

ANCIENT  
CHRISTIAN  
DOCTRINE

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We Believe in One God

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The First Article of the Creed*

The first article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, popularly known as the Nicene Creed, is both the shortest and probably also the oldest, because it can be found (with only minor variations) as far back as the first baptismal confessions of the earliest Christians. In the historical development of the creeds, brevity and antiquity usually go together, and it is remarkable that this article survived the theological upheavals of the fourth century virtually unaltered.

#### **The Form of the Article**

It is not difficult to demonstrate that the doctrine that it contains was taught in the church from the very beginning, and with the significant exception of the word *Father*, it can even be traced back to the opening pages of the Old Testament. It is the only article of the creed to which a practicing Jew can assent without serious difficulty, though he or she might find the combination of the words *Father* and *Almighty* somewhat unusual. In a real sense, therefore, the first article of the creed is a confession common to both biblical Testaments, and its all-embracing nature may be one reason why it survived the ups and downs of early church doctrinal controversy substantially unchanged.

In its present form, the words of the article are those that were recited at the second session of the council of Chalcedon (October 25, 451), though virtually identical texts can be found in the Eastern churches<sup>1</sup> in the fourth century and recognizably similar forms appear a hundred years before that. It is true that the Western (Latin-speaking) church had a different tradition, which is now enshrined in the so-called Apostles' Creed, but although it appears to have developed independently, it cannot be said to depart from the Eastern versions in any matter of substance. On the contrary, the available evidence suggests that the Western form was supplemented from the East sometime after the late fourth century, as the Nicene Creed became better known and more widely used in the Latin world, and so the two great branches of the early church joined hands to confess the faith that they had always held in common.

The variations that occur in different forms of the article can be listed as follows:

1. *We believe/I believe.* The form of the creed officially proclaimed in 451 used the plural because it was the common confession of the entire synod. This reflected a practice that went

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<sup>1</sup>The word *Eastern* is used here to refer to those churches whose classical liturgies and literatures were composed in Greek, Coptic, Syriac or Armenian.

back to the first council of Nicaea in 325 and even earlier, and it carries with it a certain sense of authority. However, the singular form is considerably more ancient, and it probably goes back to early baptismal confessions. There is no theological difference between the two forms, each of which can be found in regular use today.

2. *In one God/in God.* The inclusion of the word *one* is generally believed to be an Eastern phenomenon, though some scholars have claimed that there are a few early Western creeds that have it too. It makes no theological difference, though the inclusion of “one” can be said to reinforce biblical monotheism.

3. *The Father Almighty/the Father, the Almighty.* Many modern forms of the creed (although not the ICET version used in this series) print the words *Father Almighty* as if they belonged together, though there is considerable evidence to support the view that they were originally separate terms. The two words are never found together in the Bible, and before the end of the second century, it was not common to link them in this way. Historically, and to some extent theologically, it is therefore better to treat the two words as distinct from each other.

4. *Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.* Creedal formulations prior to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan tended to stress one side of this expression or the other. In general terms, it seems that the form “maker of heaven and earth” is more Western and the form “maker of all that is, seen and unseen” is more Eastern, though there is no evidence to suggest that the varieties were ever intended to convey a different meaning. The present form of the creed combines both. In all cases, the belief confessed is that God has made everything that exists out of nothing. The words “heaven and earth” are found in Genesis 1:1 and may therefore be said to be more obviously biblical, but the idea that the visible world was created out of nothing occurs in Hebrews 11:2. This is not quite the same thing as saying that God created both the visible and the invisible worlds, but the inference is easily drawn, and the Nicene Creed combines both traditions. The only possible difference between the two phrases is that the former concentrates on the lower creation and says nothing about angelic beings, who played a prominent part in the theology of the early church, whereas the latter would appear to include them. But if the addition of the second phrase was designed to provide a reference to the spiritual creatures, this would have been intended as a clarification of the former statement, not as a difference from, or as an addition to, its basic theology.

The Greek version says *Maker*, which the Latin sometimes translates as “Creator” and sometimes as “Maker.” English versions until recently preferred “Maker,” but some recent ones have substituted “Creator,” perhaps in order to emphasize that the creation was made out of nothing and not out of some preexisting matter. If so, that distinction was not intended in the original texts, all of which assumed that creation came into being *ex nihilo*.

