

CONSTANTINE, COUNCILS, AND THE FORMATION OF IMPERIAL CHRISTIANITY

From Legalization to the Eve of Ephesus, AD 313-431

The Genealogy of Christian Division

A Historical and Biblical Study of Schism, Reformation, and the Making of Modern Christianity

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Abstract

Between AD 313 and 431 Christianity underwent one of the most consequential transformations in its history. A religion that had developed for centuries without a Christian emperor acquired legal protection, restored property, imperial patronage, public architecture, clerical privileges, and access to the coercive machinery of the Roman state. This chapter reconstructs that transition without adopting either of two common distortions: Constantine did not invent Christianity, create the catholic church, formulate the Trinity, or select the biblical canon; yet legalization and imperial sponsorship profoundly altered the institutional conditions under which Christian unity, doctrinal conflict, episcopal authority, and heresy were negotiated. The chapter traces the Constantinian settlement, the Donatist schism, the Alexandrian controversy associated with Arius, the Council of Nicaea in 325, the complex decades of post-Nicene conflict, the Council of Constantinople in 381, the rise of Constantinople among the major sees, the increasing legal privilege of Nicene Christianity under Theodosius I, the development of monastic and public Christian culture, fourth-century canon consolidation, Christianity beyond the Roman Empire, and Augustine's decisive influence on Western theology. It argues that the genealogy of this period is best described as a transition from pre-Nicene episcopal Christianity to imperially recognized conciliar Christianity, not as the creation of a new religion in 325. A *Sola Scriptura* assessment affirms the biblical substance of Nicene confession concerning the full deity of the Son and Spirit while refusing to identify imperial enforcement, conciliar prestige, episcopal succession, or political precedence with divine authority in themselves. The chapter ends at the Christological tensions that led directly to Ephesus in 431.

Keywords: *Constantine; Council of Nicaea; Arian controversy; Donatism; Council of Constantinople; imperial Christianity; Augustine; conciliar authority*

1. Introduction: A Christian Emperor and a New Problem of Power

The fourth century did not begin with the creation of a new Christian faith. It began with the sudden removal of a political condition under which Christianity had learned to exist for generations. By AD 313, Christian churches already possessed bishops, regional synods, baptismal and Eucharistic practice, rules of faith, a large and increasingly stable body of apostolic writings, public succession claims, systems of charity and discipline, and dense networks connecting major urban centers. The pre-Nicene church had also endured the most severe imperial persecution in its history. What it had never possessed was a Christian emperor who could restore its confiscated property, exempt clergy from some civic obligations, endow basilicas, convene bishops from distant provinces, exile ecclesiastical dissidents, and treat church division as a problem of imperial order.

That change is the governing problem of this chapter. The decisive question is not whether Constantine “created Catholicism.” The preceding history makes that claim untenable. Christian communities calling themselves catholic, defending apostolic succession, recognizing episcopal structures, and arguing over Scripture and sacraments existed long before Constantine. Nor did the emperor invent the deity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity. The New Testament and pre-Nicene writers had already forced Christians to ask how the one God is confessed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and third-century disputes had produced substantial theological vocabulary before Constantine appeared on the ecclesiastical stage. The historically serious question is different: what happened when a church that had developed without state sponsorship became legally protected, financially favored, publicly monumental, and increasingly intertwined with the government of the empire?

The answer requires more than the familiar sequence Constantine, Nicaea, and Theodosius. Imperial patronage transformed the social scale of Christian institutions. Bishops who had once negotiated with hostile magistrates could now petition emperors. Ecclesiastical disputes could be appealed into imperial courts. Councils could travel under state subsidy and their decisions could receive civil enforcement. The prestige of sees increasingly intersected with the administrative geography of the empire. A theological disagreement in Alexandria could become an imperial emergency. A disciplinary schism in North Africa could produce commissions, councils, confiscations, and coercive laws. An emperor could favor one episcopal coalition, die, and be succeeded by another emperor who preferred its opponents. Imperial Christianity therefore created new possibilities for coordination and new temptations to confuse political settlement with theological truth.

This chapter follows those developments from the Constantinian settlement of AD 313 to the eve and opening of the Council of Ephesus in 431. The endpoint is deliberate. By 431 the fourth-century Trinitarian conflicts had produced a broadly pro-Nicene imperial orthodoxy, but the language of Christology remained unstable enough to generate a new and enduring crisis. The controversy surrounding Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria would expose the limits of the unity achieved after Nicaea and Constantinople. That first major permanent fracture belongs to the next chapter. Here the task is to explain the institutional and theological world that made Ephesus possible.

The chapter proceeds with two methodological distinctions. First, historical causation must not be reduced to theology alone. The disputes were genuinely doctrinal, but their trajectories were also affected by court politics, episcopal rivalries,

geography, language, patronage, imperial succession, popular mobilization, legal institutions, and personal relationships. Second, historical description and biblical judgment must remain distinguishable. A council may have expressed a biblically faithful doctrine while using political mechanisms that Scripture does not authorize. An emperor may have protected Christians from persecution while also establishing precedents for religious coercion that require criticism. Conversely, the misuse of imperial power does not make the deity of Christ false merely because emperors eventually supported Nicene Christianity. Historical contamination and doctrinal truth are not identical questions.

2. Sources, Chronology, and Method

The documentary base for AD 313-431 is unusually rich, but it is also polemical and politically charged. Eusebius of Caesarea is indispensable for Constantine's reign. His *Ecclesiastical History* preserves earlier material, while his *Life of Constantine* supplies detailed information about imperial religious policy, letters, councils, and building patronage. Yet the *Life* is also openly celebratory. Eusebius presents Constantine in providential and biblical categories, so his testimony must be compared with law codes, inscriptions, numismatics, other ecclesiastical historians, and the sharply different narrative of Lactantius. Lactantius' *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* preserves the text of the 313 toleration agreement in the form transmitted to provincial officials and gives a nearer contemporary account of Constantine's victory, but it too interprets history theologically, especially as divine judgment on persecuting emperors (Cameron & Hall, 1999; Creed, 1984; Drake, 2000).

The Trinitarian controversies leave a vast but asymmetrical archive. Athanasius of Alexandria preserved documents, defended Nicaea, narrated his own exiles, and characterized opponents in ways that decisively shaped later memory. His writings are therefore essential but cannot function as a neutral map of every fourth-century theological coalition. The label "Arian" became especially elastic. It could refer narrowly to Arius and his followers or polemically to bishops whose theology differed significantly from Arius but who rejected the Nicene term *homoousios*. Modern scholarship accordingly speaks more carefully of Homoousian, Homoiousian, Homoian, Anomoean, and other trajectories rather than imagining one coherent "Arian party" confronting an equally stable "Nicene party" from 325 onward (Ayres, 2004; Hanson, 1988; Lyman, 2021; Williams, 2001).

Council documents also require close reading. No full official Acts of Nicaea survive. The creed, canons, synodal letter, episcopal lists, later recollections, and references in contemporary or near-contemporary writers must be assembled critically. Even the famous number 318 bishops is traditional rather than securely derived from a surviving attendance roll; Eusebius gives a figure above 250, while later sources helped fix 318 in ecclesiastical memory. The evidentiary point is not trivial. Nicaea was extraordinary in scale and imperial sponsorship, but historical precision should not depend on repeating symbolic numbers as exact statistics (Kim, 2021).

For the later fourth century, imperial legislation preserved in the *Theodosian Code* is indispensable but must not be mistaken for a direct transcript of everyday religious life. Laws show what emperors ordered, prohibited, or privileged, not necessarily what every province immediately enforced. Scholarship on late Roman religious policy emphasizes the uneven, negotiated character of Christianization. Pagan cult did not disappear the morning a law was promulgated; local elites, urban traditions, temples, household practice, and administrative discretion could persist long after imperial rhetoric became more exclusivist (Salzman, 2002; Theodosian Code).

North Africa provides another exceptional archive through Optatus of Milevis and Augustine, imperial rescripts, conciliar records, and later summaries of the Donatist controversy. Augustine's letters and anti-Donatist works permit unusually close study of how a bishop's position on coercion changed over time. They also reveal how sacramental theology, ecclesiology, social conflict, and state power became intertwined. The Pelagian controversy is similarly documented through Augustine, Pelagius, Caelestius, Jerome, African councils, Roman bishops, and imperial action, but the category "Pelagianism" must not be treated as if every person so labeled taught one identical system (Chadwick, 2001; Dupont & Matz, 2025).

The chronological table below provides the framework for the narrative. Dates are exact where documentation permits and approximate where the evidence remains disputed.

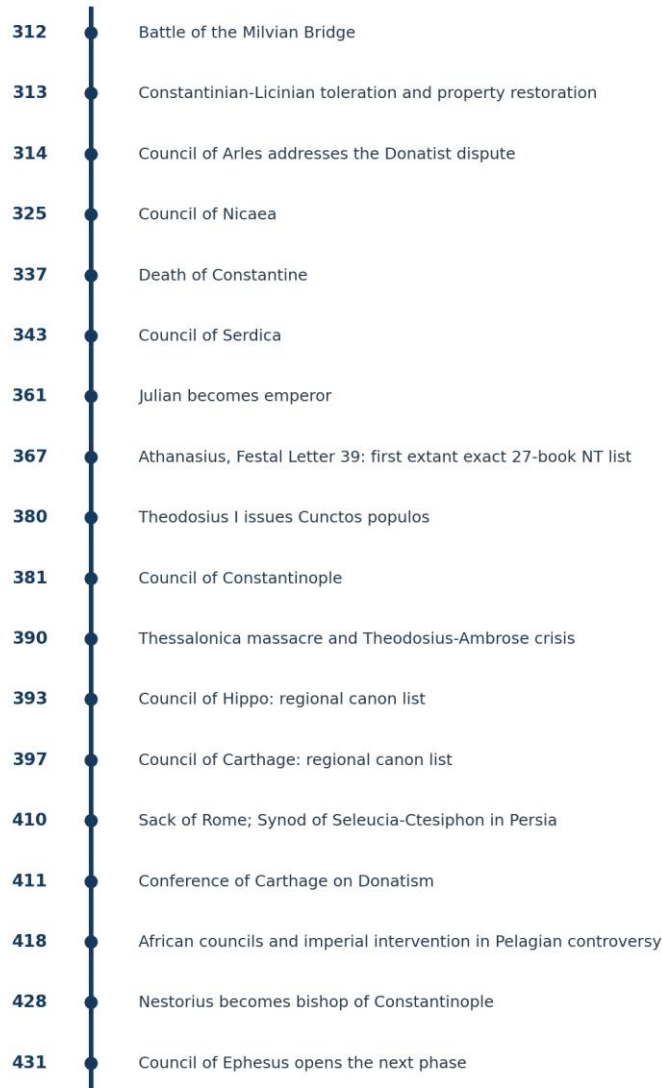
Table 1. Selected chronology of imperial and conciliar Christianity, AD 312-431

Date	Development	Historical significance
312	Constantine defeats Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge	Constantine later associated his victory with the Christian God; contemporary accounts differ on the form of the sign or vision.
313	Constantine and Licinius agree on religious toleration and restoration of confiscated Christian property	Conventional "Edict of Milan" settlement ends the legal framework of persecution and restores corporate property.
313-314	Donatist appeals; commissions at Rome and Council of Arles	The emperor becomes an arbiter and sponsor of an internal Christian dispute.

Date	Development	Historical significance
321-324	Growing Christian patronage; public privileges and building programs	Christianity acquires durable public, legal, and architectural visibility.
324	Constantine defeats Licinius and rules the empire alone	A single emperor can address empire-wide ecclesiastical disputes.
325	Council of Nicaea	First ecumenical council under imperial sponsorship; creed uses <i>homoousios</i> to confess the Son's relation to the Father.
327-337	Reversals, reconciliations, exiles, and renewed controversy	Nicaea does not end the dispute; Constantine's later policy seeks broad ecclesial peace.
337	Constantine dies after receiving baptism	His sons divide the empire; imperial preferences continue to shape ecclesiastical conflict.
343	Council of Serdica	Failed attempt at East-West reconciliation; canons give Rome a limited appellate role in episcopal disputes.
359-360	Councils of Rimini and Seleucia; Homoian formula gains imperial support	Demonstrates that imperial sponsorship did not consistently favor Nicaea.
361-363	Reign of Julian	Pagan emperor restores religious competition and recalls exiled bishops, unintentionally reshaping Christian alignments.
367	Athanasius' Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter	Earliest extant Christian document listing exactly the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament.
380	Theodosius I issues <i>Cunctos populos</i>	Nicene Christianity is elevated as the imperial confessional norm.
381	Council of Constantinople	Reaffirms Nicaea, condemns rival trajectories, strengthens confession of the Spirit, and gives Constantinople precedence after Rome.
390	Massacre at Thessalonica and conflict involving Ambrose and Theodosius	Becomes a major example of contested moral boundaries between episcopal and imperial authority.
393, 397	Councils of Hippo and Carthage	Regional North African canon lists witness continuing convergence around Christian Scripture.
410	Sack of Rome; Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the Sasanian Empire	Augustine's <i>City of God</i> context; eastern Christians formalize metropolitan order beyond Roman rule.
411	Conference of Carthage	Imperial adjudication severely weakens the Donatist communion.
418	African synod and imperial action in the Pelagian controversy	Grace, original sin, infant baptism, and freedom become central Western doctrinal fault lines.
428	Nestorius becomes bishop of Constantinople	Christological dispute over unity of Christ and <i>Theotokos</i> intensifies.
431	Council of Ephesus convenes	Marks the transition to the first enduring Christological divisions treated in the next chapter.

FROM TOLERATION TO EPHESUS

Selected milestones, AD 312-431



The timeline marks turning points, not instantaneous transformations. Reception, resistance, and institutional change often continued for decades.

Figure 1. From toleration to Ephesus: selected milestones, AD 312-431.

Note. The timeline marks turning points rather than instantaneous transformations. Reception, resistance, and institutional change often continued for decades.

3. What Existed Before Constantine: The Pre-Nicene Inheritance

Any account that begins Christianity's institutional history with Constantine necessarily distorts the evidence. On the eve of legalization, Christians had already spent generations building an interregional ecclesial world. City bishops presided over clergy and congregations; provincial synods addressed discipline and doctrine; churches corresponded across large distances; Rome possessed notable prestige without an uncontested universal ordinary jurisdiction; Alexandria had become a major intellectual and episcopal center; Antioch linked Greek and Syriac Christian worlds; Carthage exercised strong regional influence in Latin Africa; and Caesarea preserved important scholarly networks. The experience of persecution had also made questions of ecclesial loyalty, Scripture, and clerical integrity intensely practical.

The theological inheritance was equally substantial. Christians already confessed one Creator, the real incarnation of Christ, his death and bodily resurrection, the Holy Spirit, final judgment, and resurrection of the dead. They had opposed Marcionite separation of Jesus from the Creator, various forms of adoptionism and modalism, and gnosticizing systems that displaced the apostolic narrative. Tertullian had used Latin language of one *substantia* and three *personae*. Origen had distinguished Father, Son, and Spirit while also using hierarchical formulations that later generations would contest. Regional synods had condemned Paul of Samosata in the third century. The Council of Nicaea therefore did not encounter an empty doctrinal field. It inherited unresolved problems generated by serious attempts to confess all the biblical data at once: one God, the Father's monarchy, the Son's preexistence and divine worship, the reality of the incarnation, and the Spirit's divine work.

