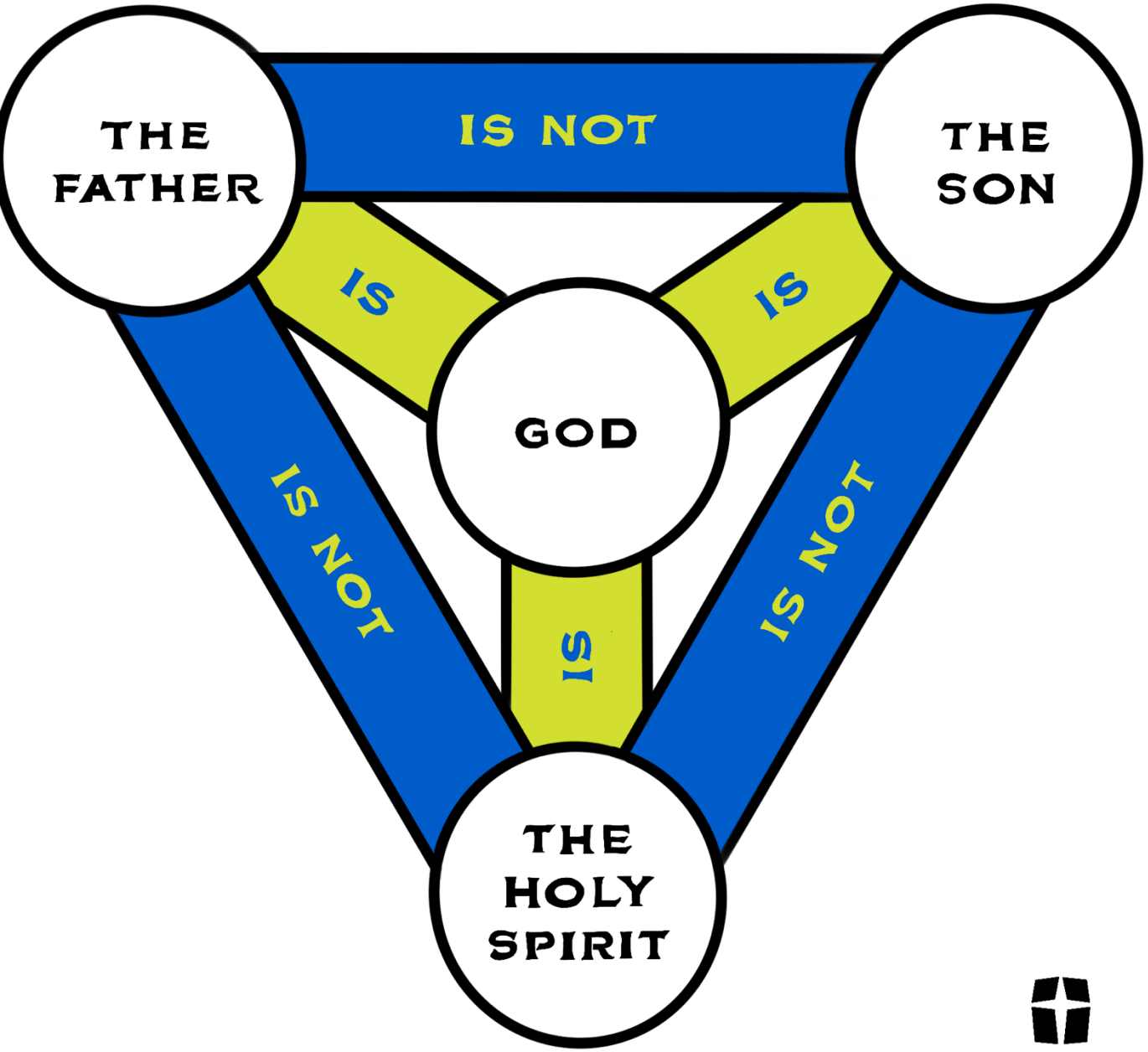


The Trinity and the Pursuit of Doctrinal Unity

The Nicene Creed of AD 325: Its Background and Failure

John 1:1–2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:1–2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was ***with God***, and ***the Word was God***. He was in the beginning with God.

- The Son of God ***is*** God
- The Son of God ***the Son of God the Father***

The Heart of a Fourth-Century Controversy

- Does the Word—the Son of God, Jesus Christ—have the **same** nature as God the Father? Or only a **similar** nature?
- Is he ***homoousias***—same nature? Or is he ***homoiousias***—similar nature?