## **The Sources of Christian Belief**

The first article of the Nicene Creed presupposes that there is an objective body of teaching that Christians are expected to confess as their faith. This idea seems normal and natural to us,

but it was a novelty in the ancient world. Neither Judaism nor any pagan religion or philosophy could claim to have a closely defined set of beliefs that everyone adhering to it was expected to profess publicly and defend against all comers. Jews were generally born into their faith, and the relatively few converts were obliged to submit not to a body of doctrine as such but to the prescriptions of the law. These could be very demanding, particularly when grown men were expected to undergo circumcision, and the requirement seems to have been quite a deterrent in many cases. Certainly there was a substantial number of Gentiles, known in the New Testament as “God-fearers,” who adhered to Jewish synagogues but did not become full members of the community, presumably because the barriers were set too high for them. Paganism, by contrast, was notoriously receptive to almost any kind of belief, and one of the biggest problems pagans faced, even within the recognized philosophical schools, was to establish some sort of coherence in their world view. Eclecticism and syncretism were common among them, and the available evidence strongly suggests that this tendency was growing in the first Christian centuries as new syntheses of Greek and Eastern (Syrian, Egyptian and Persian) ideas continued to emerge in the late Roman world.

In sharp contrast to this, Christians had a clearly defined and coherent set of beliefs, which were contained in their Scriptures. These consisted of the Old Testament, inherited intact from Judaism, and the writings of the apostles and their immediate followers, which were gradually collected together and recognized as a New Testament. Together, they formed a canon, or rule of faith, and Christians believed that everything essential to their confession was contained in them. The precise boundaries of the canon were not established until the fourth century, but it is clear from the evidence that most of the books that are now in the Bible were accepted as authoritative long before that. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, it was the Hebrew canon that was universally recognized, although most people read it in a Greek translation, particularly in the famous version composed sometime after 250 B.C. and attributed to seventy scholars of Alexandria.<sup>2</sup> That translation included a number of additional books that were not recognized by Palestinian Jews as canonical, and although the early Christians sometimes referred to them, they did not normally place them on the same level of authority as the other Old Testament Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the time of Augustine (354-430) that any prominent Christian writer defended the authority of these additional books, but even after that they were seldom commented on or used to any significant extent to establish points of doctrine.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the early church accepted the writings that were used in its preaching and teaching ministry, which were generally regarded as coming from the apostles or their immediate circle and carried their authority. There was never any doubt about the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles or the thirteen letters of Paul. Questions arose only in connection with some of the books that are now placed at the end of our Bibles, and the doubts

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<sup>2</sup>This is why we know it as the Septuagint (LXX), from the Latin word for seventy.

<sup>3</sup>Today they are known as the Apocrypha, or deuterocanonical books, and are sometimes printed between the Old and New Testaments in our Bibles.

mainly concerned the problem of authorship. Hebrews was eventually accepted because it clearly came from the Pauline circle, even though nobody could quite decide who wrote it. First Peter and 1 John were generally agreed to have come from those apostles, and so they were accepted as canonical, but 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and the book of Revelation were questioned because it was not certain who their authors were. James was widely accepted as the work of the brother of Jesus, but Jude was doubted by some, because nobody knew for sure who he was. In the end, these books were received into the canon because they had proved their worth in the church's ministry, and rightly or wrongly, they were attributed to the apostles whose names they bore.

The Scriptures were universally believed to have been given by God, who used prophets and apostles as his instruments for conveying his Word to the church. Their divine origin and content gave them a status that was unrivaled by any other authority, and it is safe to say that there was no doctrine taught in the early Christian communities that did not stem in some way from them. It is true that some of the church fathers drew extravagant conclusions from certain verses of Scripture, which we would not accept today, but that does not invalidate the principle that all doctrine taught publicly in the church had to have a scriptural foundation. A good example of how this worked can be found in the interpretation frequently given to Genesis 6:1, to the effect that when the angels ("sons of God") fell to earth, they married human women and so produced the race of demons that plagues the created order to this day. No modern scholar would accept this interpretation of that text, but even in ancient times, John Chrysostom rejected it on the ground that angelic beings do not have physical bodies like ours, and so they are unable to engage in sexual intercourse with humans. As a result of this more sophisticated approach, the earlier interpretation faded out and is seldom found after the end of the fourth century. Yet however dubious the original ancient interpretation is, it must be said that the Fathers would not have taught such a doctrine concerning the origin of demons if they had not felt able to find it somewhere in the Bible. They went wrong not because they introduced alien ideas into Christian theology but because they lacked the historical and cultural knowledge that would have enabled them to interpret the text with historical precision. Even today, when such knowledge is more widely available, scholars do not agree about the true meaning of this verse, so we are hardly in a position to criticize the ancient fathers of the church on this score!

It is also important to note that when there were doubts about the canonicity of a particular book, the Fathers were careful not to base their doctrine exclusively on it. They did not hesitate to warn Christians against drawing conclusions from what was doubtful but urged them to accept only what was known to be authentic. In the end, the doubts regarding some of the disputed books were resolved because it was possible to show that they taught the same doctrine as the books that were universally recognized, after which they were accepted as authoritative. Here it is important to note the procedure that the early church followed, as much as the conclusions to which it came. The Fathers went from the certain to the doubtful and tested the latter by their conformity with the former—a pragmatic approach that reflects the great authority that the universally recognized books had in the canon.