The canon was also already well advanced. The four Gospels, Acts, Pauline letters, and many Catholic Epistles were widely read, while some books remained regionally disputed. The twenty-seven-book New Testament had not yet been universally enumerated in the surviving evidence, but this was a process of reception and delimitation, not an imperial project waiting for Constantine to choose books at Nicaea. Indeed, the first surviving list exactly matching the present twenty-seven-book New Testament appears in Athanasius' Festal Letter of 367, more than four decades after Nicaea (Brakke, 1994, 2010; Gamble, 1995).

What AD 313 changed, therefore, was not the existence of Christianity but its political environment. The inherited pre-Nicene structures suddenly acquired access to imperial resources. That access altered the scale at which bishops could act and disputes could be settled. It also introduced a structural tension that would recur throughout later Christian history: if the state can protect the church, can it also define or police the church? If emperors can summon councils, who determines whether a council teaches truth? If civil penalties can suppress schism or heresy, what becomes of the New Testament distinction between spiritual discipline and the coercive sword of government? These questions were not theoretical. Donatism made them unavoidable almost immediately.

4. The Constantinian Turning Point

4.1 The Milvian Bridge and the problem of Constantine's conversion

On 28 October 312 Constantine defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome and emerged as ruler of the western empire. Christian memory quickly attached the victory to divine intervention, but the earliest sources do not give one identical story. Lactantius, writing close to the events, says that Constantine was instructed in a dream to mark a heavenly sign on his soldiers' shields before battle. Eusebius, in his later *Life of Constantine*, gives a much more elaborate account in which Constantine and his army saw a cross-like sign of light above the sun with a promise of victory, followed by a dream in which Christ explained the sign. These accounts need not be treated as mutually exclusive in every detail, but neither should a later narrative simply be read backward as though all evidence were identical (Cameron & Hall, 1999; Creed, 1984).

Constantine's religious development was also gradual. He increasingly patronized the Christian church and attributed victory to the Christian God, yet imperial coinage and titulature did not instantaneously abandon every traditional form. He retained the title *pontifex maximus*, intervened in religious matters as Roman emperors traditionally had done, and was baptized only near death in 337 by Eusebius of Nicomedia. None of these facts proves that his Christian commitment was insincere. Late antique conversion need not be measured by later evangelical expectations of a single private moment. They do show, however, that the emperor's Christianization unfolded within the inherited habits of Roman sacral monarchy and cannot be reduced either to cynical political theater or to a fully formed post-Nicene Christian identity appearing in 312 (Barnes, 2011; Drake, 2000; Lenski, 2006).

The political significance of the victory was nevertheless immediate. A ruler who regarded the Christian God as his benefactor now possessed the power to reverse persecution and reward a community that had recently been dispossessed. The Christian relationship to the empire was no longer defined primarily by endurance, negotiation, or refusal of idolatrous demands. Bishops now had direct access to a patron whose favor could change their institutional circumstances across provinces.

4.2 The settlement of 313: toleration, restoration, and what the "Edict of Milan" was

In February 313 Constantine and Licinius met at Milan. A letter subsequently issued in Licinius' eastern territories, preserved by Lactantius and substantially paralleled by Eusebius, granted Christians and all others freedom to practice the religion they chose and ordered that Christian meeting places and other corporate property confiscated during persecution be restored without payment. Historians commonly call this the Edict of Milan, although the surviving text is better described as an imperial agreement or rescript communicated to provincial administrators rather than a formal edict preserved from the Milan meeting itself (Creed, 1984; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 10.5).

The distinction matters because mythology has often overwhelmed the actual content. Constantine did not make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313. The agreement established toleration and restitution. Pagan cult remained legal, and the empire remained religiously plural. Nor was 313 the first toleration of Christianity. Galerius had issued a toleration decree in 311, ending the Great Persecution in principle and permitting Christians to assemble on condition that they pray for the state. The Constantinian-Licinian settlement broadened the new legal order and, crucially, required restoration of Christian property. Its importance lay not in creating Christianity but in moving Christian institutions from precarious existence into recognized corporate life.

Property restoration immediately strengthened bishops. Buildings, cemeteries, endowments, and communal assets were not merely material conveniences. They made ecclesiastical administration more durable and visible. A church that could own property, litigate, receive benefactions, and construct major buildings could develop a public institutional presence impossible under periodic confiscation. Imperial favor therefore accelerated organizational capacities that had emerged before Constantine.

4.3 Patronage, clerical privilege, basilicas, and the public Christian city

Constantine's support soon went beyond neutrality. Christian clergy received exemptions from certain burdensome civic obligations, including some forms of public service, because the emperor considered their religious service beneficial to the commonwealth. Imperial letters authorized financial support and restoration. Bishops received gifts and increasing public standing. Most visually, the emperor and his family sponsored large Christian buildings, including the Lateran basilica in Rome, the original basilica of St. Peter on the Vatican hill, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre complex in Jerusalem. These buildings announced a new fact to every inhabitant of the city: Christianity was no longer a vulnerable association worshipping mainly in houses and adapted structures. It had entered monumental public space (Bowes, 2008; Curran, 2000; Eusebius, Vit. Const.; Lenski, 2006).

The basilica was itself a revealing architectural choice. Roman basilicas had been large civic halls suited to assembly. Christians adapted the form to liturgical needs, creating axial spaces capable of accommodating large congregations, processions, clergy, and increasingly elaborate ceremonial. Architecture did not cause doctrinal change, but it reshaped Christian social experience. The physical distinction between clergy and laity could become more visible. Urban worship could gather larger crowds. Bishops could preside within spaces funded by emperors and aristocrats. Pilgrimage to biblical and martyr sites expanded, especially as imperial patronage monumentalized sacred geography in Palestine and elsewhere.

Constantine also legislated in ways favorable to churches. Bishops acquired recognized roles in arbitration, and Sunday received civil protection in certain contexts. Care is needed here. Christians had gathered on the first day of the week long before Constantine, as Justin Martyr's second-century testimony demonstrates. The imperial law did not invent Christian Sunday worship. It did, however, give the day a new civil dimension in the imperial order. Similarly, Constantine's patronage of bishops did not invent episcopacy. It increased bishops' public authority and linked ecclesiastical leadership to imperial administration.

4.4 The ambiguities of patronage

The gains were enormous. Christians could worship without fear of legal execution. Confiscated property was returned. Public preaching, charity, pilgrimage, theological education, and church building expanded. Bishops could meet across great distances, and the resources of government could facilitate communication. It would be historically perverse to describe every consequence of legalization as corruption. Freedom from persecution was a genuine good, and the protection of worship did not become evil merely because later emperors abused religious power.

Yet patronage carried structural risks. Imperial gifts encouraged competition for access to court. Bishops who gained the emperor's ear could turn ecclesial rivals into political liabilities. The state could now distinguish officially between legitimate and illegitimate Christians. Once imperial law recognized one claimant to church property, a rival claimant could be dispossessed. Once bishops asked emperors to enforce a council, emperors acquired a practical role in defining which council counted. Constantine often sought concord rather than theological precision, but concord itself became an imperial objective. The empire's interest in unity could therefore pressure churches toward settlements based as much on political stability as on exegetical conviction.

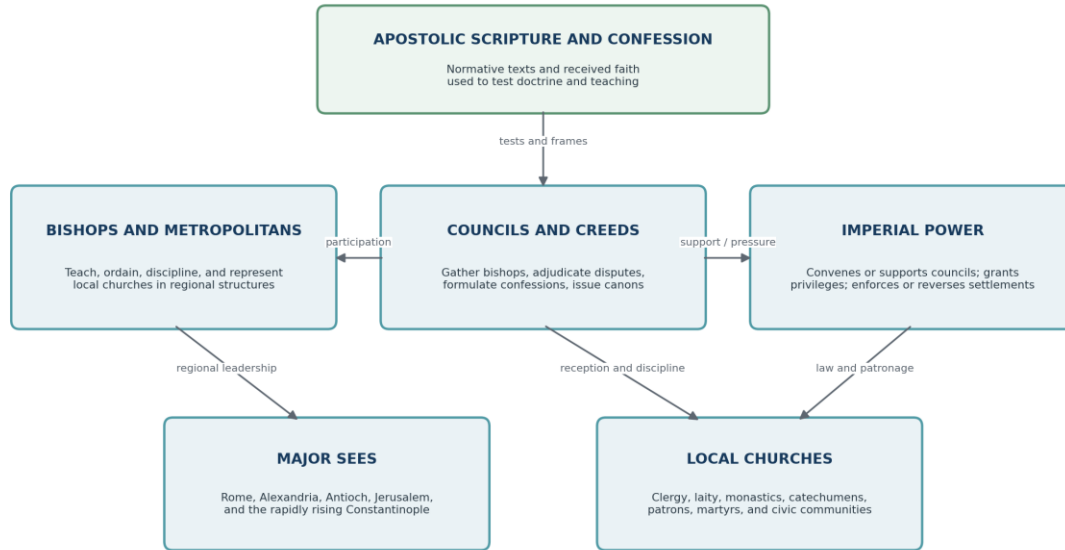
Table 2. What Constantine changed, and what he did not create

Historically demonstrable change after 312-313	Claim not supported by the evidence
Legal toleration and restoration of confiscated Christian property	Constantine did not found Christianity or create the pre-Nicene catholic church.

Historically demonstrable change after 312-313	Claim not supported by the evidence
Imperial gifts, basilica building, and new public visibility	Constantine did not invent bishops, councils, baptism, Eucharist, or apostolic succession.
Exemptions and civil privileges for clergy	Constantine did not make Christianity the exclusive official religion in 313.
Imperial involvement in disputes such as Donatism	Constantine did not personally decide all theological questions by decree.
Convocation and logistical support for the Council of Nicaea	Nicaea did not choose the books of the Bible.
Civil enforcement, exile, recall, and property decisions affecting church parties	Constantine did not invent belief in Christ's deity or the triune identity of God.

AUTHORITY IN IMPERIAL CONCILIAR CHRISTIANITY

After AD 313, inherited ecclesial authority interacted with new imperial mechanisms



Imperial participation changed the mechanisms of unity and enforcement. It did not itself create the scriptural and theological questions under debate.

Figure 2. Authority in imperial conciliar Christianity.

Note. The diagram distinguishes inherited Christian norms and offices from the new imperial mechanisms that increasingly interacted with them. Imperial participation changed the means of coordination and enforcement; it did not itself generate the biblical questions under debate.

5. Donatism: North Africa and the First Great Test of Imperial Arbitration

5.1 From the Great Persecution to a disputed episcopal succession

The Donatist controversy reveals how quickly the new alliance between church and empire could become coercive. Its roots lay not in abstract speculation but in the trauma of persecution. During the Great Persecution, Christian clergy had faced demands to surrender Scriptures and sacred objects. Those accused of doing so were called *traditores*, from the Latin *tradere*, “to hand over.” When persecution ended, North African Christians disagreed sharply over whether clergy believed to have betrayed the church could validly perform ordinations and sacramental acts.

The immediate crisis centered on the election and consecration of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage around 311 or 312. His opponents alleged that one of his consecrators, Felix of Aptungi, had been a *traditor*. They therefore rejected Caecilian and supported a rival bishop, first Majorinus and subsequently Donatus of Casae Nigrae, from whom the movement later took the name Donatist. The dispute involved personal and regional rivalries as well as principles. Numidian bishops resented the manner of Caecilian’s election and the role of Carthaginian clergy; memories of persecution divided confessors from those suspected of compromise; and the prestige of the see of Carthage magnified the consequences of rival succession claims (Frend, 1985; Shaw, 2011).

The theological question was substantial. If a bishop who had betrayed the Scriptures ordained another bishop, was the ordination valid? More broadly, does the validity of a sacrament depend on the moral purity and ecclesial legitimacy of its minister? Donatist ecclesiology placed extraordinary weight on the holiness of the church and the integrity of its ministers.

Their opponents increasingly argued that Christ, not the minister's personal righteousness, is the true source of sacramental efficacy. The controversy therefore forced Latin Christianity to distinguish the moral worthiness of ministers from the divine action signified in the sacrament, a distinction that would later become central to Western sacramental theology.

5.2 Appeals to Constantine: Rome, Arles, and the new route from schism to state power

The political context transformed what might once have remained a regional schism. Donatist representatives appealed to Constantine, asking for judges from Gaul, where they believed bishops had been less compromised by persecution. Constantine referred the case to a commission meeting at Rome in 313 under Miltiades, bishop of Rome, with other bishops. The judgment favored Caecilian. The dissidents appealed again, and Constantine convened a larger council at Arles in 314. Arles again supported Caecilian and issued disciplinary canons that circulated beyond the immediate dispute (Frend, 1985; Hess, 2002).

These proceedings mark a watershed. The emperor did not simply impose a doctrine by himself. He used episcopal adjudication. Yet the imperial court determined that bishops should judge, summoned them, provided resources, received appeals, and eventually attached civil consequences to ecclesiastical decisions. The relationship was therefore neither caesaropapism in the simplistic sense of an emperor becoming bishop of the church nor a clean separation of jurisdictions. It was a new hybrid order in which ecclesiastical judgment and imperial enforcement could reinforce each other.

Constantine grew frustrated when repeated decisions failed to restore unity. He eventually authorized measures against Donatist property and gatherings, though his policy fluctuated and at points moved back toward toleration. This pattern would become characteristic of fourth-century religious politics: emperors desired unity, but coercion often intensified resistance. A party condemned by imperial mechanisms could interpret suffering as confirmation that the official church had become worldly and persecuting.

5.3 Donatist self-understanding and Catholic response

Donatism should not be caricatured as a sect of violent fanatics obsessed with clerical perfection. It became a large, durable North African communion with bishops, churches, martyrs, regional loyalties, and its own claim to be the authentic catholic church. In some areas Donatists may have represented the majority of Christians. Their identity drew strength from the memory of persecution and from a rigorist conviction that communion with betrayers contaminated the church. They could appeal to biblical calls for holiness, separation from false brethren, and faithful witness under persecution.

The opposing Catholic argument likewise deserves its strongest form. Catholic bishops contended that the church on earth contains sinners as well as saints and that the holiness of Christ cannot be nullified by an unworthy minister. They appealed to the worldwide communion of churches against a movement largely confined to North Africa and argued that schism itself was a grave violation of Christian unity. Optatus of Milevis in the fourth century developed this anti-Donatist case before Augustine gave it its most influential form (Optatus, *Against the Donatists*; Frend, 1985).

The dispute therefore involved at least four distinguishable questions. The first concerned historical guilt: had Felix actually been a *traditor*? The second concerned ministerial character: does grave sin invalidate ordination? The third concerned sacramental theology: does the efficacy of baptism depend upon the minister's holiness and communion? The fourth concerned ecclesiology: where is the true church to be recognized when rival episcopal bodies each claim catholicity? These questions could not be settled merely by proving that one faction had political support.

5.4 Augustine, coercion, and the Conference of Carthage

By Augustine's episcopate at Hippo, the schism had endured for roughly a century. Augustine initially preferred persuasion and debate, but his position on coercion hardened as he came to believe that limited state pressure could rescue people from a schism they maintained through inherited social structures and intimidation. In letters such as Epistle 93 and especially Epistle 185, he appealed to Jesus' parable language "compel them to come in" from [Luke 14:23](#) as support for coercive measures intended, in his understanding, to correct rather than destroy. He also pointed to what he regarded as good results when former Donatists entered Catholic communion under pressure (Augustine, *Political Writings*; Atkins & Dodaro, 2001).