North Central Asia Minor



BLACK SEA

Amastris

Heraclea

PAPHL

Byzantium

Chalcedon

Nicomedia

Prusias ad Hypium

BITHYNIA

Nicea

Ancyra

Dorylaeum

Germa

GALA

Pessinus

ASIA

Amorion

Synnada



© 2013 FamilySearch

1. The Historical Pursuit of Doctrinal Unity

The Council of Nicaea

"Prior to Nicaea, church councils had only been local or provincial in scope. Nicaea was the first empire-wide gathering, featuring representatives from diverse parts of the Roman Empire and the growing church."

Rachel Ciano, "The History of the Nicene Creed," in The Nicene Creed: The Nature of Christian Unity and the Meaning of Gospel Words.

The Teaching of Arius of Alexandria

The Son is a creature

Before the Son was begotten, he did not exist

The Son is not co-everlasting with the Father

Reasoning of Arius

Logically, fathers beget sons and are older than their sons.

Therefore, the Son of God is “younger” than God the Father.

Motivation of Arius

Spiritually, salvation was about self-improvement toward becoming like God.

The Son became God through self-improvement.

Therefore, the Son is an example of how to earn our salvation.

Theological Parties at Nicaea

The pro-Arian Party (*homoiousias*)

The anti-Arian Party (*homoousias*)

The disinterested Party

Theological Parties at Nicaea

The disinterested Party

- Rejected the idea that Jesus was created. Therefore, they affirmed that the Son was begotten of the Father before all time (eternal generation)
- Rejected the idea that Jesus had the same nature as the Father, only a similar nature.
- Therefore, in one sense they affirmed Arius's "similar nature" position.

The Immediate Result of the Council

"The council decided they were against Arianism, but they had more difficulty deciding what they were for on this theological question. Many bishops had hesitations because they did not see the term *homoousios* in the Bible, but [Emperor] Constantine exerted pressure which resulted in all but two council members signing off on [the Creed of Nicaea]. . . .

