

OpenTheo

Nicene Orthodoxy with Blair Smith

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Kevin welcomes his good friend—neighbor, church colleague, and seminary colleague (soon to be boss!)—Blair Smith to the podcast. As a systematic theology professor, Blair’s expertise is on Trinitarian theology, in particular in the crucial fourth and fifth centuries. Listen in as Kevin and Blair look at the theology and the history behind the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381). Yes, there are a lot of names and concepts flying around in the podcast studio with this one, but for good reason. What could be more important than the doctrine of the Trinity, than knowing who God is?

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BOOKS & EVERYTHING

The Nicene Creed

Reformed Confessionalism

One God Almighty: The Biblical Doctrine of the Triune God

Our Father in Heaven: Rediscovering and Embracing the Fatherhood of God

CROSSWAY | The Nicene Creed

DESIRING GOD | What's The Difference?

GREENVILLE SEMINARY | Pastoral Theology

WESTMINSTER SEMINARY | Biblical Languages

Transcript

This episode of Life and Books and Everything is brought to you by Crossway, publisher of my new book, which I'm mentioning here in this episode since we're talking about the Nicene Creed and the Council of Nicaea from 325. My book aptly titled, The Nicene Creed. No, I did not write the Nicene Creed, but it is a book on the Nicene Creed.

What you need to know about the most important part of this book is that you need to know about the most important part of this book. This is the most important creed ever written. This book is a part of the foundational tools of our faith series.

People may not have realized, but I've written three books with Crossway, 10 Commandments, Lord's Prayer. Originally, it was going to be the Apostles Creed. That would make sense as the third of those foundational catechetical tools, but with this anniversary switched from the Apostles Creed to the Nicene Creed.

It's not long, it's fewer than 100 pages, and hopefully it can be a helpful introduction for you, for small group, for people in your church. Pick up a copy of the Nicene Creed, wherever books are sold, or visit crossway.org plus. Sign up for an account.

Learn how you can get 30% off. Also, want to mention Desiring God? Greatful for their support of LBE. They have released a new content series on biblical manhood and womanhood titled, What's the Difference? In eight accessible articles, the teachers at DG, along with some guest contributors, aimed to explain and celebrate the differences between men and women in the

church and in society.

You think about Genesis 1, God made us in his image. That's the first important thing. The second important thing, he made us male and female.

If you erase male and female, you erase God's plan for showing his image and what he does and what he reveals to us in Genesis. So this is crucially important, especially in our day. Head over to [desiring God.org slash themes](http://desiringgod.org/themes) to find this theme.

What's the difference and learn from trusted teachers at Desiring God? Greetings and salutations. Welcome to life and books and everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor at Christ Kevin Church in Matthews, North Carolina.

I should also mention, especially for this podcast, that I also teach systematic theology at Reform Theological Seminary in Charlotte. So the real ST Professor at Charlotte is my guest here today, Dr. Blair Smith, who is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology. We should also say our friend and colleague James Anderson also teaches, but he does apologetics and ethics stuff.

Also, Chad Van Dixford now teaches some ST classes, but Blair does most of the ST RTS Charlotte. He's also Academic Dean for RTS Dallas and Houston, or Dane Minister or TE in the PCA. Importantly, he is on staff part time at Christ Covenant overseeing our adult Sunday school, our adult education.

He's had that role in other churches. He does a great job. And he is effective June 1st, President of Reform Theological Seminary in Charlotte.

So just less than two months, a little over a month before your benevolent reign of dictatorial largesse begins. So, yeah, congratulations on that. Dr. Krueger is moving away from administration.

He's going to stay on with RTS and still teach some at RTS Charlotte and be a Chancellor's Professor teaching at different campuses focused to on some of his research on sexual criticism, can and stuff, which Mike is really, really good at. So you're starting June. What is, are you going to lose some of these other jobs, Blair? How are you doing all of these things? And what, how are you gearing up for this big transition in your life? Yeah, thank you, Kevin.

Thank you for having me on as well. Long time listener, first time interviewee interviewee and long time friend. That's right.

Well, you're already in the PCA. We came into the Great Lakes Presbyterian at the same meeting. That's right.

That's what we did. And I beat you here to Charlotte by maybe a few months or a year. Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. So for all listening, please pray for me in these upcoming transition. I will be giving up beating in Texas.

So I'll have less tacos and less water burger, I suppose. I always enjoyed my culinary exploits when I traveled to Texas for being dean there. So I'll be shedding that.

I'll still be teaching 60 Mac theology here in Charlotte, but a little less of it in order to have some more room in my schedule for for the responsibilities of being president. But I do hope that I will be able to continue to serve in the church at Christ covenants with great joy of mine to be able to serve in that role among the saints that are so dear there. Yeah.

Well, Blair's whole family is wonderful to have around and very involved. Tell us a little bit about Lisa and the kids and back into that maybe by talking about how you became a Christian and how you and Lisa met. Yeah.

So Lisa is my my wife. We've been married since 2003. We have six children.

We have four that are clustered together in 19 year old daughter Ellie, who's a freshman at Grove City College. A 17 year old son, our second Douglas who's a junior at Covenant Day School along with the young kids. Lucy is a freshman there and Graham is a seventh grader there.

So they are all spaced out about two years and we have this 10 year gap same marriage where we have two more. We got crazy and had these two more. We have a three year old named Mary.

She'll be four as she will remind you in June and then we have Christopher who's about 20 months and they bring a lot of life and joy to the household. It's especially fun to see our older kids enjoy and love on the younger kids and help take care of them. Lisa and I, as I mentioned, been married since 2003.

