

From Nicaea evolved the creed of Epiphanius and its ratification by the Council of Constantinople

A doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the Hebrew scriptures, which centre on the oneness of God: “Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut 6:4 NRSV). The New Testament writers did not clearly explain how the Trinitarian unity of Father, Son, and Spirit preserved the oneness of God. To address this and some heresies, theologians drew on Scripture, logic, and philosophy to articulate the nature of God in the Nicene Creed of 325. This creed became a foundational statement of faith that evolved over the ensuing decades. A creedal formula recorded by Epiphanius of Salamis (c.310-403) in his *Anchoratus* in 374 is, almost word-for-word, the one ratified by the Council of Constantinople in 381, and later affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451). This essay examines the fluidity of the Nicene statement of faith in the decades after the Council that became the creed of Epiphanius.

Very little was written about the Nicene Creed for more than two decades after Nicaea because there was little interest in it.¹ The disputes that persisted after Nicaea eventually prompted a need to clarify the creed’s language and perhaps address omissions. Nicaea was a response to Arius's belief that there was a time when the Son was not, by proclaiming that the Son is coeternal and begotten of the same substance (*ousia*) and being (*homoousios*) with the Father.² Some, like the Eusebians, believed it sounded too Sabellian. Others were committed to subordinationism. Councils at Serdica (343), Antioch (344), Serrimum (351), and Ancyra (358) struggled to find a solution. With the rise of the anti-Nicenes, efforts to overturn the Council of Nicaea's decisions intensified. The Homoians convened councils and replaced the Nicene Creed with their own official version, which affirmed the Son as subordinate and only like the Father.³ While the Nicene formula may not have held a unique status, it did encourage the development of creeds and new formulae to

¹ Mark S. Smith, *The idea of Nicaea in the early church councils, AD 431-451*, First edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1968607>, 1 online resource (xiii, 230 pages).

² J. Warren Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199557813.003.0009>. 111.

³ Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 112–14.

improve the Nicene text.⁴ This situation created a fluid dynamic in which a statement of faith, arising from conflict and perhaps confusion over certain words, made modification and addition to the Nicene Creed inevitable.

Ongoing dissatisfaction with the language used to describe the Father and the Son persisted into the sixth decade, drawing attention back to the Nicene formula. Basil of Ancyra was dissatisfied with the term *homoousios* and convened a council in 358, arguing that the Son was only 'like' (*homoiousios*) the Father according to his essence (*ousia*). Aetius and Eunomius further fuelled anti-Nicene debate against the term *homoousios*. They argued that because God's essence is unbegotten or ingenerate, and the Son is begotten, they could not be *homoousios*. This was rebutted by the Cappadocian bishops: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus.⁵ However, this did not resolve the disagreement over the meaning and use of the words, nor did it address the Spirit's relationship within the Trinity. This heightened the need for further refinement of the Nicene formula.

The Cappadocians contributed to the ontological relationship among Father, Son, and Spirit. The Holy Spirit was not of central concern for most of the fourth century.⁶ Smith records that pro-Nicenes, such as Athanasius and Hilary, affirmed the Spirit's divinity, while their opponents implied that the Spirit, like the Son, was not ontologically equal.⁷ Gregory of Nyssa believed that the Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and the Son.⁸ Smith agrees with Hanson that the conflict over Nicaea leading up to the Council of Constantinople was not limited to countering Arianism but also concerned the ontological relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, as well as the interpretation of scripture.⁹ The Cappadocians explained that each person of the Trinity was distinct yet remained in unity. They claimed a doctrine of 'divine simplicity' where God cannot be known by being broken down into

⁴ Smith, *The idea of Nicaea in the early church councils, AD 431-451*, 14–15.

⁵ Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 115.

⁶ R. P. C. Hanson, *The search for the Christian doctrine of God: the Arian controversy 318-381* (London: T & T Clark, 1988), 788.

⁷ Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 120.

⁸ Hanson, *The search for the Christian doctrine of God: the Arian controversy 318-381*, 784.

⁹ Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 109. See also R. P. C. Hanson, "The achievement of orthodoxy in the fourth century AD," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150.

constituent elements.¹⁰ Basil, in *De Spiritu Sancto* (374-375), argued in favour of triune equality in nature and dignity.¹¹ In 380, Gregory of Nazianzus argued for the Spirit's unity with the Father and the Son in his fifth theological oration on the Holy Spirit (*Oration* 31.9).¹² These Cappadocians, contemporaries of Epiphanius of Salamis, polished the understanding of Trinitarian unity, which would have influenced creedal refinement and expanded Trinitarian understanding in the lead-up to the Council.

The writings of Epiphanius of Salamis suggest that the final wording of the Constantinopolitan Creed was the culmination of work carried out in the decades after Nicaea. As noted by Kelly, the Nicene Creed was not an "exclusive baptismal formula of the Church", and local creeds incorporated the Nicene formula.¹³ Epiphanius was born in Palestine and later became the bishop of Salamis in 367. He was connected with those Cappadocians above, of whom only Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa attended the First Council of Constantinople in 381; Basil of Caesarea died two years earlier, in 379. Epiphanius used the Nicene formula and then fleshed out its "Christological and pneumatological content" in response to heresies that had emerged.¹⁴ Basil agreed with the supplements on the Holy Spirit but disapproved of the Christological expansions (see Basil of Caesarea, *Letter to Ephinasius* 258.2). However, both Basil and Epiphanius recognised that the Nicene Creed addressed concerns faced in 325, but now required updating.¹⁵ Epiphanius wrote the *Ancoratus* around 374 at the request of several presbyters in Pamphylia. *Ancoratus* defended the Nicene faith in the Trinity and opposed contemporary heresies.¹⁶ Christian Bull explains that a year after the death of Athanasius, the presbyters implied that Epiphanius had

¹⁰ Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 115.