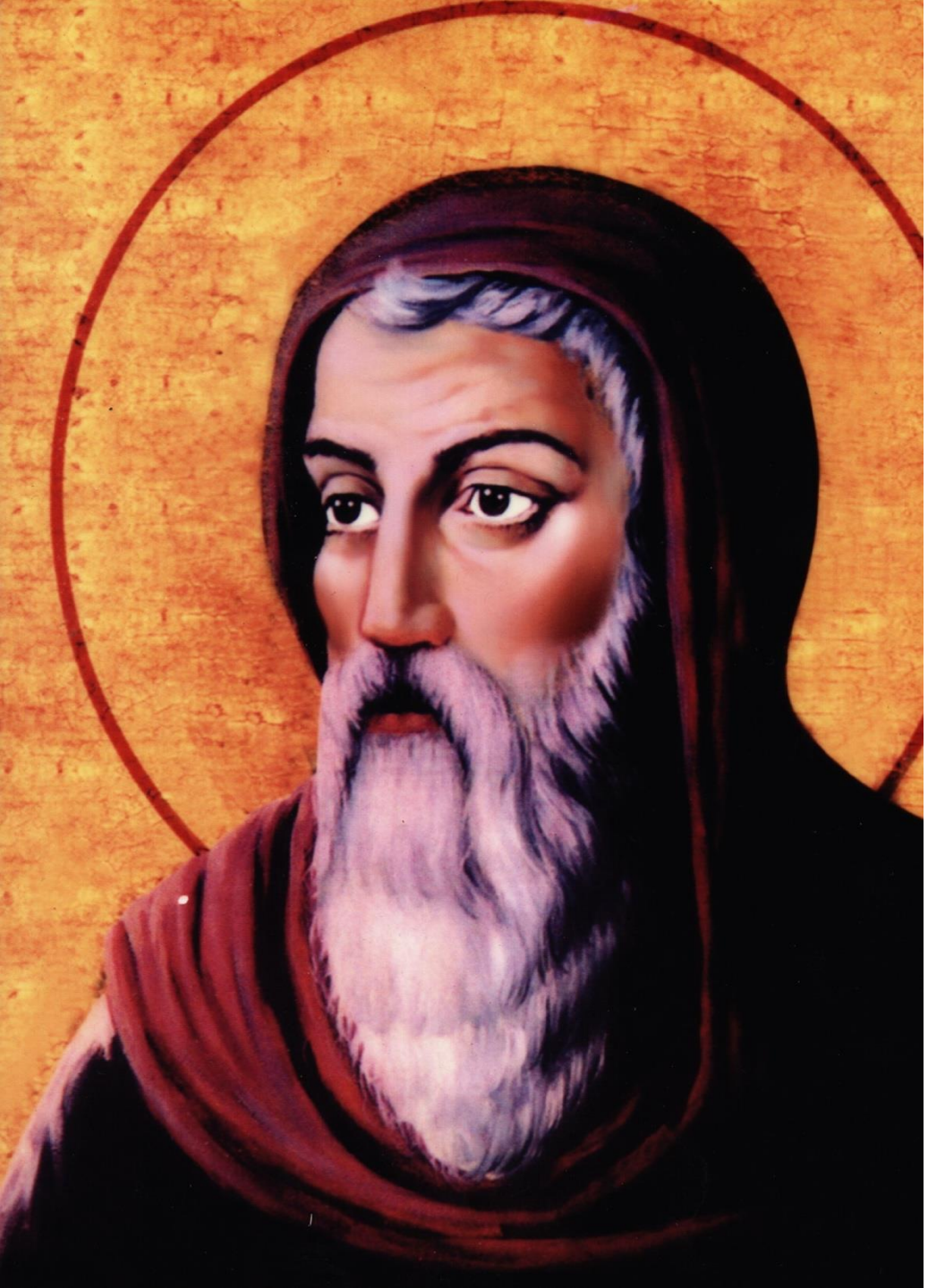
The Immediate Result of the Council

“. . . This exerted pressure, however, created a forced unity, and there was not necessarily a shared agreement on the meaning of the words chosen.”

— Ciano, “The History of the Nicene Creed”

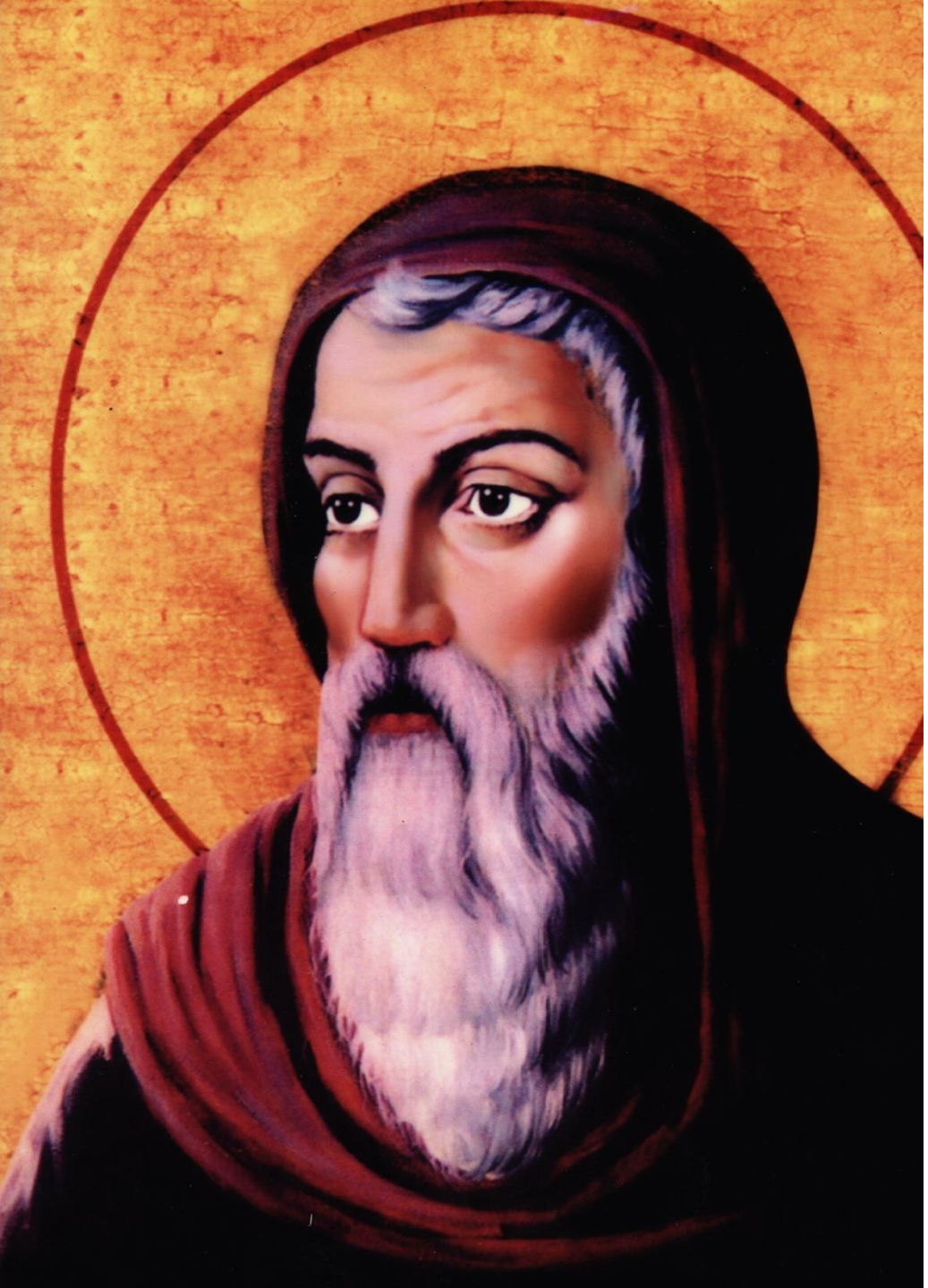
The Unintended Consequences of the Council