We met while I was in seminary. I attended actually RTS Charlotte myself back in graduating 2003 and she was in college at the time at Ohio State. We met because my grandparent, let's be very clear about the, maybe we can add that to RTS.

The reformed theological seminary. Can I add an error of superiority? Yeah, she was a student there at the time. We met because my grandparents and her parents helped plant a church together back in Perrysburg, Ohio.

I'm from Ohio. I'm a native Toledo, Ohio. Perrysburg is a suburb and they were refugees from the main line.

My grandparents from the PCUSA and they helped plant an EPC church there in Perrysburg, which has recently become a PCA church, pastored by one of our graduates here in Charlotte. So we met through those common connections. I'm older.

She will remind you of that, about four and a half years older, but that's how we met. As far as me becoming a Christian, I have the great privilege of growing up in a Christian household. My parents divorced when I was one, but my mother, who I primarily grew up with, was faithful in the church.

Many in the church were faithful for caring for me. So I heard the gospel very early on, both in Bible studies we were in and in our church. I never knew a day where I did not know Christ and trust him.

Certainly there have been ups and downs since when I was young, but at a crucial age there, I did pray with my mom to trust Christ. And through my high school years and college years, some ups and downs, but God is faithful to me, strengthened my faith, especially late in college through some service and conversations with some fellow students. Growing my faith a lot, graduated college when it came back to Ohio and worked in mutual funds for a few years and attended a theology conference in northwest Ohio that was a real catalyst in my growth.

I wasn't much of a reader growing up. I know most people in my position probably were, but I read Sports Illustrated and that was about it. I was not much of a reader either growing up.

So be some encouragement. I read only what was assigned to me. I mean, I did well in school, but I was not the kid who always had a book in front of until, yeah, really until college.

Yeah, I'm very, very similar and it looks like someone my kids might be the same. Well, hopefully all of my kids are the same. Yeah.

Well, awesome. And to being readers. But yeah, I started reading my Bible a lot first and foremost, but then theology books and wanted to grow, grow, grow.

And so I came to seminary two years out of college, not knowing exactly how God would use it in my life. I just know I wanted to know him more and grow in my understanding of the Bible and theology. So it's a little bit of my background.

You have four degrees and I don't know if there's anyone on the planet that has degrees from all four of these schools. Yes, especially two of them, but just just give us the quick rundown from college up to your doctoral work. Yeah, my undergrad is from a famous or infamous school, depending on your perspective in Greenville, South Carolina, Bob Jones University.

I studied social studies and marketing management there and ended up, we should say it's become much more friendly. Yes. I think I don't want anyone in trouble.

I think friendly or to reform theology. Yes, that's correct. When I was there, there were always kind of suspicions of who might be too reformed for the institutions liking, but they have become more open to a biblically faithful reform world that is for certain.

And a number of my fellow classmates there ended up going to places like RTS Charlotte. And

so my own growth, even though I come from a Presbyterian background and I was baptized in the PCUSA, my growth and reform faith really was in my last two years at Bob Jones, reading things like modern Reformation and Charles Hodge. So yeah, that's my undergraduate degree.

And then I went to seminary, as I already mentioned here, to reform confessional seminary RTS Charlotte. And then to add the book and on the other, maybe extreme from my THM, I did that at Harvard Divinity School. And I studied early church, early Christian theology languages, but certainly in a context that is quite progressive and liberal, very different than my undergrad.

And so they counterbalance one another in interesting ways. And then for my PhD work, I, my degrees from Durham University, which is in England, and we were going to move there for me to pursue those studies when I began them full time, but my advisor, a scholar named Lewis Ayers, had a fellowship at Notre Dame. And so I ended up doing my residency, not in Durham, but at Notre Dame, of course a famous Catholic institution.

So my degrees are representative of a lot of different angles. What's Lewis, I've asked you before, what's Lewis Ayers religious commitment? Lewis is an Orthodox Roman Catholic faithful. He grew up Methodist.

He so joined for a while in the Anglican community, and I think was even considering being a priest. But during his PhD studies, which he did under Rowan Williams at Oxford, he converted to Roman Catholicism. So he's a lay theologian in the Roman Catholic Church.

So this is going to tie into our topic today, which is to talk in and around the Council of Nicaea, and the Nicene Creed, and Nicene Theology. I trust everyone knows by now. It is the 1700 year anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 325.

And as we'll talk about what we know as the Nicene Creed began there, but substantially revised, though the Council of Constantinople in 381, certain they explicitly considered what they were doing to be the same creed that was adopted, though it was augmented, not changed in its theological direction, but augmented. So we want to talk about the Nicene Creed. I'll just, we'll get to your work and some of the things you're working on, Blair, and your expertise in the fourth and fifth century, just to mention from Crossway.

I have this little book, and when I mean little, I'm not being falsely humble. It is very little. It's about 90 pages on the Nicene Creed, grew out of four sermons that I did here on Sunday evening, a year or so, a year and a half ago, on the Nicene Creed.

So Kevin Deung, the Nicene Creed, just published by Crossway if you want. I'm sure there's lots of things coming out this year and came out last year, and certainly more comprehensive things, but if you just want a quick primer with some depth, you can look at that book, the Nicene Creed. But tell us, Blair, what was your work with Lewis Ayers? What was the focus of your dissertation? Yeah, so when I was a student here at RTS Charlotte, I studied under Dr. Douglas Kelly, also Harold Oj Brown, and they really inspired me in interest in historical

theology, and with Dr. Kelly, especially the early church.