The apostolic provenance of the New Testament books was guaranteed by the fact that they were recognized by the churches that had been founded by the apostles themselves. The Fathers' argument was that the churches mentioned in the New Testament as apostolic foundations had preserved the apostles' teaching intact, and they pointed to the remarkable agreement that existed among those churches with respect to the texts of the apostolic writings. They were well aware that there were a large number of pseudo-apostolic books in circulation, but since they were not accepted by the apostolically founded churches, they were excluded from the canon. It is important to emphasize that the Fathers understood these apostolic churches to be guardians of the apostles' legacy and not as authorities who were empowered to determine what that legacy was. There was never any suggestion that the leaders of those churches should pronounce on the canonicity of the books in their possession, nor was a council ever held to determine the status of the disputed books. The latter eventually became normative by constant use, not by any official decree. In the end the consensus of the church was unanimous. By the middle of the fourth century, the present canon was fully established, and after that, it was hardly ever questioned by anyone. The previously disputed books were mostly accepted and the clearly pseudepigraphical ones were universally rejected—all without any official pronouncement on the subject.

The Fathers believed that what we now call the infallibility and inerrancy of the biblical texts were a logical consequence of their divine origin, but they had a more relaxed understanding of these terms than would normally be the case today. This was not because they had any difficulty with the principle of infallibility or inerrancy but because they understood the practical problems that dogged the accurate transmission of texts in the ancient world. The copying of manuscripts was always a risky business, and there were few, if any, available that were totally free from scribal corruptions of one kind or another. Ancient readers were accustomed to dealing with this, and they saw no problem about making what they believed were obvious and necessary corrections to faulty texts. Modern textual study has shown that what seemed obvious to them was not always correct, and scholars have sometimes been able to reconstitute more primitive readings that differ from the versions found in the Fathers. The variations are seldom very serious from a theological point of view, but they exist, with the result that it is not always possible to follow patristic arguments based on textual exegesis by using a modern translation.<sup>4</sup>

Another feature of patristic interpretation is that a number of the Fathers believed that God had deliberately placed obscurities in the Bible in order to attract our attention and make us inquire more deeply into the real meaning of the text. According to them, this was often to be found not in the literal meaning of the words, which might not make sense in some cases, but in some hidden, spiritual interpretation, which the awkwardness of the literal reading was meant to point toward. The Fathers therefore believed that the infallibility of the Bible, which in principle they accepted, in practice demanded an allegorical interpretation of certain parts of it, a conclu-

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<sup>4</sup>As a general rule, it is often the case that the patristic readings are closer to the Authorized (King James) Version of the English Bible than to most modern translations.

sion that is foreign to most modern defenders of infallibility and inerrancy.

It should also be said that the Fathers recognized that there were some apostolic traditions that had been handed down in the churches but had not found their way into the written texts from which they drew their doctrinal authority. These traditions were almost all connected with worship or with ritual observances of various kinds (like the signing with the cross at baptism) that the Fathers regarded as lawful because of their apostolic provenance but that they did not teach as infallible truth or impose on everyone as essential. Their main concern was to authenticate existing practices that were useful but had no written authority to back them up, not to add to the deposit of revealed truth that they had received in the Scriptures.

### **The Emergence of a Creedal Pattern**

Although the supreme authority of the Bible was never questioned in the early church, from a very early time its teaching was summarized in short statements of belief that individual Christians were meant to learn and recite on appropriate occasions. There were a large number of these statements in circulation across the Christian world, and many examples of them have come down to us from the second century and later.

Common to them all is a trinitarian pattern, which remained fundamental even in the fourth century, when church leaders began to compose creeds for particular confessional purposes. Also very common, though perhaps not universal, was some connection with baptism, which had to be administered in the triune name to be valid.<sup>5</sup> Most scholars now agree that candidates for baptism were asked a number of questions about their faith, to which they were expected to give precise responses that reflected the essentials of Christian doctrine. These questions seem to have been framed along the lines of *Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?* which is supposed to account for the three-article pattern of the responses preserved in the form of proto-creeds—one for each person of the Trinity.