"The outcome of the council was that there was not inherent agreement on the words and therefore theological ideas used in the creed" because of the pressure of forced unity. — Ciano, "The History of the Nicene Creed"



Clarifying the Confusion of the Nicene Creed

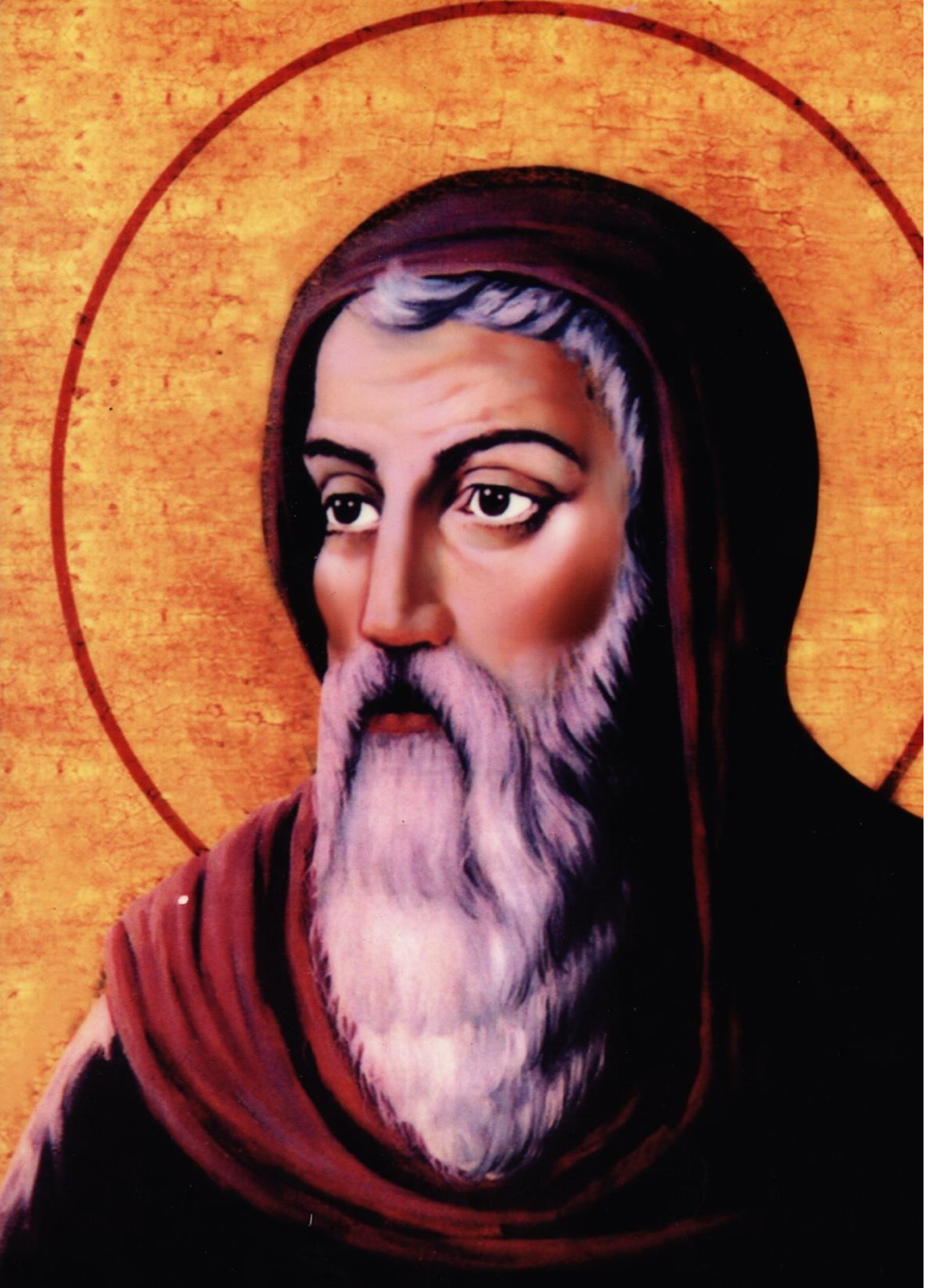
Athanasius (296–373)