So I took all of these electives when I was in seminary on Trinitarian theology, theatristic theology, really focusing in on reading the fathers, and moved on from doing that during my MDiv to do my THM, as I mentioned earlier, focused on the early church, and I wrote a thesis on Athanasius, looking at the Holy Spirit in redemption. But as I was doing my THM work, getting deeper into reading the primary sources of the fathers, I became very interested in Trinitarian theology generally, but a little more specifically on the fatherhood of God within the Trinity. So as I went on to do my doctoral work, I studied with Professor Ayers, looking at the fatherhood of God, and what we call pronicene Trinitarian theology.

So when scholarship pronicene just means those theologians who are trying to write their theology reflective of the theology at Nicaea, and not going against the grain, but pro in favor of the theology of Nicaea. And so I did the fatherhood of God, and I did it through looking at four key theologians. One, Athanasius, two, Hilary of Portière, who was a Western Latin theologian, and then two of the Capidotian fathers, Gregory of Nazianzis and Basel of Caesarea.

So I'm going to make up sort of the four core chapters of my dissertation along with an introduction and conclusion on this topic of the fatherhood of God within the Trinity. All right, I want to come back to some of that. So you have a few, I mean several different things coming out, a book by PNR with PNR, a book with Lexum, and a book with Crossway.

And they're all touching in some ways, but there's, you know, three different books for sure. But tell us about these books when we can expect them and what you've been writing. Yeah, the one that'll come out first is from PNR, Presbyterian Reform Publishing.

And that'll come out in June. It's called Reform Confessionalism. It's in a series edited by our mutual friend Jason Elopoulos called Blessings of the Faith.

And it's got a lot of helpful volumes and some bread and butter topics within the church like prayer and worship and church membership expository preaching these kinds of topics. Well, Jason reached out to me and asked me to do one. And how does Confessionalism operate in a healthy way in the church? Often we think of Confessionalism we might think in negative terms about how it helps us steer away from heresy.

And that is a good function of Confessionalism guarding against false teaching. But my book looks especially at some of the more positive functions in the disciple, but also in the life of the church of reformed Confessionalism. And that modifier reformed is important because, of course, a lot of Christians are creedal and confessional on one level, but a reformed understanding of Confessionalism, which still believes in a relative authority for the creeds and confessions in the church.

But those are subordinate to the authority of scripture. So I try to articulate that relationship in that book. It's not a very large book.

I think it'll come out, you know, about 144 pages, very much written to be read by lay people in the church. Hopefully helpful, maybe a new membership classes and that'll be out right before general assemblies meet in June. My dissertation, which has already been mentioned recently got word it will be published by T&T Clark.

Bloom to Barry, it's in a series called studies and systematic theology. I updated that dissertation and added a chapter in order to fit within that series, bringing the fatherhood of God conversation forward from the fourth century in the early church into some of the questions and concerns that are in systematic theology. Today, and some of the opportunities that will be there for reflecting on the father in the Trinity that I could see, hopefully, depending on the editorial process coming out next year, 2026.

And then, yes, I'm very close with another fatherhood book with cross way. This will also be looking at the fatherhood of God. Where's my dissertation is very focused on the Trinity and as a more academic tone.

This will be written sort of for lay people anywhere between educated lay person in those that are in seminary and I'll be looking at the fatherhood of God, not just within the Trinity, but looking at where we find the fatherhood of God in scripture and creation and covenants, covenant, a whole series of topics, including sort of contemporary questions about the fatherhood of God and that kind of language. So that word willing will be coming out next year sometime as well. And then the Lexum book, Lexum's been doing a wonderful series called we believe it's patterned after the various lines of the Nicene Creed.

And some of those volumes are already out, Brandon Crow, who I think you've had on LBE. He did one on Christology. Our colleague, John Fesco has one coming out on the Holy Spirit.

I'm writing one for that series on the Trinity. And that will be out. I don't know next year or the year after.

A lot of stuff coming out from the Blair Smith Avalanche. I want to get into the history of the Nicene Creed, probably if people clicked on this and are watching it or listening to it with the title Nicene Creed in there that you probably have heard of it, but you may not know the history. I want to get to that in a moment, but while you're talking about the fatherhood of God, sort of a selfish question to ask of you.

I'm speaking May 1 and 2 at the Crato Conference in DC, which is put on by Matthew Barrett and Crato and also with Sola, which is my court and white horse in folks. And I'm looking forward to it. And they assigned me the line from the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth of all things visible and invisible. Familiar language to us as Christians. It's easy to think that the real guts of the Nicene Creed doesn't really start until after that.

That's sort of what everyone knows. Everyone gets, yep, God the Father, that wasn't a debate,

visible and invisible. And it's true.

It wasn't the same kind of controversy. But here, help me out. What should I know and others about the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the Nicene Creed? Because we usually think of it as about the Son and then at Constantinople, it adds some significant language about the Holy Spirit.

But we tend to think, yeah, the Fatherhood of God, that's just all assumed. But there's important doctrinal freight here too. What should we notice? Yeah, the first thing that's really interesting about the Father in the Trinity is actually not in relation to the Son.

That's very important. Get to that in a second. But the whole opening of it, of course, is the Father in creation.

And there's a lot of background conversation about God's relationship to the world in theology leading up to the fourth century. And some of that's philosophical noise in the background of their needing to be sort of mediating authorities between God and his relationship to the world that you have in versions of Platonic philosophy, but also in a heretical group that the Church did great battle with Gnosticism. And one of the early Church Fathers prior to Nicaea that's very important is Irenaeus of Lyon.