For a long time, the most important thing about these formulas was their general pattern and content, not their precise wording. For example, we possess three different versions of what looks very much like an early form of the Apostles' Creed in the writings of Tertullian (fl. c. 186-212), all of which are immediately recognizable as such but none of which is identical in wording or detailed content. If one person could reproduce what he called "the rule of faith" in three different ways, it shows that there was no fixed formula even in a single church, so that trying to trace genealogies of creeds in this early period is doomed to frustration. It is possible to say that some phrases like "God the Father Almighty" became fairly stereotyped early on, since they can be found in almost every proto-creed known to us from about A.D. 200 onwards, but how can we account for the fact that Western (Latin) creedal formulas had no clause corresponding to "creator of heaven and earth," which seems to have been introduced there only after the spread of the Nicene Creed in the fifth century? Though this is puzzling, it can easily be shown that the

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<sup>5</sup>See Mt 28:19.

Western churches taught the doctrine that this phrase contains; its absence from the formulas cannot be regarded as a denial or even as an underemphasis of its teaching. As far as the first article of the creed is concerned, there is nothing to prove that the doctrine it proclaims was ever unknown in the church and everything to suggest that it was taught in substantially its present form from the beginning, whether it was officially confessed in this way or not.

It is true that when creeds began to be composed deliberately, as expressions of the church's faith in the face of heresy, there was no difficulty in adopting the longer form of the first article, which has survived virtually unchanged to the present time. The developments that occurred elsewhere in the creed under the pressures of fourth-century theological controversies had no impact on the first article, even when a case could be made for expanding it to deal with some of the issues raised at that time. From a modern perspective, it is striking to note that the word *Almighty*, applied to the Father, was never extended to cover the other persons of the Trinity, even though the applicability of this term to the Son was one of the issues at the heart of the Arian controversy. Evidently, the phrase "Father Almighty" was by this time sacrosanct and no longer susceptible to further expansion, with the result that the first article of the Nicene Creed now has a curiously archaic flavor. Yet whatever else may be said about it, there can be no doubt that the first article represents a doctrinal position that had been proclaimed by the church from the earliest days of its existence and continued to set the tone of theological confession throughout the controversies that gave rise to the later, standardized version of the creed as we know it.

### **The Doctrine of the First Article**

This doctrine can be summed up in a single word—monotheism. Scholars debate whether the early Israelites were monotheists in the strict sense, since there is at least a possibility that they worshiped Yahweh, the God of Israel, as one deity among many.<sup>6</sup> But whatever truth there may be in that idea, it is clear that by the time of Jesus, Jews were monotheistic in the modern sense of the term. The only argument was whether pagan gods were demons or illusions—that is, did they exist in some form, or were they nonexistent? For most Jews this must have been an academic question, of little practical significance for their lives, which were lived in separation from the non-Jewish (Gentile) world around them. Christians found it more difficult to ignore the issue, because they were engaged in active evangelism among pagans and therefore had to deal with the claims made for their gods. It is probably fair to say that the more intellectual the Christian, the more he would be inclined to argue that pagan gods were nonexistent. But the reality of the early church was that many believers came from the lower classes of society, where belief in demon possession was extremely prevalent. Christians in that milieu could not afford to be too intellectual in their approach, and what we find is an insistence that pagan temples were the haunts of demonic forces, against which Christians were protected by their faith in God and by the intervention of guardian angels, who watched over them on a daily and individual basis.

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<sup>6</sup>This is known technically as henotheism, rather than as monotheism, which implies that only one God actually exists.

But even on this interpretation, it is obvious that no Christian ever imagined that the pagan gods were real in the sense that the claims made for them were true. There was only one God, and he was the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel), who had now revealed himself in the world as the Lord Jesus Christ.

This core belief set Christians apart from the pagan world, but it also cut them off from their Jewish roots. Jews did not believe that God had become a man and did not accept that the messianic promises of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the way that Christians claimed. Explaining how God could appear on earth and yet remain in heaven was not easy, and it forced the early Christians to develop what we now know as trinitarian doctrine. The first element in this was to confess God as Father. This was the teaching of Jesus, and it is clear from the Gospels that it was meant to be understood in the context of his self-understanding as the Son. The early Christians knew this and did not hesitate to argue for a Father-Son relationship in the Godhead,<sup>7</sup> but they also knew that the word *Father* was ambiguous. It could be used to mean no more than that God was the Creator of the universe—its “father” in the sense of being its source or originator. That idea was present in Judaism and was almost a commonplace in the Hellenistic world, which included the Jews of the diaspora. For that reason, it can frequently be found in the writings of the second-century apologists, whose first concern was to make Christianity comprehensible and acceptable to intellectuals living in that environment.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that they promoted a universalistic understanding of the term *Father* at the expense of the more restricted New Testament usage, since both can be found in their works and there is no apparent tension between them. On the contrary, it is clear that the more general understanding of the word was gradually deemphasized, so that by the fourth century it had apparently become undesirable to speak in such terms and the word *Father* was thenceforth largely restricted to its trinitarian context.

