

Is it True that Jesus' Divinity was Invented by Constantine at the Council of Nicea?

By Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

"Indeed," Teabing said. "...During this fusion of religions, Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea."...

"At this gathering," Teabing said, "many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon—the date of Easter, the role of the bishops. The administration of sacraments, and of course, the *divinity* of Jesus."

[Sophie] "I don't follow. His divinity?"

"My dear," Teabing declared, "until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal."

"Not the Son of God?"

"Right," Teabing said. "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea."

"Hold on. You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a vote?"

"A relatively close vote at that," Teabing added....¹

Was Christ's Deity Invented by the Christian Church in the 4th Century?

In response to the charge made above, we want to begin by quoting from a letter that Eusebius of Caesarea sent back **from** Nicea to his diocese. He says,

...We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, Son Only-begotten, first-born of every creature, before all the ages, begotten from the Father, by Whom also all things were made; Who for our salvation was made flesh, and lived among men, and suffered, and rose again the third day, and ascended to the Father, and will come again in glory to judge the quick and dead. And we believe also in One Holy Ghost: believing each of

these to be and to exist, the Father truly Father, and the Son truly Son, and the Holy Ghost truly Holy Ghost, as also our Lord, sending forth His disciples for the preaching, said, "Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Concerning Whom we confidently affirm that so we hold, and so we think, and **so we have held aforetime**, and we maintain this faith unto the death, anathematizing every godless heresy. **That this we have ever thought** from our heart and soul, **from the time we recollect ourselves**, and now think and say in truth, before God Almighty and our Lord Jesus Christ do we witness, being able by proofs to shew and to convince you, that, **even in times past, such has been our belief and preaching.**²

Remember, Eusebius was a participant in the Council of Nicea. His conclusion was that the Council merely affirmed what the Church had always believed and taught about Jesus' divinity.

In spite of testimony like this, many liberal theologians maintain that Jesus' divinity, and the related doctrine of the trinity were *not* part of the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, but merely invented by the church centuries later. For example, in a sermon given in August, 1964, at New York City, liberal theologian James A. Pike declared, "The Trinity is not necessary. Our Lord never heard of it. The apostles knew nothing of it." Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of "The Way International," claims in his book, *Jesus Christ Is Not God*, that the early church (to 330 A.D.) never believed in the Trinity or in Christ's deity. He argues,

Certainly, during this time, church leaders spoke of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but they never referred to them as co-equal.... In fact, the opposite was the case. They spoke of the Father as supreme, the true and only God...and of the son *as inferior*... having a beginning, visible, *begotten, immutable.*³

But is this really what we find when we carefully examine the writings of the earliest Christian leaders, or is this allegation merely an invention by those who, for whatever reason, choose not to believe in the Trinity?

The following chronological examples show that the early church clearly *did* believe that Jesus Christ was God long before the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.):

Ignatius (30-107 A.D.), who was born before Christ died, consistently spoke of the deity of Jesus Christ. Consider a few examples: In *To the Ephesians*, and other letters, we find references such as the following: "Jesus Christ our God"; "who is God and man"; "received knowledge of God, that is, Jesus Christ"; "for our God, Jesus the Christ"; "for God was manifest as man"; "Christ, who was from eternity with the Father"; "from God, from Jesus Christ"; "from Jesus Christ, our God"; "Our God, Jesus Christ"; "suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God"; "Jesus Christ the God" and "Our God Jesus Christ."⁴ The fact that Ignatius was not rebuked, nor branded as teaching heresy by any of the churches or Christian leaders he sent letters to proves that the early church, long before 107 A.D., accepted the deity of Christ.

Polycarp (69-155 A.D.) possibly spoke of “Our Lord and God Jesus Christ.”⁵

Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.) wrote of Jesus, “who, . . . being the first-begotten Word of God, is even God.”⁶ In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, he stated that “God was born from a virgin” and that Jesus was “worthy of worship” and of being “called Lord and God.”⁷

Tatian (110-172 A.D.), the early apologist wrote, “We do not act as fools, O Greeks, nor utter idle tales when we announce that God was born in the form of man.”⁸

Irenaeus (120-202 A.D.), wrote that Jesus was “perfect God and perfect man”; “not a mere man . . . but was very God”; and that “He is in Himself in His own right . . . God, and Lord, and King Eternal” and spoke of “Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour and King”⁹

Tertullian (145-220 A.D.), said of Jesus “Christ is also God” because “that which has come forth from God [in the virgin birth] is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one . . . in His birth, God and man united.”¹⁰