And one of the things that he made very clear in his writings is God's direct relationship with the world through creation. And what is announced there at the very beginning of the Nicene Creed is the Father's sort of direct relation to the world through being the one who creates. That's not to say the Son and the Spirit are also creator, but scripture often appropriates creation to the Father.

And he is, of course, the source of the Son and the Spirit within the Trinity. Also, we reflect on him as source of all things that exist of the world itself. But what the Nicene Creed immediately announces there is that God doesn't use other things in order to relate to the world.

There's not mediating authorities and powers, but God himself is directly related to the world. This is something I mentioned Irenaeus, but also Athanasius makes great emphasis about. And the way that this relates to later issues, sort of downstream issues, is there's sort of a great ontological divide in all of existence, right? And so when we think about the Son, where does he fall in that ontological divide? Is he a creature? And so, therefore, he's more like us than he is like God, even if he might be a greater us in some way.

Or is he on this other side of the ontological divide, in which case he's fully divine, because there's not levels of divinity as the Nicene Creed understands it anyway. You're either God or your creature. You're either infinite or you're finite.

You're either independent or you're dependent. And that line is right there at the beginning in those opening lines. And that might be missed, because like you said, we just kind of roll through that.

And then we get to what seems to be of great controversy in that second great paragraph of the Nicene Creed. So is Maui from the Moana movie, sort of a later Gnostic, half joking, but he's a demigod. And I'm just bringing it to a place that folks understand, yes, these are ancient esoteric, but they're also common throughout the centuries.

And you put it really well Blair. And Nicene Creed is telling us what the Bible tells us. There's two ontological categories, God and not God, God and Creator, or Creator in creation.

There's no levels of eons or dimmy urges or demigods. It sounds silly to us until we realize, oh, those kinds of ideas are still out there. You mentioned Irenaeus, Irenaeus had the famous line that the word in the Spirit were the right and the left hand of the Father in creation.

So that's him saying, just what you said, no other mediating agencies outside of the Triune God. How prevalent are these ideas today? Or you can go back in history, how long did it take for the church to triumph over some of these Gnostic ideas? And we want to be careful. It wasn't like, you know, they needed to get to Nicene and they needed to decide, oh, Gnosticism, a really good thing.

No, Irenaeus was full blazing guns on that a century earlier, but it lingered for a long time. Yeah, definitely lingered, whether it was in Gnostic thought or some sort of hierarchy of being that you find in versions of Platonic thought. These often came into play in pre Nicene theologians in ways that we could see reflective of subordinating the Son or the Spirit in some way to the full divinity of the Father.

Now, some weren't trying to do this in some sort of intentional way of diminishing the Son or Spirit. You know, you take an origin of Alexandria, for example. I think in the end, you put all his thought together.

The Son, the Spirit are hierarchically less than the Father. At the same time, he seemed to be really trying to honor the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. It's just the language and the concepts didn't might have altogether there.

So I always talk to my students about outright heresy and the Spirit of heresy. And then those who might have been accidental heretics or those that they got there, but they weren't trying to get there per se. But as far as background here, I mean, maybe to bring it up to the 4th century, Arius, who of course is the great antagonist of this whole story of the 4th century, at least his thought is the reason he came under such suspicion and then condemnation, is because yes, he believed that the Son was highly exalted, that he even had a role in creating this world, that he even pre-existed the world.

But yet, nonetheless, he was himself the Son of creation. He's famously associated with the phrase, there was a time when he was not. This was something that Arius said about the Son.

So there was a time when he came into existence. Now, greater than you and me, because we come into existence with the rest of creation, but not as great as the Father who is eternal and

independent. And so he's a type of mediating power between the Father and the world.

And that idea is really the spark for why the Council of Nicaea was needed for the church to be very clear about the status of the Son with relationship to the Father with this sort of mediating power. Or conversation in the background crystallized in Arias and his thought. Yeah, so that's a great on-ramp.

We'll talk about getting to 325, that's when the Council meets and what happens there. And then we'll go to the next chapter, which is 325 to 381. And then you can talk about what happens after that, because it's not as if Nicaea happens in 325 in the 381 by tradition.

Bishops, or 318, 381 is Constantinople. Agree to it and then problem solved. We want to take a moment to thank our friends at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, just down the road from Charlotte here two hours away in Greenville for their support of the podcast.

Last episode we gave you a deep dive here on LBE into the book Pastoral Theology. The pastor in the various duties of his office by Thomas Murphy, a 19th century Presbyterian. And if you haven't listened to it, you'll really go listen to that conversation with Jonathan Masters, the President at Greenville.

This is an excellent book and you will certainly get that sense from the conversation that Jonathan and I have together. Whether you are newly ordained, nearly retired, or you want to give it as a gift to your pastor, or you simply want to know what pastoral ministry is about and should look like. Thomas Murphy sets forth the duties of the pastor in expansive and practical detail.

It is simply one of my favorite books on pastoral ministry. Free audio book is also available on Greenville's website where you can order a copy as well, 50% off until May 5, single day Mayo. We also want to mention our friends at Westminster Theological Seminary and highlight their 100% online biblical language certificate.

You can go beyond English word study, which is important and we can trust our English Bibles. But if you have an opportunity to learn Hebrew and Greek and to do so with trusted teachers and tested curriculum and on your own time, this is a great opportunity to do that. You can read and understand short passages written in Hebrew or Greek within just six sessions.