That God was almighty went without saying to anyone who accepted the divine inspiration of the Old Testament, but it is remarkable that this title for Yahweh was scarcely used by the apostles. Outside the book of Revelation, which is a special case, it occurs only once in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians 6:18, which is a quotation of 2 Samuel 7:8. It can hardly be said that the apostles did not believe that God was almighty, since they clearly accepted the Old Testament teaching on the subject, but it was not thought necessary to put special emphasis on this, presumably because it was too obvious to need defending. However, it is important to bear in mind that the words underlying the translation “Almighty” are nouns in Hebrew and Greek, not adjectives. God is named El-Shaddai (Hebrew) and Pantocrator (Greek)—the one who rules over everything.

The force of this teaching was not lost on the early Christians, for whom it was a way of affirming that there could be no god or principle in the universe opposed to the power of the

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<sup>7</sup>The Holy Spirit was not excluded from this, but he was not related to the Father in the same way as the Son clearly was, and less consideration was given to him before the fourth century.

Almighty. In particular, this meant that Satan and his angels could not hold any effective power over Christians, even if they were allowed to operate relatively freely on earth. Nor was it possible for Christians to hold to the kind of dualism that divided the world into spirit (essentially good) and matter (essentially evil). The existence of one almighty God precluded such an understanding of reality, since matter too must have been created by him and come under his jurisdiction, making it essentially just as good as spirit.

This was one of the most basic Christian doctrines, which characterized its mission in the Greco-Roman world more clearly than perhaps anything else. The unity of spirit and matter under the aegis of a good, almighty God was the essential precondition for two other doctrines that stand out as specifically Christian: the incarnation of the Son and the resurrection of the flesh. Neither of these would have been possible without the prior assertion of the goodness of the material world and the controlling power of God over it, which the term *Almighty* serves to emphasize.

From the mid-second century onwards it became customary to connect the terms *Father* and *Almighty*, so much so that it is now difficult to imagine that they had separate origins. Later on, the term *Almighty* underwent another, more subtle development, apparently thanks to the fact that Latin had no exact equivalent for the Greek *Pantocrator* but had to use the adjective *omnipotens* instead. Reflection on the word *Almighty* as an adjective describing the divine being, rather than as a noun indicating a divine title, led Christians to affirm that God is capable of doing anything he chooses to do. There is no sign that this had ever been denied, but stating it as boldly as that led to certain difficulties. For instance, can God do things that go against his nature? Today it might be argued that if God were to do something we call bad, it would be good for him, since he is good in himself, and his decision to do whatever it was would be determined by that fact. God would not choose to do something bad, because his will is perfectly good, and such a choice would therefore be excluded. The Fathers argued that the divine omnipotence could not fall into a logical contradiction, because in their eyes that would compromise the supreme goodness and greatness of God.

Here it seems that we are dealing with an accidental, but nevertheless important, development of Christian theology that is not openly stated in the Bible but is nevertheless implied by its teaching. Even if the development owes something to an inadequate Latin translation of the Greek word *Pantocrator*, it is still true that God has to be omnipotent in order to be himself and that he could not function as *Pantocrator* if this were not so. The theological reflection of the Fathers may have gone beyond the strict letter of the biblical text (without their realizing it, in this instance), but their conclusions are still valid, both because they are implied in what is stated and because what is stated cannot be properly understood otherwise. In the doctrine of divine omnipotence, we have an excellent example of how the church fathers remained within the mindset of the Bible, even as they were led to develop its teaching further in an effort to bring out its underlying meaning.

That God should be acknowledged as the creator of heaven and earth merely repeats the asser-

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tions of Genesis 1, and it seems that for many early Christians, particularly in the Western (Latin) church, that was already implied by the term *Almighty*. It was in the East that this phrase was first included in the credal formulas, either by saying that God was the “maker of heaven and earth” or more commonly that he was the “maker of all things, seen and unseen.” The first of these formulations is more obviously biblical and the second more philosophical, but the Greek-speaking churches may have been inclined to prefer the latter, since to them it would have been clearer in meaning. Later the two phrases were combined, and both entered the Nicene Creed as we now have it.