Clarifying the Confusion of the Nicene Creed

Athanasius (296–373)

Bishop of Alexandria after the Council of Nicaea, led a minority of “pro-Nicenes” against the prevailing Arianism.



Clarifying the Confusion of the Nicene Creed

Athanasius (296–373)

Bishop of Alexandria after the Council of Nicaea, led a minority of “pro-Nicenes” against the prevailing Arianism.

He contended that salvation is impossible if Jesus was created because of the nature of our sin and the requirement of divine forgiveness.

Clarifying the Confusion of the Nicene Creed

The Cappadocian Fathers:

- Basil of Caesarea
- Gregory of Nyssa
- Gregory of Nazianzus







Clarifying the Confusion of the Nicene Creed

The Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus

Explained the clear teaching of Scripture about the doctrine of the Trinity.



Clarifying the Confusion of the Nicene Creed

The Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus

Explained the clear teaching of Scripture about the doctrine of the Trinity.

They provided clarity about why *homoousias* was the right term to use to describe God's nature.







The Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene Creed (381 [revision in *italics*])

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of *heaven and earth*, *and of* all things visible and invisible;

The Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene Creed (381 [revision in *italics*])

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of *heaven and earth*, *and of* all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds*, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

The Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene Creed (381 [revision in *italics*])

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of *heaven and earth*, *and of* all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds*, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down *from heaven*, and was incarnate *by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man; he *was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and* suffered, *and was buried*, and the third day he rose again, *according to the Scriptures*, and ascended into heaven, *and sits on the right hand of the Father*; from thence he shall come *again*, *with glory*, to judge the quick and the dead; *whose kingdom shall have no end;*

The Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene Creed (381 [revision in *italics*])

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of *heaven and earth*, *and of* all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds*, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down *from heaven*, and was incarnate *by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man; he *was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and* suffered, *and was buried*, and the third day he rose again, *according to the Scriptures*, and ascended into heaven, *and sits on the right hand of the Father*; from thence he shall come *again*, *with glory*, to judge the quick and the dead; *whose kingdom shall have no end;*

And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets;*

The Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene Creed (381 [revision in *italics*])

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of *heaven and earth*, *and of* all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds*, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down *from heaven*, and was incarnate *by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man; he *was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and* suffered, *and was buried*, and the third day he rose again, *according to the Scriptures*, and ascended into heaven, *and sits on the right hand of the Father*; from thence he shall come *again*, *with glory*, to judge the quick and the dead; *whose kingdom shall have no end;*

And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets;*

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Summary Teaching of the Creed on the Nature of God

God is one “what” (nature) subsisting/existing in three “whos” (persons).

The Summary Teaching of the Creed on the Nature of God

God is one "what" (nature) subsisting/existing in three "whos" (persons)

The one "what" is the divine nature or essence that is possessed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit simultaneously, eternally,

The Summary Teaching of the Creed on the Nature of God

God is one “what” (nature) subsisting/existing in three “whos” (persons).