And what a lifelong ability for the Christian, even if we're not going to become world experts or fluent in Hebrew and Greek. Just have some of the tools even and be able to look at some of the passages in the languages that God chose to reveal himself in his and errant word is worth the effort. So thanks to our friends at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Learn more at wts.edu/slash/language. So you mentioned Arias, he's a presbyter in Alexandria, so this is exploding in Egypt. There's a good bishop there, Alexander of Alexandria, and his right hand man is Athanasius, not yet a bishop, but is not one of the official delegates, but influential there.

And help us understand, because here's, well, help us understand why Arias's logic was wrong, because here's his logic, which on one level can make intuitive sense to people. I think the heart of Arias's argument is this, begottenness implies a beginning. They all agreed begotten.

He's the only begotten. And the term monogonase was important for them, but it really wasn't in dispute. I mean, you can see that in scripture.

He's the monogonase, only begotten, however they would have translated it, but he's the only begotten son. So begottenness got it. Well, if you're begotten, you have a beginning.

The father was not begotten, he has no beginning, the son was begotten, and therefore he has a beginning. How did Nicaea counteract that logic, which can seem rather persuasive? Yeah, that's a great question. And it really gets back to the crux of the issue he had with his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria.

This can become a mouthful. Alexander of Alexandria was carrying forward one strain of thought that came through origin, and it could be argued Arias was carrying forward another strain of thought. From origin, origin of the third century, it's like he had streams coming out of him that went in divergent directions.

Now, he was more radical, subordinate than origin, that is Arias, because origin, while he might have subordinated the son and spirit in certain ways, he did believe they were eternal. Whereas Arias, as I already mentioned, thought that son was created. The line of origin that Alexander carried forward was that the father and the son are eternal.

And this was a doctrine that he picked up from origin, the eternal generation of the son. And his language was always father, always son. If he is an eternal father, then he's an eternal father.

And by implication, that means he has an eternal son. And so it really gets into the nature of God being eternal. And if he's always been a father, that by implication means he's always had a son.

Otherwise, we could say he only became a father when he created the son or brought the son into existence. And so what the Nicene Creed really leans into is this line of thinking in Alexander that then Athanasius carries forward in many important ways that if God the father has always been God the father, which the church has always confessed, and we can see this in scripture and especially Jesus understanding of the father, then he has always had a son. And the way we understand that relationship between the father and the son, yes, is by begottenness.

That comes from the scriptures. That's why we use that language. The monogonese, the only begotten language is the very specific language of John.

But then there's other imagery in scripture that is also picked up on to show this relationship of

source in the father and then begottenness in the son. What trips people up, of course, is begottenness is something we understand on the human level. We have children.

I haven't always been a father. I became a father when I had a child. And this is where analogical understanding and language is really important.

That is to say, while this is a human category, we don't understand it in human terms. We understand it in divine terms, which means it has to be defined by God's nature, which is eternal. And so therefore it's an eternal begottenness, an eternal generation that does define the father being source and the son coming from him, but it is an eternal relationship, not one that comes in to existence.

And so that's really where the divide was between Alexander, Athanasius, and Arias, and Nicaea really comes down on that side of the eternal generation of the son. So that's really helpful. One of the infamous lines from Arias, quoted in his poem, Him, Thalia, meaning banquet, and this is given to us from Athanasius, but let's assume Athanasius was being fair and what he was recounting from Arias.

It's very dense. It's not a very singable song to our ears, but he says at the end of it the trinity, a triad, unequal in glories. So there's really the payoff, why this is so important.

For Arias, there's a glory, but there are unequal glories, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And even that line, which I probably, you know, almost my whole life just passed over and just seems like kind of poetic exaggeration. Very God, a very God.

True God, true light of light. It just sounds like Lord of Lord, King of Kings. But even that section is trying to counteract this claim from Arias that, well, perhaps the son is God, you might call him God, but he's not of the same kind of God as the Father.

So to say he's very God, a very God is not just saying attaboy, he's the best God ever. He's saying he is the same divine nature as the God from whom his essence is communicated. This gets very difficult to understand and we can't comprehend all of it.

But Blair, help us then, you know, 2016 were the famous Trinity debates online and stirred up. And in the end, I think helped clarify a lot of things and even corrected some things. But one of the issues in that debate, you know, the big issue was, is there a functional subordination of the Son to the Father? Or should we understand the properties, what distinguishes the Father from the Son or these eternal relations of authority and submission? So if we say there's an order, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it's not that the Father comes from the Spirit and the Son.

So there's an order, even you use the language source. And then we talk about he's begotten of the Father. How do we affirm those things? But make sure we're not then saying there's an eternal functional subordination.

And is that language of subordination? Is it always wrong? Is it sometimes wrong? Sometimes

right? Help steer us through the many rocky shoals here. Yeah, good question. And they really did come to the four, about nine years ago.

Right when I was starting to teach theology here at RTS, every question I had was about this controversy it seemed. Yeah, so as you have very clearly articulated there, when we think about the Trinity, there is a clear order, taxes to these relationships. They're irreversible.

The Son comes from the Father. You can't reverse that. The Spirit from the Father and Son, you can't reverse that.

They're asymmetrical, irreversible relationships. Does that necessarily lead to relationships of authority and submission or subordination? And I don't think so. This controversy, 2016, and yes, as you mentioned, a lot of clarification has happened since then.

Also, a lot of refinement has happened since then. But it seemed that a variety of theologians were trying to relate the Son and the Spirit to the Father in a fundamental way that's different than what Nicaea in the classical tradition had done so, which is through the doctrine of eternal generation and procession, which kind of baked into it implies that if the Father has the Son, that Son will share that very same nature. Just as I have children and they are not of a canine nature, thankfully they're of a human nature, so that the getting secures that sort of common nature between the two, that language there.