The policy cannot be understood without the violence that sometimes accompanied the conflict. Bands known as Circumcellions became associated in Catholic sources with rural militancy and attacks, although the evidence is heavily polemical and the relationship between every Donatist congregation and Circumcellion violence must not be exaggerated. Catholic clergy also suffered violence, and Donatists experienced imperial repression. The conflict became a cycle in which theological division, social identity, local violence, and state intervention repeatedly legitimized harder measures on all sides (Shaw, 2011).

In 411 the imperial government sponsored a great conference at Carthage between Catholic and Donatist bishops. The proceedings were not a free ecumenical conversation in the modern sense; an imperial commissioner presided, and the result favored the Catholic side. Subsequent laws restricted Donatist activity and property. Donatism did not disappear immediately, but its institutional position weakened severely. Later Vandal and Byzantine transformations, and ultimately the wider collapse of Latin Christian institutions in North Africa after the Arab conquests, make its final disappearance difficult to date with precision.

5.5 Why Donatism matters for Christian genealogy

Donatism was not an enduring global communion that generated modern denominations, but genealogically it is crucial because it established patterns that would recur. It demonstrated that Christian division could survive repeated councils and imperial judgments. It forced the Western church to distinguish sacramental validity from ministerial worthiness. It strengthened the identification of catholicity with a worldwide episcopal communion rather than a rigorist local body. Most consequentially, it normalized the argument that the state might use coercive power to correct baptized Christians judged schismatic or heretical.

The biblical question is therefore double. Donatists were right to insist that church leaders must be holy and that betrayal of Christ is not morally trivial. The New Testament gives exacting qualifications for overseers and commands churches to discipline persistent sin (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Yet Scripture does not teach that Christ's promises become false whenever a minister is hypocritical, nor that every act performed by an unworthy leader is automatically void. At the same time, the Catholic victory becomes biblically problematic when ecclesiastical correction is fused with civil compulsion. Jesus gives the church discipline, teaching, rebuke, exclusion, and restoration; the apostles do not instruct churches to fine, imprison, confiscate property from, or physically compel theological opponents into communion (Matthew 18:15-20; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:24-26).

6. Arius and the Crisis over the Son

6.1 Alexandria before Arius

The controversy that led to Nicaea began within an already sophisticated Alexandrian Christian culture. Alexandria was a major center of biblical scholarship and philosophical theology. Clement and Origen had developed extensive reflection on the Logos, the Son's preexistence, divine transcendence, creation, and the relation between Father and Son. Origen could speak of the Son's eternal generation and divine status while also employing language of subordination that later theologians interpreted in different ways. The result was not a settled "Arian" tradition waiting to erupt, but a conceptual field in which Christians agreed that the Son existed before the incarnation and was uniquely related to the Father while disagreeing over how to describe that relation without compromising monotheism (Ayres, 2004; Hanson, 1988).

Arius was a presbyter in Alexandria, probably serving the district of Baucalis, when conflict broke out with Bishop Alexander around 318. Much of Arius' own writing survives only in fragments quoted by opponents, especially portions of his poetic-theological work *Thalia* and letters attributed to him. Reconstruction therefore requires caution. Arius did not teach that Jesus was an ordinary human prophet. He confessed the Son as preexistent, agent of creation, exalted above all other creatures, and worthy of exceptional honor. The controversy concerned whether the Son belongs eternally within the unique divine being of the Father or, however exalted, belongs on the created side of the Creator-creature distinction (Williams, 2001; Lyman, 2021).

Arius argued strongly for the Father's unique unbegottenness. If the Father truly generated the Son, Arius reasoned, the Son must derive his existence from the Father and cannot share the Father's unoriginated identity in the same way. Slogans attributed to the controversy include the claim that "there was when he was not," meaning that the Son was not coeternal with the Father in the full sense later Nicene theology would affirm. Arius could call the Son "God" in a derivative or honorific sense, but he resisted language that appeared to collapse the Son into the Father's own unbegotten being (Arius, fragments in Athanasius; Williams, 2001).

Alexander and his supporters judged this teaching incompatible with the worship, salvation, and scriptural identity of Christ. If the Son is a creature, however exalted, then Christian worship risks honoring a creature as God. If only God can save and reveal God perfectly, a created mediator cannot provide the divine life Christians confess in Christ. They appealed to texts such as John 1:1-3, John 10:30, John 20:28, Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1:1-12, and the baptismal confession of Matthew 28:19. Arius and his supporters also appealed to Scripture, emphasizing texts such as Proverbs 8:22 in the Greek tradition, Mark 13:32, John 14:28, and language of Christ receiving authority, growing, suffering, and being sent. The controversy was therefore not a simple conflict between "Bible believers" and philosophers. Both sides read Scripture, and both used philosophical terms in attempting to explain how the texts fit together (Ayres, 2004; Young, 1983).

6.2 How a local dispute became an imperial crisis

Alexander convened local and regional opposition to Arius, who in turn appealed to sympathetic bishops elsewhere, especially Eusebius of Nicomedia. Letters circulated through the eastern churches. Bishops who shared neither Arius' exact formulations nor Alexander's terminology could nevertheless object to condemnation without broader clarification. The controversy spread because ecclesiastical networks already connected major sees. It intensified because Alexandria was important, because the theological issue touched Christian worship, and because Constantine, after defeating Licinius in 324 and becoming sole ruler, wanted ecclesiastical concord across the reunited empire.

Constantine first attempted mediation. He sent Hosius of Cordoba with a letter treating the dispute as an unnecessary quarrel over a difficult question that should not disturb unity. That judgment proved inadequate. The parties did not regard the disagreement as semantic trivia. The conflict concerned whom Christians worshiped and how salvation in Christ should be understood. Imperial desire for peace could convene disputants, but it could not make the underlying theological problem disappear.

This mismatch between imperial priorities and theological conviction would recur. Emperors often valued unity because religious conflict threatened public order. Bishops might value unity too, but not at the price of a confession they believed false. Conversely, some bishops could use imperial concern for unity to strengthen their own ecclesiastical coalitions. The resulting history cannot be reduced to a pure contest of ideas or a pure contest for power. The two interacted.

Table 3. The initial Alexandrian dispute over the Son

Question	Arius and close supporters	Alexander and emerging pro-Nicene response
The Father's identity	The Father alone is unbegotten and without origin in the strict sense.	The Father is unbegotten, but the Son's generation does not make the Son a creature.
The Son's beginning	The Son derives existence from the Father and is not coeternal in the same way as the Father.	The Son is eternally begotten and belongs to the divine identity, not the created order.
Creation	The Son is preexistent and is God's agent in creating all other things.	All created things came through the Son; therefore the Son cannot himself belong to the class of created things in the same way.
Scriptural emphasis	Texts of subordination, reception, obedience, suffering, and Wisdom language.	Texts identifying the Son with divine names, works, glory, eternity, worship, and creation.
Soteriological implication	Salvation is mediated through God's uniquely exalted Son.	Only one who truly shares divine life can unite humanity to God and accomplish the salvation attributed to Christ.
Major danger perceived in the opponent	Confusing Father and Son or denying the Father's unique monarchy.	Worshipping a creature and undermining Christ's full saving deity.

7. Nicaea, AD 325: What the Council Decided and What It Did Not

7.1 Constantine summons an empire-wide council

Constantine convened bishops to Nicaea in Bithynia in 325. The choice of location placed the council near the imperial residence at Nicomedia while remaining accessible to eastern bishops, who constituted the great majority of participants. Western bishops were present in smaller numbers, including Hosius of Cordoba and representatives of the bishop of Rome. The exact number of attending bishops cannot be established with certainty from surviving lists. Later Christian tradition made 318 famous, partly because of symbolic associations with Abraham's servants in [Genesis 14:14](#), while Eusebius spoke of more than 250. What matters historically is that Nicaea assembled an unprecedentedly broad episcopal gathering under imperial sponsorship (Kim, 2021).

Constantine did not function as a theological expert dictating the wording of every clause. He attended, urged concord, supported proceedings, and used imperial authority to enforce the settlement. Bishops debated the theological text. Yet the distinction should not be made so sharply that imperial involvement disappears. Without Constantine's summons, transport support, prestige, and enforcement, Nicaea would not have possessed the same practical reach. The council represents precisely the new partnership that defines the period: episcopal deliberation joined to imperial logistics and coercive power.

7.2 *Homoousios*: one essence and the logic of the creed

The Nicene Creed of 325 confessed belief in one God, the Father almighty, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, "begotten from the Father," "God from God," "Light from Light," "true God from true God," "begotten, not made," and *homoousios* with the Father. The Greek term *homoousios* is conventionally translated "of the same substance" or "of one

essence.” The creed then anathematized propositions that the Son came from non-being, that “there was when he was not,” that he was created, or that he was changeable (Tanner, 1990).

The word *homoousios* was not itself a biblical word. Its function was to exclude a reading of biblical language that placed the Son within creation. This fact is methodologically important for Sola Scriptura. The use of an extra-biblical term does not necessarily introduce an extra-biblical doctrine. Christians sometimes need non-biblical vocabulary to deny interpretations that use biblical words while emptying them of their canonical force. The theological question is therefore whether the term faithfully summarizes Scripture, not whether every doctrinally useful word appears verbatim in the biblical text.

Nicaea’s logic was sharpened by the Creator-creature distinction. [John 1:3](#) says that all things came into being through the Word. [Colossians 1:16](#) likewise says that all things in heaven and on earth were created through and for the Son. Hebrews 1 applies to the Son scriptural language of divine throne, creation, permanence, and worship. If “all things” that came into being came through the Son, then the Son cannot coherently be included among the things made through him without qualification. The Nicene phrase “begotten, not made” sought to safeguard that distinction.

At the same time, Nicaea did not give a full later explanation of “one essence, three persons.” The creed’s line concerning the Holy Spirit was brief. Terminology such as *ousia* and *hypostasis* remained unstable and was not yet used everywhere in the later Cappadocian sense. Some bishops could accept Nicaea while interpreting its vocabulary differently; others feared that *homoousios* encouraged Sabellian or modalist collapse of Father and Son. Nicaea settled a boundary more clearly than it settled every conceptual question inside that boundary.

7.3 The canons and ecclesiastical geography

The council issued disciplinary canons as well as the creed. These canons reveal an already developed regional episcopal order. Canon 4 required provincial bishops to participate in or consent to episcopal ordinations and gave a coordinating role to the metropolitan. Canon 5 regulated provincial synods. Canon 6 preserved ancient jurisdictional customs associated with Alexandria over Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis, comparing them with the customs of Rome and also acknowledging the privileges of Antioch and other provinces. Canon 7 granted Jerusalem special honor while preserving the dignity of the metropolitan structure (Tanner, 1990).

These canons are significant for later debates about papacy and patriarchates. They show important regional sees and inherited spheres of influence, but they do not present the later fully articulated five-patriarch system as though it already existed in mature form. Rome is treated as a recognized analogue in a canon preserving customary regional jurisdiction; Alexandria and Antioch possess substantial authority; Jerusalem receives honor. Constantinople is absent because the imperial capital there had not yet been formally inaugurated as “New Rome.” The church’s geography in 325 still reflected older centers, even as political geography was about to alter it.

The council also addressed the dating of Pascha, the Meletian schism in Egypt, clerical discipline, ordination irregularities, and other matters. These decisions demonstrate that Nicaea was not solely a doctrinal symposium. It was an attempt to create common ecclesial order across regions now capable of meeting under imperial sponsorship.

7.4 What Nicaea did not do

Few events in church history have accumulated more myths than Nicaea. The council did not vote on whether Jesus was divine in the sense of choosing a previously unknown doctrine from scratch. High Christology and worship of Christ predate the council by centuries. The dispute concerned how to articulate the Son’s divine identity against a particular account of his derivation from the Father. Nicaea did not invent the Trinity, though it became a decisive stage in the church’s technical formulation of Trinitarian doctrine.

The council did not determine the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. No surviving canon of Nicaea addresses the biblical book list, and the first extant exact twenty-seven-book New Testament list appears in Athanasius’ Festal Letter 39 in 367. Canon recognition continued regionally into the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Claims that Constantine or Nicaea “chose the Bible” therefore collapse distinct historical processes into one legendary event (Brakke, 1994, 2010; Gamble, 1995).

Nicaea also did not end the Arian controversy. Indeed, the most difficult phase followed the council. Arius and a small number of supporters were condemned, but the meaning, necessity, and theological safety of *homoousios* remained disputed. Bishops were exiled and recalled. New councils produced new formulas. Imperial support shifted. The later triumph of pro-Nicene theology can make 325 look inevitable in retrospect, but participants living through the 330s, 340s, and 350s experienced a much less settled world.

Table 4. Nicaea: decisions, developments, and common misconceptions

Issue	What Nicaea did	What Nicaea did not do
Christology	Confessed the Son as begotten, not made, and <i>homoousios</i> with the Father; rejected key Arian propositions.	It did not create Christian belief in Christ's deity from nothing.
Trinity	Established a decisive boundary concerning Father and Son.	It did not yet provide the later mature formula "one <i>ousia</i> , three <i>hypostaseis</i> " or an expanded doctrine of the Spirit.
Canon	Used Scripture and inherited Christian texts throughout the controversy.	It did not select or close the New Testament canon.
Church order	Issued canons on ordination, provincial synods, regional privileges, discipline, and Paschal unity.	It did not create the later medieval papacy or fully developed pentarchy.
Imperial role	Met because Constantine convened and supported the gathering; imperial power enforced exile and settlement.	Constantine did not act as sole author of the creed.
Historical effect	Became the foundational creed of later pro-Nicene orthodoxy.	It did not terminate controversy in 325.

8. The Long Controversy after Nicaea

8.1 Constantine's search for peace and the recall of former opponents

After Nicaea, Constantine's overriding objective remained ecclesiastical concord. As circumstances changed, he permitted the return of some bishops associated with the defeated side and eventually supported efforts to reconcile Arius, provided an acceptable confession could be obtained. Athanasius, who became bishop of Alexandria in 328, resisted imperial pressure where he believed it compromised ecclesiastical integrity. His conflicts also involved charges about episcopal administration, violence, and the Meletian schism, not only abstract theology. The Council of Tyre in 335 deposed him, and Constantine exiled him to Trier (Barnes, 1993; Ayres, 2004).

This episode warns against interpreting every exile as a direct referendum on Nicaea. Fourth-century ecclesiastical litigation mingled doctrinal, disciplinary, personal, and political accusations. Athanasius became the most famous defender of Nicaea, but he was not simply exiled five times for repeating one creed to uniformly Arian emperors. His career intersected with rival episcopal networks, changing emperors, disputed elections, and political calculations. Likewise, not every opponent of Athanasius was an Arian in Arius' strict sense.

Constantine died in 337 after receiving baptism from Eusebius of Nicomedia, a bishop associated with anti-Nicene coalitions. That fact has sometimes been used polemically to portray Constantine as secretly Arian. It is more historically careful to recognize that Eusebius was a prominent imperial bishop and that fourth-century theological alignments did not map neatly onto later labels. Constantine's baptism also reflects the still-common practice of delaying baptism because post-baptismal sin was treated with great seriousness. His late baptism therefore belongs as much to the sacramental culture of the period as to the biography of one emperor.