### **The Patristic Sources**

The early development of the first article, and its relatively uncontroversial passage through the theological storms of later times, means that much of the material most relevant to its interpretation can be found in the writings of the Fathers who lived before the legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313. The fundamental character of Christian monotheism means that it could hardly have been otherwise, and as we have already suggested, it is almost impossible to imagine how the christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries could have taken place without a prior development of the doctrine of the good Creator God. This means that the writings of the first few centuries are particularly rich in references to the issues under consideration in this volume, and in most cases later commentators did little more than expand and develop what they had to say. The works of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen are for the most part readily available in English translation, though the last of these is less well served than the others. Much the same can be said for writers like Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Novatian and Lactantius, who are other major sources for these doctrines and for this period. The witness of later centuries, though less original, is also of interest, partly because it is often more detailed and explores aspects of the issues that had not previously received much treatment, but mainly because it confirms the continuity of Christian teaching from the earliest times in spite of the many changes that the church underwent in the fourth and fifth centuries. The bedrock of the church’s beliefs remained unaltered, and in the first article of the creed we can be confident that we are being transported back to the earliest days of the apostolic preaching.

Today the main issue of controversy is not whether the first article of the creed faithfully reflects the teachings of the New Testament and the earliest fathers of the church but whether those writings are truly representative of the Christian community (or communities) as it then existed. Anyone who reads Irenaeus or Tertullian will soon become aware of the conflicts that were raging in the church around A.D. 200, concerning the teachings of people whom we nowadays tend to group together as Gnostics. Both Irenaeus and Tertullian spent a great deal of time refuting Gnostic beliefs, and in the process both writers offer us a number of quotations that are suitable illustrations for the doctrines taught in the first article of the creed. But who or what did Irenaeus and Tertullian represent? How normative were (or are) the arguments that they put forward for the church in general?

For many centuries it was assumed without question that men like them were the defenders of the orthodox view of the church, which was the teaching of the vast majority of Christians and the official doctrine of the leading apostolic churches. Virtually nothing was known about the heretics whom they combated, other than what enemies like Irenaeus and Tertullian said about them, and this naturally contributed to the feeling that Valentinus and Marcion had never played a significant part in the life of the church. Their teachings appeared to be so bizarre and inconsistent that it was hard to imagine that they had ever had any followers to speak of, and it was generally assumed that once they were gone, their breakaway movements vanished without trace.

This traditional view began to be challenged in the early nineteenth century, when a new way of looking at church history was developed at Tübingen (and later elsewhere) in Germany. Scholars like August Neander classified heretics of the second century as Gnostics. They did not coin this word, which has an ancient pedigree, but they invested it with a new and more technical meaning than it had previously had. There had been a small group of heretics in ancient times who went by the name *Gnostici*, but who they were or what they believed is unknown, and they must have been fairly insignificant. By contrast, Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) used the word *gnostic* in a positive sense, to refer to someone whom we would probably now call spiritual.<sup>8</sup> Neander, however, used the word to refer to people who tried to create a synthesis of pagan and Christian beliefs. Given that there was an almost infinite variety of pagan ideas to choose from, it is hardly surprising to discover that Gnostics came in many different shapes and sizes. They did not form a single group and are best described as representatives of a syncretism that is not uncommon when different religious and philosophical traditions come into contact with each other. Later on, it would be argued by Walter Bauer<sup>9</sup> and others that the Gnostic phenomenon was not an aberration but formed part of the mainstream church in the earliest period and that so-called Gnostics may have been the majority in many if not in most of the churches for more than a hundred years.

Readers of the relevant patristic texts will not get the impression that the ancient church was full of Gnostics in the sense intended by the Tübingen school, but there is no doubt that people with syncretistic doctrines were around and that the Fathers felt obliged to combat their teachings at some length. Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament and relegated the Jewish God to a secondary status, was not typically Gnostic and is usually treated separately nowadays, but the others held to a certain pattern of beliefs that is immediately recognizable. It was an agglomeration of ideas that can be explained most easily as an attempt to graft the spirit-matter duality of ancient paganism onto a biblical and usually specifically Christian framework. Jesus was portrayed as a miracle worker from childhood, whose chief aim was to exalt the spirit over matter and deliver his followers from the latter's clutches. This could be done by spiritual experiences

<sup>8</sup>This must be borne in mind because the translator of Clement's works in the ANF series (ANF 2:163-604) does not hesitate to use the word *Gnostic* in this way, which is confusing to modern readers who are used to understanding it differently.

<sup>9</sup>Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934).

that would purify the soul by distancing it as much as possible from the taints of this world, and in particular from the lusts of the flesh. To this end, some Christians developed a complicated mythology in which Adam, Eve and the serpent were given symbolic meanings and a celestial hierarchy, consisting of abstract eons and the so-called pleroma (“fullness”), was devised to aid the soul in its ascent into the divine mystery. There were many different versions of this, but the general outline is clear enough.