¹¹ Basil of Caesarea, "de Spiritu Sancto," New Advent, accessed 12 May, 2026, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3203.htm>.

¹² Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 31," New Advent, accessed 13 May, 2026, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310231.htm>.

¹³ Canon J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1972), 324–25.

¹⁴ Smith, *The idea of Nicaea in the early church councils, AD 431-451*, 25.

¹⁵ Smith, *The idea of Nicaea in the early church councils, AD 431-451*, 26.

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *The creeds of Christendom: with a history and critical notes*, 2026 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library: Harper and Row, 1889), 47, <https://ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/creeds2/cache/creeds2.pdf>.

“inherited the mantle of Athanasius as the defender of Nicene Trinitarianism”.¹⁷ In Chapter 119 of the *Ancoratus*, a creedal formula appears that is almost identical to the Constantinopolitan creed supported by the Council of Chalcedon.¹⁸ Epiphanius confirms in his introduction to the creed that it was both familiar and in use:

“[B]oth you and we, and all the orthodox bishops, and in short the entire catholic church, against the heresies which have emerged subsequently, in accordance with the faith of those holy fathers which have been ordained earlier, thus speak especially to those coming to holy baptism, in order that they may declare and speak thus”.¹⁹

Therefore, as Schaff concludes, the clauses added to the Nicene formula by the Council of Constantinople were already in existence by 374.²⁰ Kelly states that the Council took over an existing local baptismal creed and ratified it.²¹ Ayres supports the idea that the Nicene Creed formed a basis that was incorporated into existing creeds.²² Bright states that the Council would not have had any difficulty in accepting an existing formulary, as formulated by Epiphanius in the *Ancoratus*, without any significant change.²³ This alone strongly supports the argument that the bishops at Constantinople acted to ratify an existing creed rather than merely to revise Nicaea.

There is a lack of information about the proceedings at Constantinople and the origins of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed. According to Hanson, there is evidence that the council met during May, June and July, but there are no surviving accounts of its proceedings.²⁴ In 380, an edict by Emperor Theodosius I required the people of

¹⁷ Christian H. Bull, "The Coptic Translation of Epiphanius of Salamis's *Ancoratus* and the Origenist Controversy in Upper Egypt," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 26, no. 2 (2022): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zac-2022-0020>, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5ebf0a02-7fd2-3eb0-a84e-4cbd019546e0>.

¹⁸ Compare the Greek text of both creeds in: Schaff, *The creeds of Christendom: with a history and critical notes*, 47–49. And also William Bright, *The canons of the first four general councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon: with notes*, 2nd ed., 1 online resource (248 pages) vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), b2. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h7h&AN=36857174&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁹ Epiphanius, *Ancoratus* 119.2.

²⁰ Schaff, *The creeds of Christendom: with a history and critical notes*, 49.

²¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 310.

²² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 255–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198755066.001.0001>.

²³ Bright, *The canons of the first four general councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon: with notes*, 91.

²⁴ Hanson, *The search for the Christian doctrine of God: the Arian controversy 318-381*, 805.

Constantinople to profess the Nicene faith.²⁵ Theodosius convened the Council at Constantinople the following year. Ayres states that Theodosius may have intended the Council to settle issues in Constantinople and to pursue reconciliation with the Macedonians.²⁶ Kelly observes that a letter to Theodosius mentions an intention of the Council to “ratify the faith of the Nicene fathers” and address the subsequent heresies.²⁷ Kelly notes that this is possibly because the council was not considered ecumenical until much later. Nor is there any mention of the Constantinopolitan creed in the four canons and the letter it dispatched to Theodocius, and there is silence about the Constantinopolitan creed between 381 and 451 at Chalcedon.²⁸ Ayres believes that one reason was a lack of interest in the council in the West, partly due to the canons of Constantinople's claims to the authority of the bishop of Constantinople.²⁹

Kelly makes a positive contribution, supporting the argument that the creed of the Council of Constantinople validated what already existed. He argues that it is “improbable” that the Council composed the Constantinopolitan Creed, but that adopting something different to Nicaea was not necessarily a problem because the attachment was to the Nicene teaching rather than its literal wording. It should be that the Council settled on a formulary that reaffirmed Nicaea and met the requirements of the current situation.³⁰

In conclusion, the doctrine of the Trinity evolved in the decades after Nicaea and reached an influential formulation at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which ratified what became known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This creed was recorded by Epiphanius of Salamis in his *Anchoratus* in 374 and later affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451). The Council of Nicaea had addressed the issues that concerned the bishops in 325. It had declared the Son to be of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father. But the question of the Spirit had largely been ignored. During the following decades, the status of the Spirit was addressed, along with ongoing heresies. By 374, there was a more developed

²⁵ Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 251.

²⁶ Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 253.

²⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 307.

²⁸ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 305–07.

²⁹ Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 253.

³⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 325.

formulaic understanding of the Trinity, which was adopted by enough of the church to be ratified in Constantinople. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed strengthened the Nicene tradition, which continues to form the basis of orthodox Christianity today.

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