8.2 Imperial succession and multiplying councils

After Constantine's death, his sons divided the empire, and ecclesiastical politics increasingly followed imperial geography. Constans in the West tended to support Athanasius and Nicene sympathizers, while Constantius II, who eventually became sole emperor, favored formulas designed to overcome or bypass *homoousios*. Councils at Antioch, Serdica, Sirmium, Rimini, Seleucia, Constantinople, and elsewhere produced multiple statements and disciplinary decisions. The sheer quantity of creedal experimentation demonstrates that the theological settlement remained open.

The Council of Serdica in 343 is especially important for later jurisdictional history. Intended as a gathering that might reconcile eastern and western bishops, it fractured when the parties disputed which bishops were entitled to sit. Its canons nevertheless granted a bishop who believed himself unjustly deposed a possibility of appeal involving the bishop of Rome, who could authorize a retrial by neighboring bishops and, if appropriate, send representatives. The canons appealed to the memory of Peter but did not yet amount to the later system of universal papal ordinary jurisdiction. They are best understood as an important step in the development of Roman appellate prestige (Hess, 2002).

Under Constantius II, anti-Nicene or non-Nicene formulas gained strong imperial support. The twin councils of Rimini in the West and Seleucia in the East in 359, followed by a settlement at Constantinople in 360, advanced a Homoian confession stating that the Son is "like" the Father according to the Scriptures while avoiding *ousia* terminology. The episode demonstrates that imperial pressure could work against the creed later remembered as the empire's permanent orthodoxy. If

state sponsorship were itself the measure of truth, fourth-century Christians would have had no stable criterion when emperors changed theological preference.

8.3 A vocabulary more complex than “Arian versus Nicene”

The traditional two-party narrative obscures the century’s theological complexity. Homoiousians defended Nicaea’s *homoousios*. Homoiousians preferred to say that the Son was “like in essence” to the Father, often because they feared modalism while still rejecting Arius’ creature-Christology. Homoians avoided essence language and confessed the Son as like the Father according to Scripture. Anomoeans, associated especially with Aetius and Eunomius, argued more radically that the Son was unlike the Father in essence because the Father’s defining essence was unbegottenness. The old label “Semi-Arian” compresses several of these positions and should be used, if at all, only with explanation (Ayres, 2004; Hanson, 1988).

The dispute also turned on language. Greek *ousia* and *hypostasis* did not carry one fixed technical meaning across all regions. Earlier usage could treat them as near synonyms. Latin theology tended to speak of one *substantia* and three *personae*. A Greek speaker hearing “one hypostasis” might suspect modalism, while a Latin speaker hearing “three hypostases” could imagine three divine substances. Part of the fourth-century achievement consisted in clarifying how different terminological traditions could confess one divine essence without denying real distinction among Father, Son, and Spirit (Stead, 1985).

8.4 Julian, Valens, and the instability of imperial religion

The emperor Julian, who ruled from 361 to 363, rejected Christianity and attempted to revitalize traditional cult and philosophical paganism. He reversed some Christian privileges, promoted religious competition, and allowed previously exiled Christian bishops to return. Ironically, recalling rival Christian leaders sometimes forced them into new encounters and realignments. Julian’s short reign demonstrated that imperial patronage was reversible. Christianity had become powerful, but its new political status still depended heavily on the emperor.

After Julian and the brief reign of Jovian, the brothers Valentinian I and Valens ruled West and East. Valens supported Homoian Christianity in the East and exiled pro-Nicene bishops. Yet the pro-Nicene coalition was becoming intellectually more coherent. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, collectively called the Cappadocian Fathers, helped articulate a grammar in which Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguished as three *hypostaseis* while sharing one divine *ousia*. Their work also gave sustained attention to the Holy Spirit, whose status had become a new point of controversy (Ayres, 2004; Beeley, 2008; DelCogliano, Radde-Gallwitz, & Stamps, 2011).

8.5 The Holy Spirit and the completion of the Trinitarian controversy

Some Christians who opposed Arian subordination of the Son remained hesitant to confess the Holy Spirit’s full deity. Opponents called such groups Pneumatomachians, “fighters against the Spirit,” or Macedonians, though the historical boundaries of the movement are not always clear. Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit* argued from baptismal practice, doxology, divine works, sanctification, and scriptural patterns that the Spirit cannot be placed among creatures. Gregory of Nazianzus pressed the argument more explicitly, insisting that the Spirit is God and belongs within the one divine being worshiped with Father and Son.

The biblical case rests on more than one proof text. The Spirit is named with Father and Son in the singular baptismal name ([Matthew 28:19](#)), can be lied to in a passage that identifies lying to the Spirit with lying to God ([Acts 5:3-4](#)), searches the depths of God in a manner analogous to a human spirit knowing the person ([1 Corinthians 2:10-11](#)), distributes gifts sovereignly ([1 Corinthians 12:11](#)), gives life ([Romans 8:11](#)), and is included in apostolic blessing ([2 Corinthians 13:13](#)). The later conciliar confession gave technical form to this canonical pattern.

9. Constantinople, AD 381: Pro-Nicene Consolidation

9.1 Theodosius I and *Cunctos populos*

The political balance changed decisively when Theodosius I became eastern emperor in 379. On 27 February 380 he issued the law commonly known by its opening words *Cunctos populos*. The law directed the peoples under imperial rule toward the religion transmitted by Peter and then professed, as the law described it, by Damasus of Rome and Peter of Alexandria. It defined this faith in explicitly Trinitarian terms and designated its adherents “Catholic Christians,” while labeling dissenters heretics (*Cod. Theod.* 16.1.2; Pharr, 1952).

The decree is often described as making Christianity the official religion of the empire. That shorthand captures the emergence of a confessional imperial norm but can obscure important qualifications. The law specifically promoted a Nicene form of

Christianity, not Christianity in the abstract, and its practical reach depended on administration and subsequent policy. Pagan religion did not disappear in 380. Nor did one law instantly produce uniform belief among Christians. Nevertheless, a major threshold had been crossed: the state no longer merely tolerated Christianity or favored churches generally. Imperial law now identified a particular Trinitarian communion as normatively catholic.

9.2 The council and its contested presidency

Theodosius convened bishops at Constantinople in 381. The gathering was overwhelmingly eastern; western bishops were not broadly represented. Meletius of Antioch initially presided but died during the council. Gregory of Nazianzus, whom Theodosius had supported as bishop of Constantinople, then assumed a leading role. His position became contested because of canonical questions surrounding his transfer and because the unresolved Antiochene schism divided bishops. Gregory resigned, and Nectarius, a civil official who had not yet been baptized when selected, was rapidly baptized, ordained through the clerical ranks, and installed as bishop of the imperial capital. The episode vividly demonstrates how ecclesiastical office, canon law, imperial preference, and political necessity could intersect (McGuckin, 2001; Ayres, 2004).

Canon 1 reaffirmed the faith of the 318 fathers at Nicaea and condemned a range of theological trajectories, including Eunomians or Anomoeans, Arians or Eudoxians, Pneumatomachians, Sabellians, Marcellians, Photinians, and Apollinarians. Canon 2 attempted to restrain bishops from interfering outside their diocesan regions, reflecting the need to stabilize ecclesiastical geography. Canon 3 declared that the bishop of Constantinople should have privileges of honor after the bishop of Rome “because it is New Rome” (Tanner, 1990).

That last canon is one of the most consequential jurisdictional decisions of late antiquity. It tied ecclesiastical precedence openly to the political dignity of the imperial capital. Rome’s honor was implicitly associated with its old imperial status, while Constantinople’s new position arose from being the new capital. Alexandria, previously dominant in the East, had obvious reason to resent the change. The canon therefore did not merely arrange ceremonial order. It created a jurisdictional trajectory that would contribute to later rivalry among Rome, Constantinople, and Alexandria (McLynn, 2012).

9.3 The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Holy Spirit

The creed commonly called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed expands the Nicene confession and contains the famous statement concerning the Holy Spirit as “the Lord and giver of life,” proceeding from the Father, worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son, and speaking through the prophets. The historical relationship between the surviving creed and the exact proceedings of 381 is more complicated than many liturgical retellings imply. The text is clearly associated with the theological settlement of the period and was publicly cited as the creed of the 150 fathers at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but the surviving documentation of 381 does not preserve a complete conciliar act narrating its drafting in the way later readers might expect (Kelly, 1972; Tanner, 1990).

The doctrinal significance is nevertheless clear. By the late fourth century, pro-Nicene theology confessed not only that the Son is fully divine but that the Holy Spirit belongs with Father and Son on the divine side of the Creator-creature distinction. The Cappadocian articulation of one *ousia* and three *hypostaseis* helped explain how Christian monotheism could maintain real distinctions without tritheism and divine unity without modalism.

9.4 What 381 settled, and what remained unsettled

Constantinople did not eliminate every non-Nicene church immediately. Homoian Christianity remained important among Gothic peoples and would later be carried into western post-Roman kingdoms. Nor did 381 end jurisdictional conflict. The elevation of Constantinople sharpened disputes that would reappear at Chalcedon and later in East-West relations. The council’s ecumenical standing itself developed through reception rather than arising solely from the number of bishops present or an instantaneous universal ratification.

Yet the combined effect of Theodosian policy and conciliar consolidation was decisive. The pro-Nicene confession now possessed a stable imperial center. Bishops who rejected it could face removal from churches. The fourth-century Trinitarian struggle moved from a field of competing imperially sponsored creeds toward an increasingly established Nicene norm. The next generation’s great doctrinal controversy would therefore shift from the relation of Son to Father toward the relation of divinity and humanity within the one Christ.

10. From Tolerated Church to Christian Imperial Order

10.1 Theodosius and the intensification of Christian privilege

The reign of Theodosius I marks a further transition from imperial favor toward confessional governance. Laws increasingly disadvantaged heretical groups, restricted some forms of public pagan sacrifice, and supported bishops aligned with Nicene orthodoxy. By the 390s imperial legislation against traditional cult had become more extensive. Yet the process was neither uniform nor complete. Temples continued to exist; pagan elites remained active; traditional cultural forms persisted; and enforcement differed by region. “Christianization of the empire” is therefore best understood as a long institutional and cultural process rather than as a switch thrown by one decree (Salzman, 2002; Brown, 2012).

The distinction between legal norm and lived religion matters for genealogy. Later Christian Europe did not descend from an empire in which every subject became an orthodox Christian in 380. It developed from centuries of negotiation in which law, patronage, family tradition, local cult, episcopal activism, monastic movements, education, and political opportunity altered the religious landscape at different rates. Imperial Christianity was real, but it was never socially total in the fourth century.

10.2 Ambrose and Theodosius: bishop and emperor in tension

The relationship between Ambrose of Milan and Theodosius illustrates that imperial Christianity did not simply place bishops beneath emperors. Ambrose could invoke episcopal authority in disputes involving imperial policy. The most famous case followed the massacre at Thessalonica in 390, when imperial troops killed large numbers after civic violence. Ambrose wrote to Theodosius, insisting that the emperor undergo public repentance before participating normally in the Eucharist. Later narratives dramatized the confrontation in ways that may exceed what can be demonstrated, but the underlying episode reveals a significant principle: an emperor inside the church remained subject, at least in episcopal theory, to Christian moral judgment (McLynn, 1994).

This did not create a modern doctrine of separation of church and state. Ambrose himself supported strong Christian influence on imperial policy and opposed imperial accommodation of certain non-Christian religious claims. The point is subtler. Once emperors became Christians, their authority could be sacralized, but they could also be judged by bishops speaking in the name of divine law. Late antique Christendom therefore generated a continuing tension between imperial supremacy in public law and episcopal claims to govern sacramental communion.

10.3 The danger of defining heresy by law

Under persecution, Christians had defended the distinction between worship and state compulsion. Under Christian emperors, some bishops increasingly accepted laws that penalized rival Christians and restricted non-Christian cult. The conceptual shift was profound. Heresy ceased to be only a doctrinal category within church discipline; it could become a legal status with consequences for meeting, property, office, inheritance, or public rights.

The change did not happen because bishops suddenly forgot the New Testament. They justified coercion through a theology of public order, paternal correction, Old Testament precedents, and the conviction that eternal salvation mattered more than temporary liberty. Augustine’s anti-Donatist reasoning would become especially influential. Yet this logic created a permanent problem for Christian political theology. Once government is authorized to punish theological error as such, the state must either possess theological competence or rely on a favored ecclesiastical body to define the error. In either case, political force becomes attached to doctrinal adjudication.

The New Testament’s own pattern is different. Civil authorities bear the sword to punish wrongdoing and maintain public order ([Romans 13:1-7](#); [1 Peter 2:13-17](#)), while churches guard doctrine through preaching, discipline, correction, and separation from false teachers ([Matthew 18:15-20](#); [Titus 3:10-11](#); [2 John 9-11](#)). Christians may appeal to law for protection, as Paul did when invoking his Roman citizenship ([Acts 22:25-29](#)), but apostolic churches are nowhere instructed to make the magistrate enforce baptismal communion or Trinitarian confession. The Constantinian and Theodosian settlements therefore produced real civic benefits while also crossing boundaries that require explicit biblical scrutiny.

10.4 Priscillian: when theological deviance became a capital case

A still darker precedent emerged in the western empire with Priscillian of Avila. Priscillian was an ascetic Christian leader in Hispania whose opponents accused him and his circle of doctrinal error, unauthorized ascetic gatherings, and practices associated with magic. After a prolonged ecclesiastical conflict, Priscillian and several companions were tried before the usurping emperor Magnus Maximus at Trier and executed in 385. The civil conviction included charges framed as *maleficium* or magic, so the case should not be reduced to a simple statutory execution for holding one proposition deemed heretical.

Nevertheless, Christian bishops had helped move an intra-Christian controversy into a secular process that ended in death. Martin of Tours and Ambrose of Milan were among prominent churchmen who opposed the use of capital coercion in the affair (Chadwick, 2001).

The Priscillian episode exposed the logical destination of sacralized state enforcement. If false doctrine is treated as a public crime and bishops may hand opponents to rulers, the distinction between excommunication and execution can collapse. The New Testament knows severe ecclesial judgments, including exclusion from fellowship, but it never commissions the church to kill false teachers. Even when Paul invokes the magistrate for protection, he does not ask Rome to execute theological rivals. Priscillian's death therefore stands as an early warning that Christian rulers can turn the sword from protection of persons toward punishment of conscience.

10.5 John Chrysostom and the vulnerability of a bishop near the imperial court

The career of John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople from 398, reveals another side of imperial Christianity. Famous for preaching, moral rigor, and criticism of elite luxury, John also inherited a see whose proximity to court made episcopal conflict intensely political. His reforms alienated clergy and aristocrats, while tensions with Empress Eudoxia and Theophilus of Alexandria escalated. In 403 a gathering known as the Synod of the Oak condemned him on disciplinary charges amid a wider struggle over authority. He was briefly removed, recalled after popular unrest, and then exiled again in 404. He died in exile in 407.

John's fate demonstrates that the imperial church did not simply empower every bishop. Court proximity could magnify both influence and vulnerability. Alexandria used imperial and conciliar mechanisms against Constantinople; popular support could pressure the court; and an emperor could enforce an episcopal deposition without resolving the underlying moral or canonical controversy. The same institutional machinery that had been celebrated as a means of universal unity could become an instrument of rivalry among leading sees.

11. Metropolitan Structures and the Rise of the Major Sees

11.1 From city bishops to regional ecclesiastical geography

The pre-Nicene church had already developed networks of city bishops and provincial synods. The fourth century did not invent regional hierarchy, but imperial administration gave it a clearer territorial frame. Bishops in provincial capitals increasingly exercised coordinating functions as metropolitans. Councils expected bishops to respect provincial boundaries, and major urban sees accumulated authority because of apostolic associations, political importance, intellectual prestige, wealth, missionary reach, or long-standing custom. The resulting system was never reducible to one principle. Apostolic memory mattered, but so did the map of the empire.