Well, others came along and they want to see that fundamental relationship not defined by getting a procession, but things like submission or some sort of subordinating authority to a lesser authority. And those do not reflect this eternal generation relationship. And what they end up doing is diminishing the glory of the Son and the glory of the Spirit.

You said that really well earlier, that this really has doxological implications. So the Son sharing fully in the nature of the Father means that he is to be worship. He is to be glorified in the same way as the Father, same with the Spirit.

Also, we can say, and this was of great concern in opposing areas in the fourth century, the Son has to be equal with the Father because for soteriological reasons, we need to know that he can fully bring us to the Father as he reconciles us. But if we are to say that the Son has a lesser glory or a lesser power than the Father, then he therefore has some lesser glory. And that's where you have the doxological implications of much of the debate since 2016.

And that's why I think it got so heated is because it seemed to be bringing back up these ghosts from the past. Now, maybe some of those that were offering alternative accounts since 2016 didn't want to, of course, go against Nicaea, didn't want to bring up the legacy of Arias. But some of their thinking seemed to go back into those same categories of Son and Spirit and divinity in eternity.

Now, you asked, though, is subordination at all appropriate? Is it in any way appropriate to think of subordination or submission when we think about the Son and the Spirit in relation to

the Father? And I think, yes, as long as we're very nuanced and careful about that, we can think of, for example, the incarnate Son who assumed the human nature. As he assumed the human nature, we find all over the Gospels his talking about obedience to the Father, wanting to follow the Father's will in plan. And then the Spirit carries that out in the application of our salvation.

But this is what we would call the economy of the Trinitarian Acts in creation and redemption. And that because the Son assumed the human nature, in the capacity of that human nature, we find Him all over the place, obeying the Father, even saying in John 14, the Father is greater than I. These are all texts that have caused a lot of consternation, but I think can be properly understood as we see the Son in His incarnate state, or even as we see the Spirit carrying out the plan of redemption, applying it to us. And so, yes, subordination, yes, even submission, because while it would be inappropriate to talk about submission in eternity, because that introduces multiple wills in eternity, and God is one nature, so therefore one will.

The Son, because He has a human nature now, has two wills, and so that submission language in the capacity again of His human nature, I think, is appropriate. And if I could say even one more thing, subordination as a word is a tricky word. For us, theologically, it has all kinds of negative connotations because of the controversies of the fourth century.

Subordination equaling some sort of ontological lessness. But on a dictionary level, subordination, all it has to mean is ordered under. And so, when we think of the Son, He is ordered after the Father.

And so some people might say subordination and not mean ontological subordination, they just might be referring to an order, although it's probably best to avoid it altogether, just for confusion's sake. Yeah, that's a really good point. I try to bring that out, too, in my classes, that, you know, I've never, nor will I, ever baptize someone in the name of the Spirit and the Son and the Father.

You baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. There's an order that the Son has begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. So yes, a sub-ordering, an ordering under.

And there are lots of quotations you can pull from really good theologians in the past who have used that language. So it's not like automatically something is wrong. But in our way of speaking, subordination conjures up less than inferiority.

And even in the way you explain that really helpful about the Trinity and the person of Christ in his incarnate state versus the works of the Trinity, and intra and all the fancy language there. But it's one thing to affirm that the Son in that order of things is ordered under the Father. Part of what the debate in 2016, and to be fair, I think all the people I read, you know, they all wanted to say, I affirm nice to you.

I don't, you know, that's bad. But your point was some of the categories adopting, and then

some of the categories, some of the folks didn't want to adopt, from like the capidotions which we'll come to. It often was, they were talking around what theologians call the personal properties of the persons of the Trinity.

Meaning, how do you distinguish? What can we say about the Father that you can't say about the Son and the Son about the Spirit? Those are the personal properties of each. And there was initially a real, a hesitancy, and by some a rejection of eternal generation, that category. So then the personal properties become authority and submission.

Well, now we're moving, not just, well, might there be a way in which, say with the covenant of redemption, that the Son is a submissive Son, I suppose you can try to nuance that. But once you say the personal property, okay, what are you saying about the Father and not about the Son? Well, you're saying the Father has authority and the Son has submission. That's really hard not to hear in that some of these ontological categories.

One person of the Trinity is an authoritative person. Another person of the Trinity is a submissive person. And just talk about this as you maybe trace this up to some of the debates with the capidosians, which you're more of an expert on for sure than I am.

But one of the things I think those debates have been helpful is to say, look, we do believe solo-scriptura. We can correct people from the past, even the greats. And yet let's do so very cautiously, because if they have some language that has served as helpful categories for a long time, we better be really, really sure we have some better categories before we jettison some of those.

So how did this Nician theology establish in 325, Homo Uciah, same essence as the Father? How did the debate then develop and what happened that necessitated a very significant revision by the time we get to 381? Yeah, it's a very good question. One maybe comparison to World War II history. Sometimes we think of 325 and we don't know all the nuances and complexity of the 4th century.

We think that's the end of the debate. Areas just put down. The church goes on and we've been saying the Nicene Creed ever since 325.

And as you know, history is often more complex than we anticipated to be. And 325 was less D-day in the storming of the beaches of Normandy. It was more like the invasion of Poland, you know, the start of something rather than the end of something.

Yeah, because Homo Uciah, which is the key non-biblical word that was used in 325, which became sort of the heart of the Creed of Nicaea. It was not a word that everyone immediately understood what it meant. In fact, it had some baggage for a lot of people.

It had been used in Gnostic context. Some people thought it had a material connotation. Others thought to say the Father and the Son are the same substance or same Uciah.

