down (Acts 17:6), as moralistic Jews and pagan Gentiles came to faith in Jesus Christ.

THE TRIUMPH OVER PERSECUTION

Persecution began early on, in Jerusalem. God used it, though, to nudge his people out to the known world with the good news of Christ (Acts 8:1-4). As Gentiles came to faith, Christianity lost its legal protection under Judaism. Thus, over the next three centuries, Christianity was ravaged by ten Roman persecutions. And yet, said the church father, Tertullian, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The more Christ's followers were chopped down, the more others were drawn to the love of God and his people.

The persecutions came to an end with the Edict of Milan (313). Then, in 324, the Roman emperor, Galerius, while dying, issued an edict of toleration, acknowledging that while Christians had been forbidden from worshiping as God would have them do so, it had failed to return them to "the persuasion of their forefathers" or to stop them from "making themselves laws for their own observance." Instead, at great cost they had faced down Rome's dictates.

By God's grace, Christianity is still here to stay. Nothing sinks it, not assaults on the Bible or on the followers of Christ, nor, as we shall see, when error creeps into the church.

***"We are more than
conquerors,
through [Christ]
who loves us"***

Romans 8:37

THE TESTING OF CHRISTIANITY

Another triumph for Christianity lay in its development of Christian doctrine. Jesus had promised his disciples that when the Holy Spirit came he would teach them all things (John 14:26). Thus, over the early centuries A.D. the church's understanding of Christ's gospel began to deepen and broaden. Initially, the early apologists were preoccupied with the defense of Christianity from Jewish and pagan attacks. Gradually, though, Christian doctrine developed via a combination of the study of the inspired Scriptures and the emergence of ideas that required answers. By the third century, this was especially so in regard to the doctrines of God and of Christ.

THE NICENE COUNCIL

When in 324 A.D. the emperor Constantine took over the eastern territories, he discovered a widespread controversy that had begun in Alexandria, North Africa, likely in 318. It involved a high profile church leader (presbyter) named Arius (250–336). Arius taught that Christ was not the eternal Son of God, but rather a creature. To non-Christians this may appear of little import, but the denial of Christ's eternal divinity not only undervalues the glory of Christ but undercuts the gospel. Without his divinity Christ has no power to save us from our sins.

The Bishop of Alexandria, Alexander (312?–328) saw the gravity of the situation, as did the 100 Egyptian bishops who deposed Arius. Yet, by that time, Arius had fled to Palestine, where he continued to spread his teaching.

Initially, Constantine, failing to appreciate how fundamental was the issue to the existence and spread of the gospel, called for reconciliation. Of no use, he summoned all the bishops of the empire to the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor (now Iznik, Turkey). With persecution now past, 200 to 300 bishops mainly from the East traveled unhindered to meet with Constantine at Nicaea. A small group of them was fully behind Arius, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia; another small group was led by Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra and fully supported Bishop Alexander; and the majority led by church historian Eusebius of Caesarea. They opined that God's Son was only like (*homoiousios*) God the Father. The resultant council, of historic importance, lasted from May to July, 325.

THE NICENE CREED

The bishops approached their main business not from scratch, but, offered by Eusebius the baptismal creed in use

in his church, they opted to adapt it. Eusebius' creed was theologically orthodox but was insufficient to answer the claims of Arius: that Christ was not until he was begotten by the Father, that he was created out of nothing, and therefore, being changeable, had come into a different substance (*hypostasis*) from the Father. Thus, the Council drew up an explicit, universal denunciation of Arius:

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 from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth,

Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and became incarnate and became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead,

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or

created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

THE NICENE CONSEQUENCES

The Nicene Creed gave orthodox expression to the salient features of biblical teaching. Later creeds would have more to say, notably the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed of 381, adding that the Spirit is, "*the Lord, the Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*" Nevertheless, the creed of 325 became the first to gain universal authority in the church.