Bauer’s classic work on the subject appeared in 1934. He argued that the early church was a mixed company of people holding a wide variety of beliefs and that sometime in the late second century there was a takeover by what later became the orthodox party. These people, of whom Irenaeus would be a prime example, narrowed the range of doctrinal options acceptable in the church, and dissidents were pushed to the sidelines. Fortunately (from Bauer’s point of view) traces of them and their beliefs survived on the edges of the Christian world, and from them we can reconstruct what the earlier situation must have been like. Bauer’s views were refuted in some detail by H. E. W. Turner, in a series of Bampton Lectures that he gave in 1954 and published in the same year.<sup>10</sup> That should have been the end of the story, but Bauer’s work was translated into English in 1972<sup>11</sup> and has since enjoyed a wide popularity in parts of the English-speaking world, where Turner’s refutation seems to have been forgotten.

Because of this, it is now necessary to defend the classical fathers of the early church against the charge that they were a small and unrepresentative minority who happened to take control of the church at a key moment in its development and who were thus able to obscure the historical truth in their own interests. Fortunately, the best refutation of such ideas is the reading of the Fathers themselves. Everyone agrees that the different Gnostics had convoluted and obscure systems of thought, which would have been clear only to those who were specially initiated into the cult—which is what Gnostics supposedly were. If the Fathers had been like them, they would simply have produced another obscure theological system, which would have been equally opaque to outsiders. But they did not do this. Instead, they appealed to the clarity, the openness and the recognized antiquity of the Scriptures as the best proof that what the so-called Gnostics were teaching was not only wrong; it was historically impossible.

Far from spurring the orthodox to construct a competing theological system, the Gnostics appear to have retarded the development of systematic theology by forcing the church fathers to restrict their defense to an appeal to the precise wording of the biblical texts alone.<sup>12</sup> Any attempt to move beyond the apostolic writings was resisted as an illegitimate departure from the deposit of divine revelation, and even in the fourth century, when it was increasingly necessary

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<sup>10</sup>H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations Between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: Mowbray, 1954).

<sup>11</sup>Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM, 1972).

<sup>12</sup>“Scripture alone” in this sense does not mean exactly the same thing as the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. Protestants do not normally object to systematic theology; they merely expect it to be grounded in scriptural evidence and principles.

to devise theological terminology capable of defeating Arius and his followers, resistance to this was still very strong, for the same reason. It ought to be equally obvious (though apparently it is not) that the church before the time of Constantine had no means of relegating its dissidents to a marginal role. Had they been as numerous as Bauer claimed, they could not have been dislodged from the cities in which they were preaching, and even if they could have been excluded from the church, there would have been no way of preventing them from starting their own worshipping communities, which is what most of them did, or any way of hindering the growth of these breakaway movements.

Had the Gnostics been really influential, it is hard to see why the Roman authorities, who were trying to persecute and extirpate the church, did not take advantage of the situation by trying to play one group off against the other. They could presumably have split the church into a hundred warring parties if they had wanted to, but nothing like that ever happened. Instead, by the time the Arian controversy began in 318, Basil, Valentinus, Hermogenes and Marcion were to all intents and purposes forgotten. The survival of their ideas in the sands of Upper Egypt can be explained by a number of other factors, remoteness being one of them.<sup>13</sup> Modern discoveries have given us a more objective picture of what these groups were like, but they have not overturned the traditional picture of an essentially orthodox church that was called to combat new and alien heresies in its midst. We can therefore state with complete confidence that the writings of the classical church fathers remain primary witnesses for what the early church believed and taught and that the underpinning they provide for the first article of the Nicene Creed represents the authentic tradition of Christian teaching, not a late and somewhat totalitarian deviation from it. Bauer's thesis and its variants will doubtless continue to circulate, but students of early Christian doctrine do not have to worry that the magisterial church fathers are unrepresentative of the beliefs of the mainstream Christian communities in ancient times.

### **The Selections in This Volume**

The patristic texts chosen for inclusion in the present volume have been selected primarily because of the light that they shed on the first article of the creed and the doctrines that it contains. It will be obvious that before the fourth century, none of the writers concerned was commenting on the creed as such, though the doctrine of the first article is sufficiently fundamental and universal that it is not difficult to find expositions of its themes that are as valuable as if they were commentaries on the actual text. It is also true that the Fathers often alluded to these doctrines in passing, when their main concern was to discuss something else, and in these cases it has been necessary to edit out the extraneous material, unless it sheds some particular light on the concerns of the first article.

This problem is particularly delicate when it comes to trinitarian texts, many of which are pri-

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<sup>13</sup>It is just as likely that the Nag Hammadi community represented a group that had gone off to the country to seek obscurity as that it was a lingering survival of what had previously been a majority view in the Egyptian church. We simply do not know.

marily concerned to prove the divinity of the Son or the Holy Spirit or both. In cases where the role of the Father is highlighted in some particular way that deserves to be recorded, the text has been included here, but readers will have to supplement such examples with material in the other volumes in this series if they wish to have a complete picture of the patristic doctrine of the Trinity. Likewise, it would have been very easy to include long portions of patristic writings about creation, which some of the Fathers examined in great detail, but here too a line had to be drawn, and it is the scope of the first article of the creed that has determined the parameters of what would be included. The article is concerned primarily with the identity of the Creator, not with the mechanics of the creation, with the result that in this volume only those texts that emphasize or explain the work of God have been consistently selected, although there is also a sampling of the other kind of texts, particularly when they illuminate some aspect of the divine plan.