Nicaea's sixth canon is a particularly important window into this older geography. Alexandria's traditional authority in Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis was preserved and compared with Roman custom, while Antioch and other provinces retained their privileges. Jerusalem received special honor in Canon 7 but without displacing the metropolitan order. The canons therefore show a church already accustomed to differentiated regional authority before Constantinople became a leading see.

Constantinople changed the balance because it was not an ancient apostolic center of comparable prestige. Constantine inaugurated the city as his imperial capital in 330 on the site of Byzantium. Its bishop inevitably gained access to court, imperial ceremonies, visiting officials, and bishops who came to the capital on business. Canon 3 of Constantinople in 381 formalized a new principle of precedence: New Rome should rank after Old Rome because of its status as the imperial city. This linkage between civil and ecclesiastical prominence generated long-term controversy precisely because Alexandria and Antioch could appeal to older apostolic and regional claims (McLynn, 2012; Rapp, 2005).

11.2 Rome: prestige, Peter, and developing appellate claims

Rome entered the Constantinian period with exceptional prestige. It was the old imperial capital, associated in Christian memory with the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, possessed a large and wealthy church, and had repeatedly intervened in disputes beyond Italy. Yet the fourth-century evidence still requires distinctions between primacy of honor, moral authority, appellate involvement, and the later doctrine of universal ordinary papal jurisdiction.

The Council of Serdica illustrates that development well. Its appeal canons allowed a bishop who believed himself unjustly deposed to seek the involvement of the Roman bishop, who might order a new regional trial and send representatives. The canons justified this in relation to the memory of Peter. Such provisions undoubtedly strengthened Roman claims and later became important in papal jurisprudence. At the same time, the mechanism remained conciliar and appellate rather than

equivalent to the later idea that the pope possesses immediate ordinary jurisdiction over every local church by divine law (Hess, 2002).

Bishops of Rome in the later fourth century, especially Damasus I and Siricius, articulated stronger claims and issued decretal responses to questions from other churches. Damasus promoted Roman apostolic memory and aligned strongly with Nicene orthodoxy. Siricius' letter to Himerius of Tarragona in 385 is often treated as the earliest surviving papal decretal in the technical Western tradition. These developments belong to a real trajectory toward papal monarchy, but that trajectory was still contested and incomplete in AD 431. Eastern bishops did not operate as though every disciplinary question required Roman authorization, and even western conflicts could expose resistance to Roman intervention.

11.3 Alexandria and Antioch: theological schools, episcopal power, and rivalry

Alexandria remained one of the most powerful Christian centers of the Mediterranean. Its bishops exercised broad authority over Egyptian Christianity, and the city's scholarly inheritance gave theological controversies exceptional intellectual force. Athanasius' long episcopate made the Alexandrian see synonymous with pro-Nicene resistance. Theophilus, bishop from 385 to 412, combined theological authority with formidable ecclesiastical and political skill. Cyril, who succeeded him in 412, inherited both the see's theological tradition and its ambitions. Alexandria's power was not merely doctrinal; it rested on a densely organized Egyptian episcopate, monastic connections, urban resources, and access to the imperial court.

Antioch represented another great apostolic and administrative center. Its theological culture is often described as "Antiochene," especially in contrast with "Alexandrian" interpretation. Such labels can be useful but should not be treated as rigid schools in which every theologian shared an identical method. Antiochene writers tended to emphasize the integrity of Christ's humanity, historical-literal interpretation, and careful distinction between divine and human predicates. Alexandrian theology tended to stress the unity of the incarnate Word and often employed more extensive typological and allegorical exegesis. These emphases would become decisive in the fifth century, but both traditions were internally diverse (Young, 1983; McGuckin, 2004).

The Antiochene see itself was weakened by schism after the deposition of Eustathius and later by competing episcopal successions. The Meletian schism complicated relations between eastern bishops, Alexandria, and Rome for decades. Gregory of Nazianzus' resignation at Constantinople in 381 was entangled with these rivalries. Ecclesiastical geography was therefore not merely a stable ladder of sees. It was a field of overlapping communion, disputed succession, and political negotiation.

11.4 Jerusalem and the sacred geography of pilgrimage

Jerusalem's position changed dramatically in the Constantinian age. The city, rebuilt as Aelia Capitolina after the Jewish revolts, had not possessed the political weight of Alexandria or Antioch. Nicaea nevertheless granted its bishop special honor. Constantine's building projects at the sites associated with Jesus' death and resurrection transformed Jerusalem into an international center of pilgrimage. Cyril of Jerusalem's catechetical lectures in the mid-fourth century testify to a flourishing liturgical and instructional culture tied closely to the city's sacred geography (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*; Walker, 1990).

Pilgrimage brought genuine biblical remembrance and educational opportunity, but it also contributed to the growing material culture of holy places, relics, shrines, and sacred objects. This development should be traced without assuming that every later devotional doctrine was already present in full. Fourth-century Christians increasingly honored martyrs and visited tombs, while theological distinctions between honor given to saints and worship owed to God continued to develop. The genealogy of veneration must therefore distinguish remembrance, pilgrimage, relic devotion, invocation, and later formal doctrines rather than compressing them into one practice.

11.5 Constantinople: New Rome and the institutional logic of empire

Constantinople's rise exposed a principle that would shape later Christian division: ecclesiastical precedence could follow political power. The see did not possess a New Testament foundation narrative comparable to Rome, Antioch, or Jerusalem. Its rapid ascent resulted primarily from the city's status as imperial capital. Bishops at Constantinople stood physically near the court and therefore near the imperial mechanisms that appointed, protected, exiled, or restored bishops across the East. The see became a prize for competing theological networks and a platform from which its occupant could influence imperial Christianity.

This political logic did not automatically invalidate Constantinople's bishops or doctrines. Scripture does not make an apostolic foundation a prerequisite for every important church. The issue is what kind of authority political prestige can legitimately create. A *Sola Scriptura* framework can recognize practical regional coordination without turning civil status into

divine right. The biblical authority of an elder rests on fidelity, character, teaching, and service, not on proximity to an emperor or the political rank of a city (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Table 5. Major sees and centers in the fourth and early fifth centuries

Center	Sources of influence	Fourth-century development	Later significance
Rome	Peter and Paul memory; old imperial capital; wealth; transregional correspondence	Serdican appeal canons; stronger decretal and Petrine claims under Damasus and Siricius	Central to the later Roman Catholic papal trajectory.
Alexandria	Markan/apostolic tradition; Egyptian episcopal network; scholarship; monastic ties	Athanasius and pro-Nicene leadership; strong regional jurisdiction	Major actor at Ephesus and Chalcedon; later Coptic/Oriental Orthodox trajectory.
Antioch	Apostolic mission center; Syrian regional importance; theological scholarship	Internal succession disputes; major role in Trinitarian and later Christological debates	Crucial to Syriac traditions and the Church of the East/Chalcedonian trajectories.
Jerusalem	Biblical sacred geography; pilgrimage; episcopal honor	Constantinian building, catechesis, rising prestige	Later patriarchal see and major pilgrimage center.
Constantinople	Imperial capital and court access	Founded as New Rome; Canon 3 of 381 grants honor after Rome	Becomes leading eastern see and central to later Eastern Orthodoxy.
Carthage/Hippo	Strong North African episcopal and conciliar tradition	Donatism, Cyprianic inheritance, Augustine, regional councils	Major source of Western Latin theology despite later institutional decline in North Africa.

MAJOR CHRISTIAN CENTERS AND IMPERIAL-CONCILIAR GEOGRAPHY, c. AD 325-431



Schematic orientation, not a map of fixed jurisdictional boundaries. Aksum and Seleucia-Ctesiphon show that fourth-century Christianity extended beyond the Roman imperial frame.

Figure 3. Major Christian centers and imperial-conciliar geography, c. AD 325-431.

Note. The map is schematic and does not depict fixed jurisdictional borders. Aksum and Seleucia-Ctesiphon are included to show that fourth-century Christianity extended beyond the Roman imperial frame.

12. Monasticism, Ascetic Authority, and an Alternative Christian Center of Gravity

12.1 From pre-Nicene asceticism to organized monastic life

Legalization did not make every Christian eager for imperial respectability. The fourth century witnessed the extraordinary expansion of ascetic and monastic forms that relocated Christian seriousness away from urban office and toward disciplined communities, deserts, and households of renunciation. Asceticism itself was not new. Earlier Christians had practiced fasting,

celibacy, voluntary poverty, virginity, and rigorous prayer. What changed was the scale, social visibility, and institutional organization of these practices (Harmless, 2004; Rousseau, 1985).

Antony of Egypt, whose life Athanasius famously narrated after Antony's death in 356, became the paradigmatic solitary monk in later Christian imagination. Athanasius' *Life of Antony* is theological hagiography as well as biography, so it should not be treated as a modern documentary transcript. Nevertheless, it helped transmit an ideal of desert renunciation throughout the Christian world. Pachomius developed a more communal or cenobitic form of monasticism in Upper Egypt, organizing monks under a rule, common work, prayer, discipline, and shared life. The contrast between solitary and communal monasticism was never absolute, but it became a basic typology of later Christian ascetic life.

Monasticism also developed in Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, and eventually the Latin West. Basil of Caesarea encouraged ascetic community integrated with service, Scripture, worship, and care for the poor. Macrina, Basil's sister, stands at the center of a family network that demonstrates the importance of women in fourth-century ascetic Christianity. In the West, figures such as Martin of Tours and later John Cassian helped adapt eastern ascetic ideals to new settings.

12.2 Monastics as theological and political actors

Monks did not remain outside church politics. Egyptian monastics could support Athanasius and later Cyril; ascetic networks could mobilize popular opinion; bishops were increasingly recruited from monastic or ascetic backgrounds. The desert became a source of charismatic authority that could rival elite education and court access. In a Christian empire, the monk could embody a counter-image to imperial luxury, episcopal ambition, and urban compromise.

Yet the common claim that monasticism simply arose because Christianity had become worldly after Constantine is too simple. Asceticism clearly predates imperial patronage, and fourth-century monasticism had multiple causes: biblical ideals of undivided devotion, martyr memory, eschatological expectation, social and economic pressures, networks of spiritual mentorship, local Egyptian traditions, and the search for disciplined Christian community. Imperialization likely intensified the symbolic contrast, but it did not create ascetic Christianity ex nihilo.

12.3 Biblical assessment of asceticism

Scripture gives genuine warrant for fasting, simplicity, generosity, disciplined prayer, voluntary celibacy, and sacrificial service. Paul himself commends singleness for those gifted to serve with undivided devotion while explicitly denying that marriage is sinful ([1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 32-35](#)). Jesus fasted and taught his disciples how to fast without display ([Matthew 4:1-2](#); [Matthew 6:16-18](#)). The church should therefore not dismiss disciplined ascetic practice as inherently unbiblical.

The danger arises when voluntary disciplines become a superior class of holiness or when abstentions forbidden by Scripture are made conditions of spiritual perfection. Paul explicitly warns against teachings that forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods God created to be received with thanksgiving ([1 Timothy 4:1-5](#)). Colossians cautions against self-made religion and severe bodily treatment that appear wise but do not conquer sinful desire ([Colossians 2:20-23](#)). A biblical evaluation can therefore honor monastic devotion where it serves Christ freely while rejecting any doctrine that turns celibacy, poverty, or withdrawal into a second gospel of merit.

13. Scripture, Canon, and the Fourth-Century Church

13.1 Nicaea did not choose the Bible

The fourth century is crucial for canon history precisely because it disproves the legend that the Council of Nicaea selected the biblical books. Nicaea's surviving creed and canons contain no such decision. Eusebius, writing around the council's era, could still distinguish writings widely acknowledged from those disputed or rejected. The process of canon reception remained active (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25; Gamble, 1995).

Athanasius' Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter, issued for Easter 367, contains the earliest extant Christian list that exactly matches the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament. He distinguished these "canonized" books from other works useful for catechetical reading. The importance of the letter is not that Athanasius personally created the canon in 367. Most of the books had functioned as authoritative Scripture for generations. Its importance is that the letter witnesses a moment of explicit delimitation in Egypt and provides the earliest surviving exact enumeration of the later common New Testament (Brakke, 1994, 2010).

Regional councils in North Africa, including Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397, listed scriptural books in forms broadly corresponding to later Western canonical reception. These were not ecumenical councils creating inspiration. They were

ecclesiastical acts of recognition within particular regions. Differences in Old Testament enumeration and the status of books later called deuterocanonical or apocryphal remained, and eastern churches could display different patterns of use. Canon history is therefore a history of converging reception, not of one imperial vote manufacturing Scripture.

13.2 Jerome, translation, and the Vulgate trajectory

Damasus of Rome commissioned Jerome in the 380s to revise Latin Gospel texts, and Jerome later undertook extensive translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew while consulting Greek traditions. His work became foundational to what later came to be called the Latin Vulgate, though the medieval Vulgate was itself the result of a long textual history rather than one uniform book issued by Jerome in a single act. Jerome's preference for the Hebrew text of the Old Testament generated debates with other Christians, including Augustine, over translation and the standing of books used in the churches but absent from the Hebrew Jewish canon (Graves, 2007; Kelly, 1975).

This debate is important for later confessional history. Questions about the Old Testament canon were not invented by the Reformation. Fourth- and fifth-century Christians already knew that Jewish, Greek, and Christian book collections were not identical in every respect. A historically responsible *Sola Scriptura* method must therefore distinguish the inspiration of Scripture from the later ecclesiastical history by which particular lists were recognized and transmitted.

13.3 Scripture and creed

The fourth-century controversies also transformed the relationship between biblical text and confessional rule. Arians, Homoians, Homoiousians, and Nicenes all quoted Scripture. The existence of rival scriptural arguments showed that merely repeating verses did not guarantee agreement. Creeds therefore functioned as public summaries of how the church understood Scripture's overall teaching. A creed could become a hermeneutical boundary: biblical language must not be interpreted in a way that makes the Son a creature if the total scriptural witness places him within the divine identity.

This use of creed is defensible only if the creed remains ministerial rather than magisterial in an absolute sense. A confession can serve the church by summarizing Scripture and excluding destructive interpretations. It becomes dangerous if it is treated as irreformable because an emperor or council promulgated it rather than because its content is true to the Word of God. The Berean pattern remains decisive: even authoritative preaching is examined by the Scriptures ([Acts 17:11](#)), and Paul subjects even angelic proclamation to the apostolic gospel ([Galatians 1:8-9](#)).

14. Christianity Beyond the Roman Imperial Frame

14.1 Why “imperial Christianity” is not the whole Christian story

The phrase “imperial Christianity” accurately describes a major Roman development, but it can mislead if it becomes a synonym for all Christianity. Christian communities already existed beyond Roman frontiers, and the fourth century saw major developments in Armenia, the Caucasus, the kingdom of Aksum, Mesopotamia, and the Sasanian Persian Empire. These communities were affected by Roman theology and politics but could not be reduced to Roman imperial institutions.

Armenian tradition places the conversion of King Tiridates III and the mission of Gregory the Illuminator around the beginning of the fourth century, though the exact chronology is debated. Christianity became deeply associated with Armenian royal identity before the full Theodosian settlement in Rome. In the Caucasus, Georgian Christianity developed through its own royal and missionary narratives. These cases show that rulers could sponsor Christianization without simply copying Constantine's exact institutional model.