The one “what” is the divine nature or essence that is possessed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit simultaneously, eternally, without differentiation or alternation.

The three “whos” reflect the reality that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are personally distinct from one another.

The Summary Teaching of the Creed on the Deity of Christ

The Son is eternally begotten of the Father—this is what distinguishes him as the Son of the Father.

However, the Son is not begotten like our fathers begat us. He is eternally begotten. This is the doctrine of eternal generation.

The Summary Teaching of the Creed on Salvation

The Son became incarnate—God in human flesh—and accomplished salvation for us through his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

2. The Biblical Way to Doctrinal Unity

Unity is an Already Experienced Spiritual Reality

John 17:20–23

Congregational Unity is Cultivated by Attention to the Implications of the Gospel and Incarnation

1 Corinthians 1:10, 13

Philippians 2:2–5

Doctrinal Unity is Cultivated by Shepherds Submitting to the Intended Meaning of Scripture

Ephesians 4:11–13

2 Timothy 2:15

Titus 1:9–11

Forced Unity is a Paper-thin Unity that Does Not Last

The unity gained by the Council of Nicaea didn't last long because they did not know what they were *for*.

They did not have clarity about why *homoousias* was the right term to use about the divine nature of the Son of God.

Four Necessities for Cultivating and Strengthening Doctrinal Unity

Four Necessities for Cultivating and Strengthening Doctrinal Unity

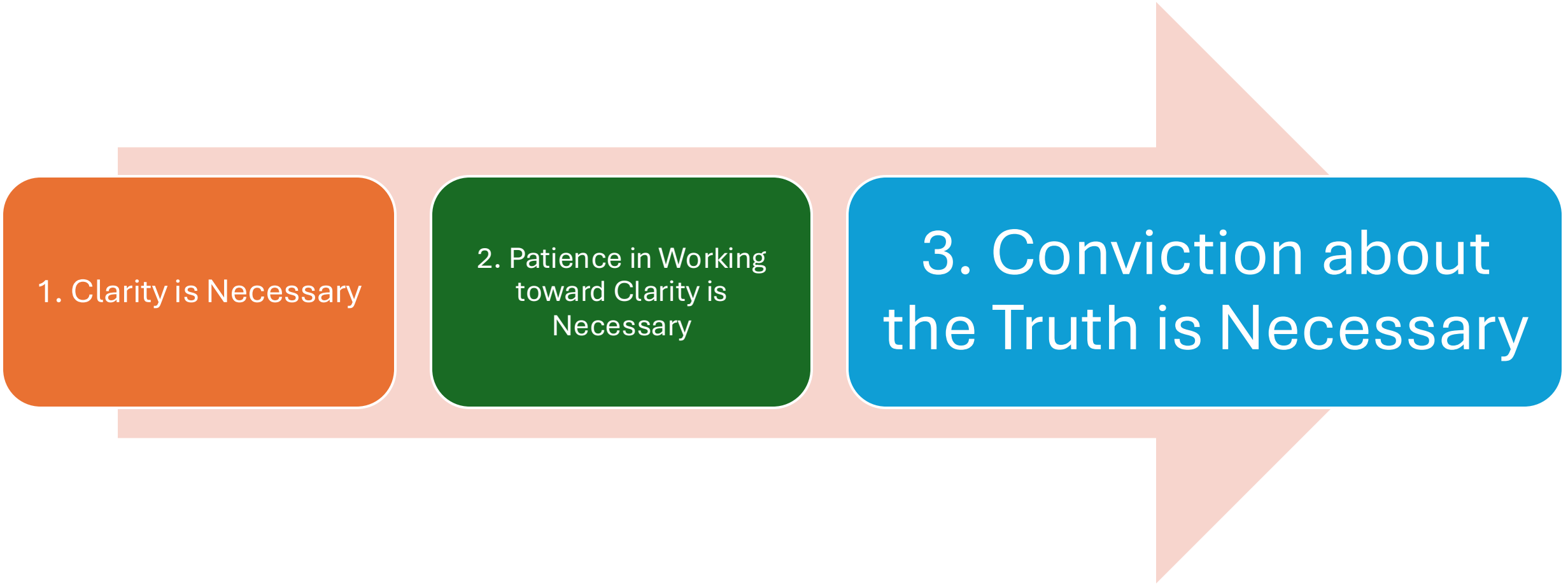
1. Clarity is Necessary

Four Necessities for Cultivating and Strengthening Doctrinal Unity

1. Clarity is Necessary

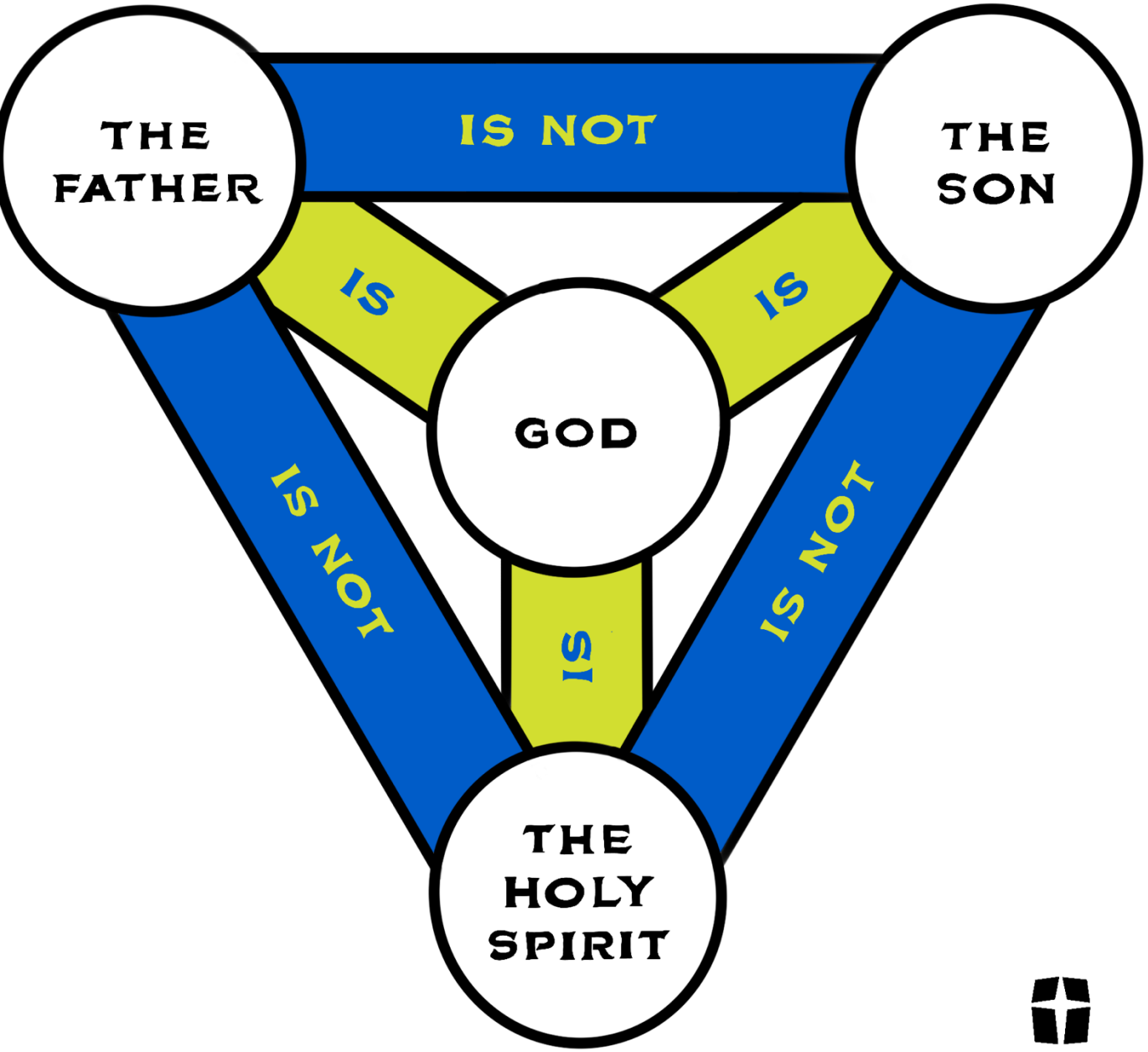
2. Patience in Working toward Clarity is Necessary

Four Necessities for Cultivating and Strengthening Doctrinal Unity



Four Necessities for Cultivating and Strengthening Doctrinal Unity





The Trinity and the Pursuit of Doctrinal Unity

The Nicene Creed of AD 325: Its Background and Failure