Caius (180-217 A.D.), a Roman Presbyter, wrote of the universal Christian attestation to the deity of Christ in his refutation of Artemon, who maintained that Christ was only a man. Note that before 217 A.D., Caius appealed to much earlier writers, all of whom taught Christ’s deity: “Justin and Miltiades, and Tatian and Clement, and many others,—who is ignorant of the books of Irenaeus and Melito, and the rest, which declare Christ to be God and man? All the psalms, too, and hymns of brethren, *which have been written from the beginning by the faithful*, celebrate Christ the Word of God, ascribing divinity to Him . . . [This] doctrine of the Church, then, has been proclaimed so many years ago . . .”¹¹

Gregory Thaumaturgus (205-265 A.D.) declared in *On the Trinity*, that “All [the persons] are one nature, one essence, one will, and are called the Holy Trinity; and these also are names subsistent, one nature in three persons, and one genus [kind].”¹²

Novatian (210-280 A.D.) wrote in his *On The Trinity*, of Jesus being truly a man but that “He was also God according to the Scriptures Scripture has as much described Jesus Christ to be man, as moreover it has also described Christ the Lord to be God.”¹³ (Note then, that in the 200’s we already had discourses on the Trinity.)

Athanasius (293-373 A.D.), the keen defender of New Testament teaching against the early Arian heresy, which taught that Jesus Christ was not God, declared of Jesus, “He always was and is God and Son” and “He who is eternally God, . . . also became man for our sake.”¹⁴

Alexander of Alexandria spoke in reference to Jesus of “his highest and essential divinity” and that he was “an exact and identical image of the Father.”¹⁵

Eusebius of Caesarea stated that “the Son of God bears no resemblance to originated creatures but . . . is alike in every way only to the Father who has begotten [Him] and that he is not from any other hypostasis and substance but from the Father.”¹⁶

Augustine declared that Christians "...believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, maker and ruler of the whole creation: that Father is not Son, nor Holy Spirit Father or Son; but a Trinity of mutually related Persons, and a unity of equal essence" and that therefore, "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit God; and all together are one God."¹⁷

Origen stated that Christ was "God and man."¹⁸

Tertullian wrote of Jesus that "He is God and man.... We have here a dual condition—not fused but united—in one person, Jesus as God and man."¹⁹

Proclus wrote, "He was born of woman, God but not solely God, and man but not merely man.... Christ did not by progress become God—heaven forbid!—but in mercy he became man, as we believe. We do not preach a deified man; we confess an incarnate God...him alone who was born of a virgin, God and man."²⁰

Cyril of Alexandria wrote of Jesus, "For he remained what he was; that is, by nature God. But...he took it on himself to be man as well" and "There is nothing to prevent us from thinking of Christ as being the one and only Son at once both God and man, perfect in deity and perfect in humanity...he is conceived of as God and is God,..."²¹

These are only a few of the references that could be cited.

In conclusion, from the very first, church leaders—immediately after the time of the apostles up to the Council of Nicaea in the 4th century and beyond—had consistently believed and taught that Jesus Christ is God. Therefore, Dan Brown and others are clearly mistaken when they maintain that the divinity of Jesus was "invented" by Christians in the 4th century.

Only one logical explanation can be given for this abundant early testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ: early church leaders were simply declaring what was already declared by Jesus Christ and the apostles in Holy Scripture—that Christ was indeed God. As Gregory of Nazianzus stated in his "Third Theological Oration Concerning the Son," "From their [the apostles] great and exalted discourses we have discovered and preached the deity of the Son."²²

The truth is that for those today who deny Christ's deity—as for the early Arians—the concept that Jesus could be God, part of the Trinity, is simply a stumbling block to their rationalism. What they cannot fully comprehend, they will not accept. However, the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be rejected on biblical or historical grounds because the testimony for it is too abundant. It can only be rejected on philosophical and personal grounds which have no merit.

How influential was Constantine at Nicea?

From the above information, it should be clear that Constantine did not "invent" the deity of Jesus. But how much influence did he have on what happened at the Council of Nicea? According to one account,

Constantine did play an important role at the Council. Eusebius of Caesarea reports that he played a key part in calming, convincing, and

bringing all to agreement on contested points. The account of Eusebius fairly glows in regard to the Emperor, and he is portrayed as a key figure. It is nowhere suggested, however, that he was permitted to vote with the bishops nor that he used any form of force to obtain an outcome....