14.2 Aksum and the African extension of Nicene Christianity

The kingdom of Aksum in the Horn of Africa provides one of the period's most important non-Roman developments. King Ezana adopted Christianity in the fourth century, probably in the second quarter of the century. Frumentius, remembered as a formative missionary and ecclesiastical leader, was consecrated bishop by Athanasius of Alexandria. Aksum's Christianization therefore connected an African kingdom to the Alexandrian see while remaining politically independent of the Roman Empire (Black, 2008; Phillipson, 2012).

The episode became entangled with the Arian controversy when the emperor Constantius II wrote to Ezana and his brother urging that Frumentius be examined by the anti-Nicene bishop George of Alexandria. Athanasius preserved and criticized this intervention. The correspondence is historically remarkable: an imperial theological conflict inside the Roman world reached a Christian king beyond Roman rule, but the emperor could not simply command Aksum as a province. The case exposes both the transnational reach and the limits of imperial Christianity.

Aksum is also essential for the genealogy of African Christianity. Christianity in Ethiopia and Eritrea did not arise in the modern missionary era. Its roots belong to late antiquity and to the Alexandrian ecclesiastical orbit. Later Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo traditions would develop within the Oriental Orthodox family after the Christological divisions treated in the next chapter. The fourth-century Aksumite conversion is therefore a major genealogical link between the Nicene age and living African Christian communions.

14.3 Persia: persecution, political suspicion, and ecclesiastical organization

Christians in the Sasanian Persian Empire lived under a different political logic. Once Roman emperors publicly patronized Christianity, cross-border Christian connections could acquire new political suspicion during periods of Roman-Sasanian tension, but modern scholarship cautions against explaining Persian persecution by a single geopolitical cause. Under Shapur II, severe persecutions developed during the fourth century, especially from the 339/340 period onward; taxation, court politics, religious institutions, warfare, and later martyr narratives all complicate a simple story of retaliation against a "Roman religion" (Smith, 2016).

By 410, however, the Synod of Isaac (Mar Ishaq) at Seleucia-Ctesiphon organized Persian Christianity more formally, confirmed metropolitan structures around the catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and formally received the Nicene Creed and a body of Nicene and western conciliar canons in a Sasanian setting. The synod illustrates an important genealogical distinction. Persian Christianity was influenced by Roman conciliar Christianity but was not institutionally a branch of the Roman state church. Its political separation from Rome would later contribute to a distinctive East Syriac trajectory, especially after the Christological controversies of the fifth century (Smith, 2016).

The Roman-Persian frontier thus complicates any idea that one "imperial church" simply swallowed all Christianity. Christian doctrine could cross borders even when political loyalties could not. The same Nicene confession could be received under a Christian Roman emperor and under a Zoroastrian Sasanian ruler whose state sometimes persecuted Christians.

15. Augustine and the Consolidation of Western Latin Theology

15.1 Augustine's historical position

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) belongs near the end of this chapter chronologically but near the center of later Western Christian genealogy. Born in Roman North Africa, educated in rhetoric, attracted for years to Manichaeism, influenced by Platonist philosophy, and converted to Nicene Christianity in Milan, Augustine became bishop of Hippo Regius in the 390s. His enormous literary output addressed Scripture, Trinity, grace, sacraments, church, political order, sexuality, memory, time, evil, and eschatology. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Jansenist, and many other Western traditions would later appropriate different parts of his legacy (Brown, 2000; Chadwick, 2001).

Augustine did not create Latin theology from nothing. He inherited Cyprianic ecclesiology, Ambrosian preaching, Latin Trinitarian reflection, North African conciliar traditions, and earlier Christian Platonist engagement. His importance lies in the scale and integration of his synthesis. He gave later Western Christianity conceptual frameworks that would outlast the Roman Empire itself.

15.2 Donatism, sacrament, and the mixed church

Against Donatism, Augustine argued that the church in history is a mixed body in which the final separation of true and false belongs to God's judgment. He rejected the idea that baptism's validity depends on the personal holiness of its minister. Baptism belongs to Christ; therefore a sacrament administered by a schismatic can be objectively Christian even if its use outside catholic unity is spiritually disordered. This reasoning allowed Augustine to recognize Donatist baptism without recognizing Donatist separation as legitimate.

The distinction had long-term consequences. Western sacramental theology increasingly separated sacramental validity from the moral state of the minister. That principle protected believers from having to investigate the hidden holiness of every priest before receiving baptism or Eucharist. It also strengthened an institutional account in which valid sacraments could operate through ordained ministry despite personal corruption. The later scholastic phrase *ex opere operato* belongs to a much later period and should not be read directly into Augustine, but the anti-Donatist controversy supplied important conceptual foundations.

Biblically, the distinction contains a legitimate insight and a potential danger. God's faithfulness does not depend on human perfection, and the gospel remains true even when proclaimed by flawed messengers ([Philippians 1:15-18](#)). Yet Scripture never allows office to shield a leader from discipline. Elders can be rebuked and removed; teachers face stricter judgment;

wolves can arise from within the leadership itself ([Acts 20:28-31](#); [1 Timothy 5:19-20](#); [James 3:1](#)). The church must therefore avoid both Donatist perfectionism and institutional complacency.

15.3 Augustine and coercion

Augustine's acceptance of coercion against Donatists became one of the most consequential and troubling aspects of his legacy. He argued that punitive laws could function medicinally by breaking habits and social pressures that kept people in schism. He drew on [Luke 14:23](#) and Old Testament examples, and he increasingly believed experience had shown that coerced people could later become sincere Catholics (Augustine, Ep. 93; Ep. 185; Atkins & Dodaro, 2001).

The intention to correct rather than kill does not resolve the biblical problem. The kingdom announced by Christ advances through witness, conversion, discipline, suffering, and the power of the Word and Spirit, not by compelling profession through civil penalties. When Jesus' disciples wanted to call fire on a rejecting village, he rebuked them ([Luke 9:51-56](#)). Paul instructed the Lord's servant to correct opponents with gentleness in the hope that God might grant repentance ([2 Timothy 2:24-26](#)). The state may restrain violence and protect persons, but coercing ecclesial communion crosses from civil justice into enforced conscience. Augustine's argument later supplied theological resources for medieval coercion and therefore must be treated as a genuine departure from the apostolic pattern even when its pastoral motives were more complex than simple persecution.

15.4 Pelagius, Caelestius, and the controversy over grace

The Pelagian controversy arose from a different concern: moral responsibility and the power of divine grace. Pelagius, a British ascetic teacher active in Rome, feared that appeals to human weakness could excuse sin. He stressed moral responsibility, free will, obedience, and the command of God as evidence that obedience is genuinely possible. Caelestius, a close associate, became the focus of controversy in North Africa after arriving there around 410. Augustine increasingly interpreted their teaching as denying inherited original sin and making grace too external to the human will (Chadwick, 2001; Dupont & Matz, 2025).

Fair representation requires caution. "Pelagianism" became a polemical category broader than Pelagius' own surviving writings. Pelagius himself affirmed divine grace, but he could define grace in ways Augustine considered insufficient, including creation, free will, law, teaching, forgiveness, and Christ's example. Augustine insisted that fallen human beings require not merely instruction and pardon but an inward, prevenient, transforming grace that enables the very willing and doing of good. For Augustine, even the beginning of saving faith depends on God's gracious action.

The controversy passed through complex ecclesiastical and imperial stages. Caelestius faced condemnation in Carthage in 411/412. Pelagius was acquitted at Diospolis in 415, partly because he distanced himself from propositions attributed to others. African councils in 416 condemned teachings associated with Pelagius and Caelestius; Pope Innocent I confirmed the judgments. His successor Zosimus initially questioned the African procedures and was more favorable to the accused, but after renewed African pressure and imperial intervention, Honorius issued a decree against them in April 418, and a major African synod in May condemned propositions concerning sin, grace, baptism, and human ability. Zosimus subsequently endorsed the anti-Pelagian settlement (Dupont & Matz, 2025).

The history matters because it prevents oversimplification. Augustine did not single-handedly define doctrine by private authority, nor did Rome simply dictate the African position from the beginning. African councils, Roman bishops, imperial legislation, personal networks, and contested texts all interacted. The controversy also shows how quickly theological disagreement could become legally enforceable once Christianity operated inside the imperial order.

15.5 Original sin, infant baptism, and grace

Augustine's doctrine of original sin was shaped in part by his reading of [Romans 5:12](#) and by the universal practice of infant baptism for remission of sins. He argued that humanity shares Adam's fallen condition and requires grace even before personal acts of sin. His Latin biblical text and interpretive tradition contributed to his formulation, and later Western theologians would debate how precisely guilt, corruption, and solidarity in Adam should be described.

Scripture clearly presents sin as universal and connects death and condemnation to Adam's transgression ([Romans 5:12-21](#); [1 Corinthians 15:21-22](#)). It also teaches that salvation is God's gift, not a human achievement ([Ephesians 2:1-10](#); [Titus 3:3-7](#)), and that no one can boast before God. Augustine's insistence on radical grace therefore protects a central apostolic truth against moral self-sufficiency. Yet later Augustinian conclusions concerning predestination, infant baptism, and the exact transmission of guilt require separate exegetical evaluation rather than acceptance merely because Augustine defeated a condemned position.

The controversy also demonstrates again that theological victory and biblical perfection are not identical. A movement may correctly expose one error while retaining or introducing another. Augustine was right to insist that fallen humanity cannot save itself and that grace is more than information. That does not make every later Augustinian inference binding. Under *Sola Scriptura*, Augustine remains a powerful witness, not a final court of appeal.

15.6 *The City of God*: disentangling Christianity from Rome

The sack of Rome by Alaric's Goths in 410 shocked the Mediterranean world and generated pagan accusations that abandonment of Rome's traditional gods had weakened the empire. Augustine responded over many years with *The City of God*. He argued that Christianity never promised the eternal security of the Roman political order. Two "cities," defined by contrary loves, are intermixed in history until final judgment. Earthly states can serve relative goods such as peace and justice, but no empire is the kingdom of God (Augustine, *City of God*; Clark, 2018).

This argument is especially striking in a chapter about imperial Christianity. Augustine could support coercive Christian law in one context while simultaneously denying that Rome itself was sacred or eschatologically ultimate. His thought therefore embodies the tensions of the age. Christianity had become deeply entangled with imperial power, yet one of its greatest imperial-era theologians insisted that the church's ultimate hope transcends every political order.

16. Public Christianity: Basilicas, Martyrs, Relics, Pilgrimage, and Christian Culture

The legalization of Christianity changed not only councils and law but everyday religious imagination. Public basilicas became landmarks. Imperial and aristocratic patronage supported liturgy, clergy, poor relief, burial, and pilgrimage. Christians traveled to Jerusalem, martyr shrines, monastic centers, and reputed biblical sites. The bodies and tombs of martyrs, already cherished before Constantine, became increasingly prominent in urban devotion. Bishops such as Ambrose could translate relics into new basilicas, integrating martyr memory with episcopal leadership and city identity (Brown, 1981; Jensen, 2018).

These practices developed unevenly. Commemoration of martyrs has clear continuity with earlier Christian memory, which honored those who died faithfully without equating them with Christ. By the fourth century, however, claims about relics, healing, intercession, and sacred presence became more elaborate. The growth of pilgrimage similarly combined biblical remembrance with a developing geography of holiness. Christians could visit places associated with Jesus as acts of devotion and instruction, yet the New Testament does not make proximity to a holy site a means of superior access to God. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman explicitly relativizes sacred geography by locating true worship in spirit and truth ([John 4:20-24](#)).

The same period saw increasing public use of the cross and biblical imagery. This should not be confused with the later eighth-century icon controversy, which concerned formal theological defense of image veneration. Fourth-century evidence shows a Christian visual culture, not yet the complete later iconological system. Historical genealogy requires those stages to remain distinct.

Christianity also moved into education and elite culture. Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and John Chrysostom demonstrate sophisticated appropriation of classical rhetoric, philosophy, grammar, and literary forms. Pagan intellectual culture was neither simply destroyed nor passively preserved. Christian authors criticized idolatry while using the educational tools of the Greco-Roman world to interpret Scripture and persuade audiences. The result was a long cultural transformation in which Christian doctrine became increasingly articulated through the intellectual languages of late antiquity.

17. Toward Ephesus: From Trinitarian Settlement to Christological Crisis

17.1 The new question: how are divinity and humanity united in Christ?

By the early fifth century the central Trinitarian boundary had become clearer: the Son is fully divine and the Holy Spirit is worshiped with Father and Son. Yet this success intensified another question. If the eternal Son truly became human, how should Christians speak about the relation between the divine Word and the humanity of Jesus? The church needed to avoid opposite errors: dissolving Christ's real humanity into divinity, dividing him into two acting subjects, or confusing divine and human properties in a way that destroyed either nature.

Apollinaris of Laodicea illustrates one attempted solution. Eager to safeguard the unity and sinlessness of Christ, he taught in forms interpreted as replacing the rational human mind in Jesus with the divine Logos. His opponents argued that such a

Christ would not possess complete humanity. Gregory of Nazianzus expressed the enduring soteriological objection in the principle that what Christ did not assume was not healed. Constantinople in 381 condemned Apollinarianism. The controversy made full humanity as indispensable to orthodox Christology as full deity.

17.2 Antiochene and Alexandrian emphases

Theologians associated with Antioch, especially Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, emphasized the integrity of Christ's humanity and carefully distinguished divine and human predicates. Their concern was to avoid attributing suffering or change to the divine nature in a crude sense. Alexandrian theology, especially under Cyril, emphasized the unity of the incarnate Word and feared that excessive distinction would produce two sons or two subjects of worship. Both concerns had biblical motivations. Jesus truly hungered, suffered, died, and grew ([Luke 2:52](#); [John 19:28-30](#)), yet the one who did so is also the eternal Word through whom all things were made ([John 1:1-3, 14](#)).

The labels "Antiochene" and "Alexandrian" should not be turned into total opposites. Both traditions affirmed the incarnation and both contained internal variation. Their preferred vocabulary, exegetical habits, and soteriological accents nevertheless made misunderstanding likely, especially as Greek terms such as *physis*, *hypostasis*, and *prosopon* did not yet possess universally fixed Christological meanings.

17.3 Nestorius, Cyril, and Theotokos

Nestorius, a monk and preacher from the Antiochene theological environment, became bishop of Constantinople in 428. The appointment placed an Antiochene theologian in the empire's most politically sensitive see. Controversy soon erupted over the title *Theotokos*, conventionally translated "God-bearer" or "Mother of God," used of Mary. The title was intended by its defenders to protect the identity of the one born from Mary: the person born in the incarnation is truly the divine Word made flesh. Nestorius feared that unqualified use could confuse Christ's divinity and humanity or imply that the divine nature itself originated from Mary.

The dispute rapidly exceeded Marian terminology. Cyril of Alexandria interpreted Nestorius' language as dividing Christ into two subjects and mobilized Alexandria's extensive ecclesiastical network against him. Nestorius and his defenders believed Cyril risked confusing natures. Rome became involved, and Emperor Theodosius II summoned a council to Ephesus for 431. Political rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople, Antiochene solidarity, imperial court factions, popular devotion, and difficult theological vocabulary all converged.