Care has also been taken to achieve a balance in the use of the available source material. Often the Fathers copied one another or repeated themselves in much the same terms, and unless a particular passage adds its own special twist to the doctrine, there seemed to be little justification for including multiple quotations that are effectively the same. In such cases, the more ancient sources have generally been preferred, and it has been assumed that later writers merely followed the tradition. However, when it can be shown that a later author contested or altered earlier opinions, care has been taken to include this as well. It is therefore possible to follow the course of theological development over time without having to produce a comprehensive collection of every relevant text.

Quotations have been arranged in broadly chronological order within given thematic categories. This means that every quotation within each category needs to be looked at in order to get a complete picture and that similar topics within a particular theme are not grouped together if they are attested, as most of them are, in different centuries. The indexes should be of help here and ought to be consulted by anyone trying to do a systematic search for a particular topic, whether it is a designated theme or not. It must also be remembered that in the ancient world, contemporaries or near contemporaries seldom knew of each other's work and were therefore not dependent on one another. This is less true of the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity was a public religion and men like the Cappadocian fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) clearly did work together. Somewhat later, even strangers like Augustine and Jerome corresponded with each other and followed what they were doing. But this situation can only rarely be projected back into the time of persecution, so that even prominent writers, like Tertullian and Origen, lived and worked in complete ignorance of each other. It is therefore all the more remarkable to observe the extent to which they agree with one another and demonstrate that the communion of saints was an intellectual as well as a physical and a spiritual reality.

Most of the material dating from the age of persecution is now available in English translation, and in some cases there are multiple versions to choose from. In this volume, the texts have been freshly translated from the original languages, but with some attention being paid to the

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vocabulary and style of the more important existing translations, particularly where technical theological terminology is concerned. The fact that the series known as the Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF) is still the most commonly used one has been acknowledged in the footnotes, but that series has been used in the translations themselves only to the extent that it has stood the test of scholarship and time. Otherwise it has been altered or replaced by more satisfactory modern renderings.

The post-Nicene sources are both more extensive than the earlier ones and less fully translated into English. To some extent the two series known as the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) still provide a classic starting point for most students, and when a text has been translated in that series, reference to it has been given here, whether it has been used in preparing this edition or not. Other existing translations have also been consulted, but in every case the translation used here has come first and foremost from the original or, where the original is missing, the extant Latin text. These can mostly be found in J.-P. Migne's classic *Patrologia Graeca* and *Patrologia Latina*, which remains the standard source for the Fathers as a whole and to which reference is invariably given, for much the same reason as applies to the ANF and the NPNF. Where there are more reliable, critical editions these have been used instead, and the translations have been modified accordingly. Among modern English translations, the Fathers of the Church series (Catholic University of America Press), Ancient Christian Writers (Paulist), Cistercian Studies Series (Cistercian), Message of the Fathers of the Church (Michael Glazier, Liturgical Press), and Texts and Studies (Cambridge) may be singled out for special mention. As for modern critical editions of patristic texts, the series *Sources Chrétiennes*, *Corpus Christianorum*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latino-rum*, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*, *Patrologia Orientalis*, *Patrologia Syriaca*, *Bibliotheca Patristica*, *Les Pères dans la foi*, *Collana de Testi Patristici*, *Lecture Cristiane Delle Origini*, *Lecture Cristiane del Primo Millennio*, *Cultura Christiana Antica*, *Bibliotheca de Patristica*, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and the *Cetedoc* series, which offers in digital form the volumes of *Corpus Christianorum*, are all significant. The last of these has been particularly important in establishing the text of many of the selections translated here.

In conclusion, it ought to be said that the choice of selections for this volume has been guided throughout by the desire to find texts that will not only convey the authentic flavor of the early church's beliefs but also provide usable material for the spiritual growth of modern readers. This volume is one of a series that is primarily intended to foster the edification of Christian believers, even as it may also provide valuable assistance to scholars and others who are less concerned with that aspect. In saying this, we are merely following the Fathers, whose only concern in writing was to glorify God and make known his salvation in Jesus Christ. If this book contributes to that aim, it will have served its purpose well and brought honor to those whose memory and teaching it seeks to preserve and communicate afresh to a new generation.