It almost sounds modalistic like they're the same thing. And so even though the majority of the Council agreed to the Creed and the condemnations of areas, there was a lot of debate and confusion in the next 50 years or so leading up to 381. On the one hand, you had a whole legacy of those that seemed to want to take things in a trajectory of modalism, which had been something that the church had dealt with in the past.

If you know the name Tertullian, he dealt with this issue of modalism. The word Sabelian was a heretic of the past. The church had dealt with this, but the language of Father and Son being of the same Uchia or substance to some Christians, it felt like that didn't establish enough distinction between the two that we read the Gospels.

It's very clear, the Son praying to the Father. These are distinct persons. Almost like you got a chunk of Plato and you ripped it in half.

Well, those are both the same essence. Right. That's absolutely the same stuff.

And that's what you said, the kind of overly materialistic people feared. Well, is that what we're communicating? Like the Son was just ripped out as a chunk of the Father. That's one way to say they have the same essence.

Yeah. You lop off your arm. That's your essence.

But is that what we mean? So I'm just saying, yeah, absolutely, you're hitting on what the differences were. And you can see it wasn't all from people who just said, you know what? I don't think the Son is really God. No, not at all.

I mean, you had people who signed on to the Creed from Nicaea and they go later on to describe their theology. And that sounds very modalistic. And then people are saying, well, does that mean the Creed is modalistic? And so lots of confusion.

And then you have this other group, another party sort of on the other side of things. They became known as the Eusebians that were really concerned to uphold the distinction between the Father and the Son that they're of like substance, perhaps not a same substance. But there's sort of an incipient hierarchical relationship that they were articulating.

So you have kind of these two trajectories on either side. But what I find extremely heartening, you know, as a believer who believes in the authority of scripture that scripture interpret scripture that theology should come from reading scripture with scripture is that when you get into those that are trying to push this forward, trying to get to a point of agreement and coalescing around Homo Uchias being reflective of biblical teaching, guys like Athanasius and Hillary around the middle of the fourth century. What they're doing is reading scripture with scripture, trying to show, okay, yes, here it says Jesus is less than the Father, but how do we read that in light of the incarnation and how we relate read that in light of his being the word of the Father, for example, in John 1 1. And so they're doing exegesis scripture with scripture, counteracting the exegesis of those that are following in the footsteps of Arias.

And around that, what you find is you have an increasing unity. I think an increasing unity over reading scripture with scripture, reading scripture together and also recognizing those who are trying to subordinate the Son to the Father, kind of increasingly going in radical directions. I don't want to lose all the listeners with all the different camps and councils and labels, but you have those that went from say, he's a like substance with the Father, then you had a group that said he's just like the Father, and then you had a further group known as the Unomians who said he's unlike the Father.

And the more extreme the views got, it seemed like it pushed those who are seeking to be faithful, seeking to be faithful to the language of scripture and the truth of scripture, it pushed them more and more together. And so Hillary and Basel, they became very much key leaders to bringing unity around the truth of the Son's eternal generation from the Father, sharing in the same substance, but yet being distinct through his personal relation with the Father. And the same with the Spirit.

I'll pause there. There's much more to say leading up to 381, but there are some pieces to I think the puzzle you were asking about. So one of the things that strikes me that I think we learn a little bit anachronistically, and maybe I've even taught it anachronistically in the past, is to say, okay, they're at 325, they're debating whether the Son is homo ucia or homoy ucia.

And Edward Gibbon and his, you know, enlightenment historian and his description of this says they were fighting over a diphthong. But they at 325, they weren't really arguing over homo ucia or homoy ucia. That homoy option comes later in the 4th century, correct? Yeah, that's right.

Yeah, you have a party of homoy uciaans led by the likes of say, a Basel of Ankara, who are trying to keep a distinction between the Father and the Son, and they're getting as close as they can to saying they're the same. But they feel that same language sounds modalistic, so they use the homoy language to say of like substance. The way they're eventually won over to the homo uciaan, nysine position, is simply by talking in many ways with one another, and by being scared of how bad the other side was.

And one of the capidosans changed his mind, right? Yeah, yeah. So Basel, you have as a key person who was a part of this leadership of being very sympathetic to that homoy language, but saying no, the best articulation is homo, that secures same nature, therefore, same power, same glory, all of this. And so they left the homoy language behind, but I think through a lot of leadership, common reading of scripture, making sure you're using that term the same way I'm using that term all got around to the same position.

I think that's very instructive to us today. It's always important. How are you using a word? How am I using a word? Let's be clear about this.

Let's see which is most reflective of the truth that's given to us in revelation. And so helpful because there's not one size fits all when it comes to church controversy. As soon as somebody

says, well, you should always be willing to fight tooth and nail and you never agree to the well, no, that's not always the answer.

And as soon as you say, you should always find common ground and a way to move forward together. That's not always the answer because with Arias, at least the council eventually came to realize. And Athanasius certainly did.

We're not really on the same page with Arias. So if we come up with a formula that we all agree to because they could have done that. There was a language they all could have affirmed, but they understood it would have been paper over real differences versus you're saying some of this discussion later on in the 4th century are people who say, I think we're trying to get to the same place.

And I think we want to affirm the same things, but let's try to find the right language to do this very different impulse and we need to have wisdom as Christians to know. It's not one or the other. It would have been wrong to find common ground at Nicaea 325, but it was right for many of these theologians to press through and find what they could agree on to 381.

So if we have 325, Arias is the gasoline, Alexander of Alexandria. There's lots of important people at the council we didn't talk about. But then after that, Athanasius, he will become bishop in place of Alexander.