This is the point at which the present chapter ends. The Council of Ephesus would not merely refine an existing imperial church. It would help produce the first enduring institutional division among major ancient Christian communions. The structures created in the fourth century made the conflict empire-wide: powerful sees, imperial convocation, conciliar authority, canonical procedure, doctrinal formulas, and legal enforcement were all now in place. The same mechanisms that had stabilized Nicene Trinitarianism could also harden Christological division.

18. Why the Transformation Happened: Immediate Triggers and Deeper Causes

The formation of imperial Christianity cannot be explained by legalization alone. The transformation emerged from several mutually reinforcing forces that operated at different levels: imperial patronage, inherited episcopal institutions, doctrinal conflict, administrative geography, memories of persecution, linguistic diversity, ascetic renewal, and rivalry among powerful persons and sees. None is sufficient by itself. Their interaction explains why the legal settlement of AD 313 produced consequences far beyond toleration and why those consequences differed across regions.

Imperial patronage became historically transformative because it encountered an already institutionalized episcopal church. Constantine possessed resources to restore property, subsidize travel, build basilicas, and treat ecclesial concord as a matter of imperial order, but bishops, provincial synods, inherited lines of communion, and regional centers already existed. Once Constantine defeated Licinius in 324 and ruled the empire alone, these older networks could be coordinated at an unprecedented scale. The empire amplified structures forged under persecution; it did not create them. This interaction between new political capacity and older ecclesiastical organization was the institutional precondition for Nicaea, later imperial councils, and the growing public authority of bishops.

Doctrinal pressure arose independently of court politics, even though court politics altered its course. Christians already worshiped Christ, baptized in the triune name, confessed one God, and read scriptural texts that attribute creation, divine names, saving works, and worship to the Son and Spirit. The controversy associated with Arius therefore exposed a real

exegetical and theological problem, not a dispute invented by Constantine. At the same time, Greek, Latin, and Syriac theological vocabularies did not map neatly onto one another. Terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *substantia*, *persona*, *prosopon*, and related expressions could carry different connotations across regions, so sincere attempts to protect monotheism, personal distinction, or the incarnation could be heard by opponents as modalism, tritheism, or subordination. The fourth century was shaped both by the substance of doctrine and by the difficulty of finding a transregional language precise enough to express it.

Imperial administrative geography supplied the channels through which theological conflict became ecclesiastical structure. Provinces, metropolitan cities, roads, imperial residences, and court access shaped communication and precedence. Rome drew prestige from apostolic memory and its old imperial stature; Alexandria combined established regional jurisdiction with scholarship and a tightly organized Egyptian episcopate; Antioch linked Greek and Syriac worlds; and Constantinople rose rapidly because the emperor's new capital concentrated political access. The result was not a neutral map of apostolic antiquity but an ecclesiastical geography increasingly intertwined with civil geography. That development helps explain both the practical efficiency of metropolitan coordination and the later rivalry among the major sees.

The memory of persecution and competing ideals of holiness supplied a different kind of pressure. Donatism emerged from unresolved wounds created by surrender, betrayal, disputed ordinations, and competing memories of martyr fidelity. Monasticism, although rooted in pre-Constantinian ascetic practice, expanded in a world where public Christian privilege made renunciation an especially powerful counter-image to wealth, court access, and nominal affiliation. Both movements, in very different ways, asked whether a church enjoying imperial favor could remain holy. Their answers could become excessive, but the questions were real and show why the Constantinian transformation cannot be understood only through imperial law or elite theology.

Personal and institutional rivalries repeatedly intensified disputes whose doctrinal content was nevertheless genuine. Athanasius and his opponents, Damasus and rival Roman claimants, Theophilus and John Chrysostom, Alexandria and Constantinople, and eventually Cyril and Nestorius all show how office, honor, jurisdiction, patronage, and personal trust could shape the reception of theological arguments. It would be reductionistic to treat doctrine as a mask for ambition, just as it would be naive to write the history as though bishops and emperors acted without political interests. The transformation of AD 313-431 occurred because theological conviction, inherited institutions, imperial resources, language, geography, memory, social aspiration, and human rivalry converged. Table 6 summarizes that interaction without reducing any one factor to the sole cause.

Table 6. Before, change, and result in the formation of imperial Christianity

Before AD 313	Change after legalization	Result by AD 431
Christianity legally vulnerable and periodically persecuted	Imperial toleration, property restoration, patronage	Public, wealthy, institutionally secure churches in major cities
Regional synods without Christian state enforcement	Emperors convene, subsidize, and enforce councils	Empire-wide conciliar settlements become possible and politically consequential
Bishops influential inside Christian communities	Bishops receive civil privileges and court access	Episcopal office gains major public and political significance
Major sees based on older custom and apostolic memory	Imperial geography elevates Constantinople	Precedence becomes tied to both apostolic claims and political rank
Heresy handled primarily through ecclesial exclusion	Civil law increasingly classifies and penalizes religious dissent	Theological deviation can become a legal as well as ecclesial status
Asceticism present but less institutionally differentiated	Monasticism expands rapidly	Monastics become major spiritual, social, and theological actors
Canon largely recognized but not universally delimited	Fourth-century lists and regional councils clarify boundaries	Exact twenty-seven-book NT list explicitly attested; regional convergence increases
Trinitarian vocabulary still unsettled	Nicaea, decades of controversy, Cappadocian synthesis, Constantinople	Pro-Nicene confession becomes the dominant imperial orthodoxy
Christology less technically defined	Full deity and full humanity increasingly affirmed	New disputes over the unity of Christ lead directly to Ephesus

GENEALOGICAL TRANSFORMATION, AD 313-431

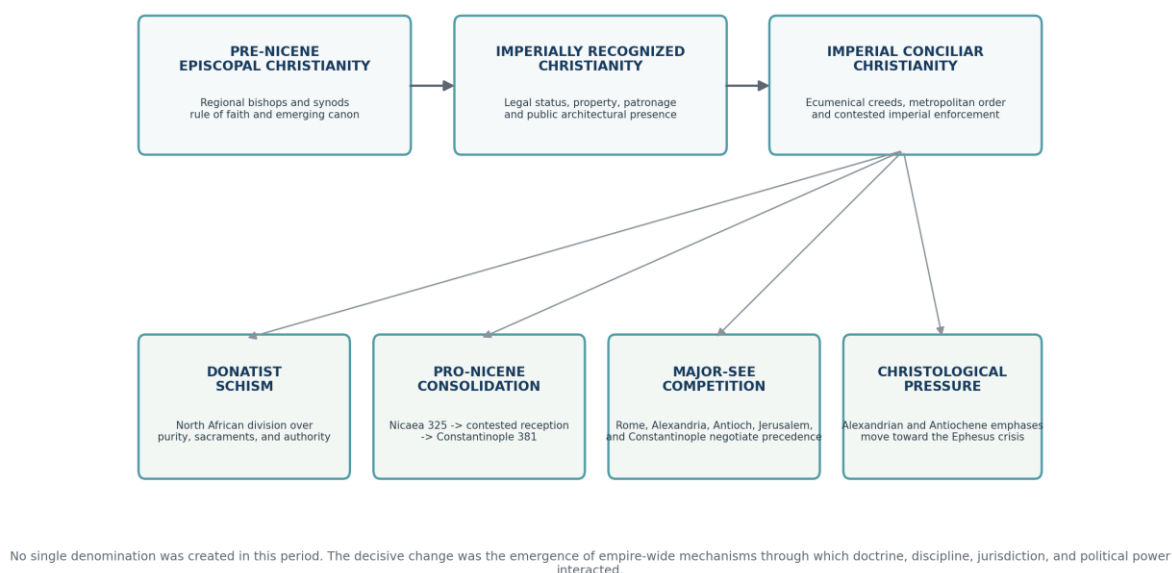


Figure 4. Genealogical transformation, AD 313-431.

Note. The period produced no single new denomination. It transformed the institutional conditions under which doctrine, discipline, jurisdiction, and political power interacted across the Christian world.

19. Institutional Outcomes, Branches, and Later Descendants

The period from Constantine to Ephesus did not generate one simple institutional branch comparable to a later denominational schism. Its genealogical significance lies in transformation of the parent environment from which several ancient communions would soon separate. Pre-Nicene episcopal Christianity became an imperially recognized, council-centered ecclesial order in which orthodoxy was increasingly defined through ecumenical confession, episcopal communion, and legal recognition. That order supplied the common institutional ancestry of the later Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and, in more complex ways, Church of the East trajectories.

The Donatist communion represents a genuine schism within this period, but it did not produce a surviving global denominational family. Its theological and institutional legacy persisted indirectly through Western reflection on sacramental validity, church purity, coercion, and the relation between local rigorist communities and transregional catholicity. The controversy also became a permanent historical warning that an ecclesial majority supported by the state can still use means requiring biblical criticism.

The pro-Nicene settlement became far more genealogically durable. The confession that the Son is truly divine and that the Holy Spirit belongs with Father and Son in the one divine identity became a theological boundary across the ancient communions that later separated after Ephesus and Chalcedon. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and the Church of the East all developed within the world shaped by the fourth-century Trinitarian controversies, even though their later Christological histories differed. The Nicene inheritance also passed through medieval Western Christianity into the Magisterial Reformation and remains foundational to most historic Protestant confessions.

The rise of the major sees created another long-lived genealogy. Rome's Petrine and appellate claims strengthened in the West. Constantinople's status as New Rome established the political-ecclesiastical logic that would later place it at the center of Eastern Orthodoxy. Alexandria's authority prepared the institutional base from which Cyril would dominate Ephesus and from which the later Coptic tradition would emerge. Antioch's theological and Syriac networks contributed to several later eastern trajectories. Jerusalem's sacred and liturgical prestige helped secure its later patriarchal status.

Monasticism generated yet another cross-cutting genealogy rather than a denomination. Egyptian, Palestinian, Syrian, Cappadocian, and Latin ascetic traditions shaped Catholic and Orthodox spirituality, missions, education, manuscript

transmission, and later religious orders. Their influence also reached communities that would eventually separate from Chalcedonian Christianity. Monasticism therefore demonstrates why a Christian genealogy cannot be reduced to formal schisms. Some of the most consequential developments spread by influence, adaptation, and institutional replication across branches that later became separate communions.

Finally, fourth-century imperial Christianity created a political genealogy. Byzantine symphonia, medieval Western Christendom, coronation traditions, established churches, coercive anti-heresy laws, and later debates about religious liberty all drew in some measure from precedents established when Christian emperors and bishops first learned to govern alongside, through, and sometimes against one another. The later forms were not identical to Constantine's arrangements, but the Constantinian settlement created a new repertoire of possibilities that Christian states would revisit for more than a millennium.

20. Biblical-Theological Assessment: Testing Imperial Conciliar Christianity by Scripture

Historical explanation alone cannot decide whether a development was faithful to the apostolic church. The fourth century contains both major achievements in defending biblical truth and major departures in the use of religious power. A *Sola Scriptura* assessment must therefore resist two opposite simplifications. It is historically and theologically wrong to reject Nicene doctrine merely because emperors supported it. It is equally wrong to treat imperial approval, ecumenical reception, or institutional antiquity as proof that every conciliar or ecclesiastical development was apostolic.

20.1 The full deity of the Son: Nicaea as faithful doctrinal clarification

The central Nicene affirmation corresponds strongly to the total witness of Scripture. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the eternal Word who is God and through whom all things were made ([John 1:1-3](#)). Thomas addresses the risen Jesus as “My Lord and my God” ([John 20:28](#)). Paul applies to Jesus the saving invocation of the Lord from Joel ([Romans 10:9-13](#)), describes him as existing in the form of God before taking the form of a servant ([Philippians 2:6-11](#)), and says that all things were created through and for him ([Colossians 1:15-17](#)). Hebrews distinguishes the Son from angels, commands angelic worship of him, and applies to him scriptural language of the eternal Creator ([Hebrews 1:1-12](#)). Revelation places the Lamb within heavenly worship offered to the one on the throne ([Revelation 5:8-14](#)).

These texts do not permit the Son to be located simply among created beings. Arius rightly wanted to preserve monotheism and the distinction between Father and Son. His solution, however, created a deeper biblical contradiction by placing the one through whom all created things came to exist on the created side of the line. The Nicene distinction between “begotten” and “made” and its use of *homoousios* were attempts to protect what Scripture already says: the Son is personally distinguishable from the Father yet fully shares divine identity.

The fact that *homoousios* does not appear in the Bible does not violate *Sola Scriptura* if it remains a subordinate explanatory term. The church is free to use extra-biblical words to summarize biblical teaching, just as “Trinity” is a theological term rather than a biblical noun. The decisive limit is that no technical term may be made authoritative against Scripture or used to authorize doctrines not actually warranted by the biblical witness.

20.2 The deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit

The pro-Nicene clarification concerning the Holy Spirit is likewise grounded in Scripture. The Spirit speaks, sends, wills, teaches, can be grieved, distributes gifts as he wills, and bears personal witness ([Acts 13:2](#); [1 Corinthians 12:11](#); [John 14:26](#); [Ephesians 4:30](#); [Romans 8:16](#)). Peter's rebuke to Ananias moves directly from lying to the Holy Spirit to lying to God ([Acts 5:3-4](#)). Paul describes believers as God's temple because God's Spirit dwells in them ([1 Corinthians 3:16](#)). Father, Son, and Spirit appear together in baptism and blessing ([Matthew 28:19](#); [2 Corinthians 13:13](#)).

The later phrase “one essence, three persons” is not printed as a formula in one verse, but it responsibly coordinates these scriptural affirmations: there is one God; the Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God; and Father, Son, and Spirit are not the same person. Modalism protects unity by erasing personal distinction, while tritheism protects distinction by sacrificing monotheism. Nicene Trinitarianism is valuable precisely because it refuses both reductions.

20.3 Councils: useful servants, not infallible masters of Scripture

Acts 15 demonstrates that church leaders may gather to resolve controversy. The Jerusalem meeting listened to testimony, reasoned from God's work, appealed to Scripture, sought agreement, and communicated a binding apostolic judgment to affected churches. That biblical precedent gives strong warrant for councils as instruments of corporate discernment.

Nicaea and Constantinople can therefore be appreciated as historically serious attempts to perform a legitimate ecclesial task on a vastly larger scale. They gathered leaders, examined contested teaching, summarized doctrine, and sought visible unity. Yet the analogy with Acts 15 has limits. The Jerusalem Council included apostles whose foundational authority is not reproducible. Fourth-century bishops did not become apostles merely by assembling. Their conclusions therefore require testing by the already given apostolic Word.

The instability between 325 and 381 demonstrates the wisdom of this distinction. Councils contradicted or revised one another; emperors enforced different formulas; bishops were exiled by opposing regimes. A Christian living in 359 could not simply ask which formula possessed current imperial backing. Scripture and the apostolic gospel had to remain the higher norm. Councils are most trustworthy when they faithfully confess Scripture and least trustworthy when institutional self-preservation becomes a substitute for biblical argument.

20.4 The emperor as protector: legitimate civil good and dangerous ecclesial expansion

[Romans 13:1-7](#) and [1 Peter 2:13-17](#) teach that civil government has a divinely permitted role in restraining wrongdoing and maintaining public order. Christians may rightly welcome laws that protect them from violence, return stolen property, recognize lawful assembly, and secure equal justice. In that respect, the end of persecution under Constantine was a genuine providential good. The church is not required to prefer martyrdom when lawful peace is available ([1 Timothy 2:1-4](#)).