Universal authority, however, is not the same as universal success. Figures and cults have since emerged to deny the oneness of God (Mormonism), and the eternal Sonship of Christ (the Jehovah Witnesses). Yet, the Council of Nicaea helped to distinguish biblical Theology and Christology from that which is false. This was no small accomplishment for knowing the truth doctrinally is a start to knowing the truth (Jesus) personally. This is vital, for, he said, the truth sets us free (John 8:32).

[Fresco, c.1600, Speranza, Rome, Vatican Biblioteca, First Council of Nicaea, www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/15.]



THE TEACHING OF CHRISTIANITY

Since God's truth is abiding, it is no surprise that the Nicene Creed's summary of biblical teaching has survived 1,700 years.

THE TRINITY

By the words "we believe," the Council stated that it is the universal belief of Christians that there is but one God in all the universe and in all of history—the One who made both the invisible and visible realms. At no point does the Creed seek to prove this monotheism, but then neither does the Bible (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1). God has ineradicably etched on our beings the knowledge of him (Romans 1:18-20). Thus, made in God's image, the making of gods to worship is unnecessary and ungodly.

Although we know of God from creation (Psalm 8:3-5; 19:1-4), we cannot know him personally unless, in grace, he introduces himself to us. How wonderful it is that he has done so through his Son. The Creed includes two vital details about him:

- *The Son's divineness:* He is "begotten from the Father." This biblical phrase expresses to us in language accommodated to our humanness that the Son shares the same substance as the Father. In essence the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all equally and eternally the one God. Were any of them to cease to be divine, God would cease to be God. To counter, then, the Arian heresy, the Nicene Creed insists that the Son was and remains "God from God, light from light, and true God from true God."
- *The Son's exclusiveness:* Additionally, the Creed proclaims that the one who became man, is alone the one in our flesh who is eternally divine. He is, says the Creed, the "only begotten." Since some are inclined to read into the language of begottenness the creation of the Son, the Creed adds that the Son was "begotten not made" (cf., John 1:1). Of all who claim to save, the Son possesses exclusively a sameness of substance with the Father. Being uncreated, he has been eternally begotten, which is to affirm that he has always been of the same substance as the Father (and the Spirit). Accordingly, man has only "one Lord." We know him as Jesus Christ, God's Son, the one by whom all things in heaven and earth exist, and by whom alone we can know God.

THE SAVIOR

Countless reasons explain why God's Son is the sole Savior of sinners. Obviously, his divinity uniquely qualifies him to be such. He alone belongs to the Godhead and was ordained to come and be our Savior. The Son, then, is *the* Christ, the one anointed with grace, truth, and power to

save sinners. To this end, he received in his conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb a human soul and started developing a human body. Meanwhile, Joseph learned that his betrothed was pregnant and was directed to name the child *Jesus* (or Savior). "***He [and he alone] would save his people from their sins***" (Matthew 1:21).

This Savior of sinners, the Creed states, is divine (Lord), having unique power to save; anointed (Christ), with authority to save; and human (Jesus), able to substitute for us in bearing our sins. Thus, we officially claim as the universal church that we neither need nor desire any other "Savior." In the Lord Jesus Christ, we have one who, no matter the number of religions and cults, is alone sufficient to save us to the uttermost. The Nicene bishops simply echoed, then, the apostle Peter's denial of salvation in any other, "***for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved***" (Acts 4:12).

THE SALVATION

The nature of salvation wasn't majorly discussed until Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033–1109), and thereafter during the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. Nevertheless, we discern in the Nicene Creed three principles of God's saving grace (unmerited favor):