The Church was willing to accept the help of an emperor, to listen to what he had to say, but not to accept the rule of an emperor in matters of faith. However one describes the role of Constantine at the Council of Nicea, it must be remembered that the Creed of Nicea expressed what the great majority of bishops at the council found to be **traditional, Biblical, and orthodox of the Christian faith**, a faith in which they believed so firmly that they were willing to die for it.²³

One other point needs to be made: In *The Da Vinci Code*, Teabing declares that Jesus' divinity was decided by a "close vote". Is this true?

It is not accurate to say that there was a "vote" at Nicea regarding the divinity of Jesus. As one source reveals, "And there certainly was no vote to determine Jesus' divinity: this was already a matter of common knowledge among Christians, and had been from the early years of the religion."²⁴

The Bishops did, however, have to decide whether or not to sign the statement the Council drafted which clarified their understanding of the historical and biblical teaching concerning Jesus' nature. If this is what Brown—and his alter ego Teabing—meant by a "vote", then it wasn't very close: "Only **two** out of more than 300 bishops **failed to sign** the creed!"²⁵

Notes

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (), p. 233.

² <http://www.ccel.org/fathers/NPNF2-04/v2/A3.HTM>, emphasis added

³ Victor Paul Wierwille, *Jesus Christ Is Not God* (New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press, 1975), emphasis added.

⁴ Kirsopp Lake, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers, Vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library*, Harvard University Press, 1965, *To the Ephesians I*, Greeting; i.1; vii.2; xviii.2; xix.3; *To the Magnesians*, xiii.2; *To the Trallians*, vii.1; *To the Romans*, Greeting; iii.3; vi.3; *To the Smyrnaeans I*; *To Polycarp*, viii.3, respectively.

⁵ *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, Chapter 6, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Vol. 1 The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus) (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1977), 34.

⁶ Justin Martyr, "The First Apology," Chapter 63, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 184.

⁷ Justin Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew," Chapters 64, 68, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol 1, 231-233.

⁸ Tatian the Assyrian, "Address of Tatian to the Greeks," Chapter 21, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, 74.

⁹ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies" Book III, Chpt. 16, Title; Chpt. 19, Title, para.2; Book I, chapt. 10, para. 1, in Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, 440, 448-49.

¹⁰ Tertullian (Quintus Tertullianus), "A Treatise on the Soul," Chapter 41, and "Apology," Chapter 21, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1978), 221, 34-35, respectively.

¹¹ Caius, "Against the Heresy of Artemon" in "Fragments of Caius" in Roberts and Donaldson, *The*

- Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century, Vol. 5*, 601, emphasis added.
- ¹² Gregory Thaumaturgus, "On the Trinity," para. 2, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 6: Fathers of the Third Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 48.
- ¹³ Novatian, a Roman Presbyter, "A Treatise of Novatian Concerning the Trinity," Chapter 11, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century, Vol. 5*, 620.
- ¹⁴ Athanasius, "Against the Arians," III, para.29, 31, in Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer (eds.), *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 52, 54.
- ¹⁵ "Alexander of Alexandria's Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica," para.37, in William G. Rusch (trans./ed.), *The Trinitarian Controversy*, (Philadelphia: For tress Press, 1980), 40, 42.
- ¹⁶ "Eusebius of Caesarea's Letter to His Church Concerning the Synod at Nicaea," para.13 in Rusch, 59.
- ¹⁷ Augustine, "On the Trinity," IX, para.1; XV, para.28, in Wiles and Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, 36-37, 91.
- ¹⁸ Origen, "Dialogue with Heraclides," 1-4 in Wiles and Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, 23.
- ¹⁹ Tertullian, "Against Praxeas," Chapter, 27, in Wiles and Santer (eds.), 46.
- ²⁰ Proclus, "Sermon I," paragraphs 2, 4 in Wiles and Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, 62-64.
- ²¹ Cyril of Alexandria, "Second Letter to Succensus," 2, 4, in Wiles and Santer, *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, 67, 69-70.
- ²² Gregory of Nazianzus, "Third Theological Oration Concerning the Son," 17 in Rusch (trans./ed.), *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 143.
- ²³ <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/sbrandt/nicea.htm>, emphasis added.
- ²⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The DaVinci Code* (Oxford University Press), from http://beliefnet.com/story/168/story_16806_1.html
- ²⁵ <http://www.reachouttrust.org/articles/relatedsubjects/davinci.htm>, emphasis added.

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