The problem begins when civil protection becomes civil governance of conscience. The apostles never call upon governors to suppress heresy as heresy, compel baptism, force participation in the Lord's Supper, or exile rival teachers on the church's behalf. Church discipline uses spiritual means: instruction, rebuke, correction, separation, and restoration ([Matthew 18:15-20](#); [1 Corinthians 5:1-13](#); [2 Timothy 2:24-26](#); [Titus 3:10-11](#)). The magistrate's sword addresses civil wrongdoing; the church's keys address confession and fellowship. Conflating the two creates coerced conformity and makes political access a theological weapon.

Constantine's interventions were not all equally coercive, and late antique law must be read in context. Nevertheless, the basic precedent is clear. Once Christian rulers began confiscating rival church property, exiling bishops for doctrinal or disciplinary opposition, and enforcing conciliar settlements, the church accepted methods absent from its apostolic foundation. Later claims that coercion served unity do not change that discrepancy.

20.5 Donatism: holiness without sacramental perfectionism

The Donatist controversy contained a biblical concern that should not be lost in later Catholic victory. The church is called holy, leaders must be above reproach, and betrayal under persecution is serious. Scripture never teaches that a bishop's office renders grave sin irrelevant. A church that protects corrupt leaders in the name of institutional continuity contradicts the apostolic qualifications for ministry ([1 Timothy 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)).

Yet Donatist logic became excessive when ecclesial holiness was made dependent on a chain of morally uncontaminated ministers. The New Testament grounds salvation in Christ's faithfulness, not in an ability to verify the inner holiness of every minister. Paul can distinguish the truth of the message from the mixed motives of some preachers ([Philippians 1:15-18](#)). Baptism is into Christ, not into the moral record of the baptizer ([1 Corinthians 1:13-17](#)). The Catholic insistence that divine grace is not nullified by ministerial hypocrisy therefore answers a real pastoral and theological problem.

The proper biblical synthesis is neither sacramental automaticism nor ministerial perfectionism. Christ is faithful; his Word governs the church; sacraments or ordinances must be practiced according to that Word; and leaders remain accountable to discipline. Institutional validity cannot excuse corruption, while human corruption cannot overthrow God's truth.

20.6 Augustine on grace: a needed defense with limits

Against moral self-sufficiency, Augustine emphasized a thoroughly biblical truth: fallen human beings do not rescue themselves by unaided will. Salvation is by grace; even faith is not a ground for boasting ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#); [Romans 3:21-28](#); [Philippians 2:12-13](#)). Jesus says that no one can come unless drawn by the Father ([John 6:44](#)), while the new birth is the work of the Spirit ([John 3:3-8](#)). Pelagian or quasi-Pelagian accounts become biblically defective whenever grace is reduced to external instruction and human beings are treated as capable of spiritual self-regeneration.

At the same time, Augustine's later theology must not be made a second canon. Scripture also gives real calls to repent, believe, persevere, resist, obey, and make one's calling and election sure ([Acts 17:30](#); [Hebrews 3:12-14](#); [2 Peter 1:10](#)). Christian traditions have differed over how divine sovereignty and human responsibility relate. Those later debates cannot be settled merely by citing Augustine's prestige. The biblical conclusion must hold together what Scripture itself holds together:

salvation originates in God's grace, excludes boasting, produces willing obedience, and summons human beings to genuine response.

20.7 Ecclesiastical rank and the political prestige of cities

The New Testament recognizes differentiated leadership but gives no warrant for ranking churches by the political status of their cities. Jerusalem had unique salvation-historical significance in the apostolic period, yet the gospel was not governed permanently from Jerusalem as an imperial headquarters. Paul could address Rome with respect without treating Roman civil greatness as a divine charter of jurisdiction.

The rise of Constantinople "because it is New Rome" is therefore historically understandable but not biblically self-validating. Regional structures can be prudentially useful, especially in large communions. They become theologically problematic when administrative precedence is transformed into spiritual supremacy without scriptural warrant. The same test applies to Rome. Peter's prominence is real and must not be minimized ([Matthew 16:16-19](#); Acts 1-12), but the New Testament does not state that the political city of Rome inherits a perpetual universal jurisdiction from Peter. Later papal claims therefore require arguments beyond the mere antiquity or prestige of the Roman see.

20.8 Monasticism: disciplined vocation without a two-level Christianity

The ascetic movement recovered truths easily obscured in a privileged church: prayer, simplicity, fasting, chastity, generosity, spiritual warfare, and refusal to conform to luxury. Monastic communities also preserved texts, educated leaders, served the poor, and produced remarkable missionary energy. Their critique of nominal Christianity could be profoundly biblical.

The danger lies in constructing two classes of Christians, ordinary baptized believers and a spiritually superior ascetic elite. The New Testament calls every believer to holiness ([1 Peter 1:15-16](#)), presents marriage as honorable ([Hebrews 13:4](#)), and condemns ascetic rules that become self-made religion ([Colossians 2:20-23](#)). Voluntary celibacy is a gift, not a universal higher state ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#)). Biblical asceticism therefore disciplines desire for the sake of love and mission; it does not earn a superior righteousness before God.

20.9 Martyrs, relics, and sacred places: remembrance under Christ's unique mediation

Remembering faithful believers is biblical. Hebrews recounts heroes of faith and calls Christians to remember leaders whose faith should be imitated (Hebrews 11; [Hebrews 13:7](#)). Honoring those who died for Christ can strengthen courage and gratitude. Visiting sites connected with biblical events can also educate and focus remembrance.

Yet the New Testament gives no basis for treating relics, shrines, or geographical proximity as necessary channels of access to God. Christ alone is the one mediator between God and humanity ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)), and believers approach the Father through him ([Hebrews 4:14-16](#); [Hebrews 10:19-22](#)). The extraordinary miracles associated with objects in Acts, such as handkerchiefs connected to Paul's ministry ([Acts 19:11-12](#)), describe sovereign acts of God and do not establish a system for collecting or invoking relics. Later devotional practices must therefore be tested carefully at the point where remembrance becomes mediation or where created things receive religious trust belonging to God.

20.10 Canon recognition and the sufficiency of Scripture

The fourth-century canon process does not undermine Sola Scriptura. Scripture can be intrinsically God-breathed while the church's recognition of the complete collection develops historically. Israel likewise possessed inspired writings before later communities produced final lists. The church did not make apostolic books inspired by voting for them. It received, copied, compared, read, and eventually delimited writings already functioning with authority.

This does not make history irrelevant. Christians depend on historical transmission to know which texts were received across the ancient church. But reception is ministerial rather than creative. The canonical books claim and display apostolic-prophetic authority that ecclesiastical institutions recognize rather than manufacture. Athanasius' 367 list is therefore important evidence about recognition, not the moment inspiration began.

20.11 Unity and truth

The fourth century demonstrates that Christian unity is precious and dangerous when misunderstood. Jesus prayed for the unity of his people ([John 17:20-23](#)), and Paul condemns factionalism ([1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#)). Bishops were right to seek common confession across regions. The church should not celebrate fragmentation as though division itself proved faithfulness.

Yet biblical unity is unity in truth. Paul can withstand Peter when conduct threatens the gospel ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)), command separation from false teaching ([Romans 16:17-18](#)), and pronounce anathema on another gospel even if preached by an angel ([Galatians 1:8-9](#)). Imperial Christianity became most dangerous when visible unity was made an absolute good enforced regardless of conscience. The apostolic church is united under Christ by the Spirit through the truth of the gospel, not merely by occupying one legally recognized institutional structure.

21. Contemporary Significance

The fourth-century settlement continues to shape Christianity at multiple levels. The Nicene and Niceno-Constantinopolitan creeds remain among the most widely shared doctrinal texts in global Christianity. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and many other churches confess the essential Trinitarian substance articulated in the Nicene tradition, even when they differ over later additions, especially the Western *Filioque*. The councils therefore remain living theological reference points rather than museum artifacts.

The period also explains why present-day church structures look the way they do. The prominence of Rome and Constantinople, the regional authority of Alexandria and Antioch, the patriarchal status of Jerusalem, and the long association between Ethiopia and Alexandria cannot be understood without the ecclesiastical geography consolidated during and after the fourth century. Modern disputes over primacy, synodality, papal jurisdiction, and ecumenical councils continue to invoke precedents formed in this period.

Church-state relations remain equally contemporary. Christian communities still debate establishment, religious liberty, state funding, political privilege, Christian nationalism, public morality, and the boundary between lawful civic influence and coercion of conscience. The Constantinian experience warns against two simplifications. Political protection can be a genuine good, especially where Christians face persecution. Political privilege can also compromise witness when the church depends on coercive power or confuses national stability with the kingdom of God. The fourth century shows that the same state capable of protecting one Christian party can suppress another, and that emperors can reverse theological preference.

The Donatist controversy still speaks to churches facing clerical abuse and institutional scandal. The failure of a leader does not make Christ false, but institutional continuity does not absolve leaders from biblical qualifications. Churches need both confidence in God's faithfulness and uncompromising accountability. Augustine's anti-Donatist achievement should therefore never be used to shield clergy from discipline.

The age also remains decisive for Christian education. Modern readers frequently encounter popular claims that Constantine invented the Bible, imposed Christianity at Nicaea, or created Jesus' divinity for political reasons. These claims collapse centuries of documentary evidence. Correcting them does not require romanticizing Constantine or imperial Christianity. Historical honesty can state simultaneously that Nicaea defended a doctrinal conviction deeply rooted in pre-Nicene Scripture and worship, and that the imperial mechanisms attached to conciliar Christianity created serious problems of coercion and political entanglement.

Finally, the period teaches a methodological lesson that governs the rest of this genealogy. Neither antiquity nor persecution, neither majority nor minority status, neither council nor charismatic resistance, automatically proves fidelity. Donatists could appeal to martyr purity and still divide over assumptions requiring scrutiny. Imperial bishops could defend Christ's deity and still support coercive policies foreign to the apostolic pattern. The test remains the Word of God, interpreted carefully in its canonical context and applied without granting immunity to any institution, movement, ruler, bishop, or reformer.

22. Genealogical Summary

Table 7. Genealogical profile: Constantine, councils, and imperial Christianity

Field	Historical synthesis
Parent tradition	Pre-Nicene regional episcopal Christianity, with bishops, synods, rule of faith, emerging New Testament canon, sacramental practice, and major urban centers already established by AD 313.
Approximate emergence	AD 313 as the legal-political threshold; AD 325 as the first imperial ecumenical council; AD 380-381 as the decisive consolidation of Nicene imperial orthodoxy.
Principal geographical centers	Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Carthage/Hippo, Caesarea, Nicaea; with important developments beyond the Roman Empire in Aksum and Sasanian Persia.
Principal actors	Constantine, Licinius, Arius, Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Hosius of Cordoba, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodosius I, Ambrose, Augustine, Pelagius, Caelestius, Damasus, Theophilus, Cyril, Nestorius.
Immediate trigger	End of persecution and restoration of Christian corporate life, followed almost immediately by disputes that emperors treated as threats to religious and civic concord.
Deeper causes	Pre-existing episcopal consolidation; unresolved Trinitarian vocabulary; memory of persecution; regional and urban rivalries; imperial administrative geography; growing Christian demography; court patronage; linguistic differences; desire for visible unity.
Authority structure	Local bishops and clergy; provincial metropolitans; regional and ecumenical councils; increasingly prominent major sees; creeds and canons; imperial convocation and enforcement; Scripture and inherited apostolic confession invoked as doctrinal norms.
Principal doctrinal distinctives	Nicene confession of the Son as truly divine and <i>homoousios</i> with the Father; developing confession of the Spirit's full deity; stronger conciliar definitions; Western development of grace and sacramental theology; emerging technical Christology.
Immediate divisions	Donatist schism in North Africa; multiple fourth-century Trinitarian coalitions including Homoian and Anomoean streams; Antiochene succession disputes; continuing non-Nicene Gothic Christianity.
Later descendants	The conciliar-imperial parent environment from which Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Church of the East trajectories would differentiate; Nicene theology also inherited by most historic Protestant traditions.
Present-day presence	Nicene Trinitarian confession remains foundational across most historic Christian communions; Rome and Constantinople remain major global centers; ancient African and Syriac communions preserve lineages rooted in this period.
Major biblical questions raised	Is the Son fully divine? Is the Spirit fully divine and personal? What authority do councils possess? May the state coerce religious conformity? Does sacramental validity depend on ministerial holiness? Can political precedence establish spiritual jurisdiction? How should grace and human responsibility be related? How does the church recognize Scripture?

23. Conclusion: The Achievement and Cost of Imperial Conciliar Christianity

Between AD 313 and 431 Christianity changed its public location more dramatically than at any earlier point in its history. The church did not begin the period as an undefined religious movement waiting for Constantine to create its doctrines and institutions. It entered the Constantinian age with bishops, synods, Scripture, rule of faith, sacramental life, regional centers, and centuries of theological reflection already behind it. Constantine's revolution was therefore not the invention of Christianity but the transformation of the political conditions under which Christianity operated.

That transformation brought undeniable goods. Persecution ended. Confiscated property was restored. Christians could build, teach, travel, gather, copy Scripture, care for the poor, and organize openly. Empire-wide councils became possible. The Arian controversy forced the church to state with unusual precision what its worship and Scriptures already required: the Son is not a creature but truly shares the divine identity of the Father. The later pro-Nicene settlement likewise confessed the Holy Spirit as divine. These doctrinal achievements should not be dismissed as political inventions simply because emperors became involved in their history.

Yet the same period attached dangerous instruments to Christian unity. Imperial arbitration of Donatism accustomed bishops to civil enforcement of ecclesial decisions. The exile and recall of bishops showed how theological fortunes could change with emperors. Theodosius' confessional legislation increasingly turned heresy into a legal category. Augustine gave theological arguments for coercion that later Christendom would repeatedly invoke. Political geography elevated Constantinople and intensified competition among major sees. Public privilege, monumental architecture, sacred geography, and court access changed the social meaning of episcopal office.

The most important conclusion is therefore neither triumphalist nor cynical. Imperial Christianity was a mixed historical development. It preserved and clarified central apostolic truths while simultaneously institutionalizing practices that cannot be justified merely by appealing to their antiquity or conciliar pedigree. The biblical benchmark remains decisive. Christ, not emperor or council, is head of the church ([Colossians 1:18](#)). Scripture, as the prophetic-apostolic Word, tests every later teacher and institution ([2 Timothy 3:14-17](#); [Acts 17:11](#)). Civil rulers are to be honored within their God-given sphere but are not commissioned to create faith by compulsion ([Romans 13:1-7](#); [2 Corinthians 10:3-5](#)). Christian unity is commanded, but it is unity in the truth of the gospel rather than unity purchased by coercion ([John 17:17-23](#); [Galatians 1:6-9](#)).

By 381, the Trinitarian dispute that had dominated the fourth century had reached a durable pro-Nicene settlement within the Roman imperial church. By the early fifth century, however, the very success of that settlement exposed a new frontier. If Jesus Christ is truly divine, as Nicaea confessed, and truly human, as the church increasingly insisted against Apollinarian reduction, how are his divinity and humanity united in one person? Theological vocabulary, rivalry among Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople, imperial involvement, and popular devotion converged around that question after Nestorius became bishop of Constantinople in 428. In 431, bishops assembled at Ephesus, and the mechanisms of imperial conciliar Christianity were turned toward a dispute whose consequences would be far more enduring than Donatism. The next chapter follows that crisis through Ephesus, Chalcedon, the Church of the East, the Oriental Orthodox communions, and the first permanent divisions of ancient Christianity.

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