- *God's grace was planned:* The incarnation was premeditated, combining divine genius and amazing grace for the salvation of sinners. Says the Creed, "because of us men [our sin and misery] and because of our salvation [our need and inability to save ourselves]" God's Son "came down, and became incarnate and became man."
- *God's grace was displayed:* While salvation has required that the one to bear our penalty be one of us, the Creed, contra nineteenth-century liberalism, is clear that only by his death in our place can we be saved. Moreover, only by his resurrection in our flesh have we proof that his atonement was accepted in heaven; and only by ascending to heaven in our flesh have we one to intercede sympathetically for us (Hebrews 4:14-16).
- *God's grace is bestowed:* The Creed says little of the Holy Spirit other than that Christians universally believe in him. Later, the church would underline the Spirit's divinity and especially his personhood. Yet, mention of the Spirit reminds us that it is by him that the work of God's Son is applied to sinners. He grants them spiritual life and gifts of repentance and faith, uniting them to Christ and opening up to them sonship to God. Moreover, the Spirit witnesses to them that the gospel is true and that those coming to God through Christ get to belong to God. [Image: <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/hope-christian-christianity-8877961/>]



Residential Address:

THE TASTING OF CHRISTIANITY

God's revealed truth is essential to Christianity. We make, then, no apologies for delving into it. Knowing the truth written in Scripture (John 17:17), personified by Christ (John 14:6), and summarized as in the Nicene Creed, is, spiritually, a matter of life and death.

Thus, Christianity offers through Christ more than a philosophy (an uncertain inquiry into the meaning of life), and more than a religion (man's attempt to get to God). Rather, it offers a divine promise that if we turn unto God from our sins and rest for our forgiveness upon our suffering Savior, we shall not only be forgiven, but be transformed, and possess an eternal life that survives the grave.

We can read, then, of the triumph of Christianity, its testing, and teaching, but unless we actually taste the gospel of Christ, we shall not benefit from Christianity. Rather, we shall miss out on eternal satisfaction.

INTELLECTUAL SATISFACTION

Turning to God satisfies because he opens up to us vistas we cannot otherwise see. As the author of *Hebrews* puts it, "*faith is the evidence of things not seen*" (11:1). By faith we get to see beyond the visible.

Describing what we see by faith is not easy. We try, for instance, to explain how there can be three persons in one God. We use the three-leafed clover, for the one leaf possesses three petals, and we say that God is as water, which can be liquid, ice, or vapor. Yet, God transcends these illustrations, for each person of the Godhead possesses the full essence of God simultaneously. For the illustration to suffice, each leaf of the clover would have to be the full clover at the same time, and the same water would have to be liquid, ice, and vapor simultaneously.

Instead, then, of squeezing God into finite minds, the Christian, contrary to cults, rejoices to declare God as he has revealed himself to be. God's Word teaches that each person of the Godhead mutually indwells the other (John

17:21; Colossians 1:19)—the Greeks call this *perichoresis*, the Latins *circumincessio*—and that, in Christ, we are in God (John 17:21) and he is in us (Galatians 4:6). There is, then, intellectual satisfaction in knowing that the mysteries of the faith are consistent with the size of God.

SPIRITUAL SATISFACTION

If the doctrine of God were not true, we would have to worship the one who invented it. So also with the doctrine of Christ. He is fully God and fully man, possessing two natures in one person, without their admixture (Christ becoming a deified man or human god) or isolation (Christ thus becoming two persons). Faced with such a mystery, the counsel of Puritan Thomas Watson is fitting: "Where reason cannot wade, there faith must swim."

While many over recent centuries have sought satisfaction in reason, God intends that through faith we find contentment in Christ. Faith rests in Christ's divinity, for his signs and wonders assure us of his might to save us from our sins; his prophecies of his intention and desire to do so; and his claim to raise himself from the dead of his undoubted success in doing so (John 10:17).

Faith also rests in Christ's humanity, thankful that one so divine could die for us; can feel our infirmities (Hebrews 4:14-16); and knows the cross under which shadow he calls us to live.

LIFE SATISFACTION

Yet, in humbling ourselves before God and confessing our need of Christ, God graciously raises us to a new life. In it, we find our true purpose, and by the work of God's Spirit we now live with a clearer and higher aim, namely, to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Thus, no authentic believer ends their life wishing they had not become a Christian. We have in Christ a genuine sense of fulfilment, knowing that whatever the challenges by which we are being honed, they prepare us for the best which is to come. May you too, then, come to know God. He stands ready to save you!

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