He's the great champion. So later in the 4th century, you're saying capidocious. So that's a region.

It's called the capidocious fathers now. And that's Basil, Gregory, Gregory. Which ones are brothers? Nissa and Basil.

Nissa and Basil. And they're friends with the other Greg. Yeah.

In fact, Basil and Gregory of Naziansus went to what we would call the equivalent of college together in Athens. Yeah. So there's lots of Gregory's.

Different than Gregory's, the great. Another Greg. So you have all these now.

We're almost up on an hour. But last question. Yeah.

So 381. Council of Constantinople. And significantly revises.

So they just said, we are building on the same foundation. We're not changing anything. So my last question is, tell us about Augustine.

I think if you blare, is that being your expertise? Although I know you did all four of these folks. So Augustine, if memory serves 354, is he born? Is that his? Yeah. So he's not a player at Constantinople.

Right. What is Augustine's role after 381 relative to Nicene Orthodoxy? Yeah. Good question.

And the one thing I've left out in describing 381, which is a key part of the story that is important for Augustine, is, you know, once sort of there was a coalescing around the father-son relationship, there was this further party that wanted to subordinate the son, sorry, the spirit. And they have this fun label, the Numa Tamakians, the Numa Tamakians, the spirit fighters. It sounds like something out of maybe Star Wars, but everybody was.

So they, okay. They had a homo oucias related to between the father and son, but they didn't know what to do with the spirit. So they left him out of the divine.

And so the, the fuller version of the creed in 381 has extra language about the spirit being worshiped and glorified along with the father. And the son. So a more robust confession of the spirit, his relationship to the father and his divinity.

And that came out of that background, 381. So Augustine. Okay.

He comes, he starts doing his theology late fourth century, fifth century. You're right. He was born in 354.

He dies in 430. And he has this privilege of, you know, imagine a mountain, you know, at one stage in the mountain. All these debates are hashed out.

And there's, there's a lot of blood. There's a lot of toil. That's the debates of the fourth century.

And then he's up another stage. The Trinitarian questions are solved in some way. And so he's able to look out peacefully upon these debates and sort of build upon those, not in the midst in the battle of controversy that he had his own controversies.

Donatism, Pelagianism, so on and so forth. But his Trinitarian theology was able to sort of calmly look from his perch a little further on and theology eyes. And so what's fascinating about it, about Augustine is yes, he's known for a book called on the Trinity.

But he wrote about the Trinity in a lot of different places. And sometimes it's better to read him elsewhere before you get to that big intimidating book on the Trinity. He has a hymn, or sorry, he has a sermon, 52 on the Trinity.

He wrote about the Trinity, some in his confessions. He wrote about the Trinity in city of God. He wrote tractates on the gospel of John.

He's always doing Trinitarian theology. And then he puts together this needy work. And what we find in that work is he goes back into the biblical exegesis and he sort of freshly engages that.

He goes in and he talks about sort of the conciliar debates of how we relate the father to the son and the son. But then he really, I would say, one of the things that he does is develop some

thought in and around the Holy Spirit. So that's why I wanted to go back there to 381.

And when he's talking about the spirit, he talks about the spirit in terms, biblical terms of a gift and of love. And these two ideas of love and gift really conditioned his understanding of the spirit. And so the spirit he sees in some ways as the love shared between the father and the son and the gift given by the father and the son.

And because of that, the spirit connects both to father and son, because the original language of the Nicene Creed, of course, is the spirit proceeds from the father, which is John 15:26. But later Western editions of the creed, what's known as the filioque and the son. So most listeners here will recite the creed proceeding, the spirit proceeding from the father and the son.

And the theology behind that is really found in Augustine, as he relates the spirit as a gift from the father and the son and as a love proceeding from the father and the son. And now there's lots of debates about that. There's lots of controversy about that.

And that's sort of the theology behind the filioque way in this edition to the creed that is found in Augustine who builds on this heritage. That's great. We're up on an hour.

Let me remind our listeners. Blair's got several books coming out. Most soonest will be reformed confessionalism coming out in June.

If some of you of the listeners are familiar with the nine marks books that are looking at various aspects of healthy church life. This was a unashamed attempt to try to do some of the same kinds of things for more explicitly reformed and Presbyterian background though it's certainly our Baptist friends would be able to agree with with lots of things. So look for that reform confessionalism.

And then the book from Lexum Press, One God Almighty from the Nicene Creed from Nicene Creed and then Crossway Our Father in Heaven rediscovered embracing the fatherhood of God. Of course, your dissertation to for people who've got, you know, \$150 to plunk down and TNT Clark. So congratulations on that.

And on your appointment as president of RTS Charlotte, Blair really grateful for this. And my encouragement to our listeners here if any of this, you know, is fuzzy and it will be for most people and it is even for professors who teach through it multiple times. There's lots of names.

There's lots of esoteric but important theological distinctions. My encouragement sometime in this year of 1700, you know, year anniversary. Try to at least read the Nicene Creed, especially if you're in a church that's not familiar with it and pick up a book and introduction.

You know, there's various, you know, you go to Amazon, you can find, you know, better yet ask your pastor for a recommendation because not everything on Amazon is going to be good. But try to spend some time this year on thinking about this because what could be more important

than thinking about the Trinity. And I guess that's, I'll give you the last word Blair.

I said my last question was Augustine but, you know, 20 seconds. Just give some encouragement here to the listener. Maybe interested in this slightly befuddled.

Why should we care so much about the doctrine of the Trinity? In short, this is who God is. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There's not a, this isn't just a way of thinking about God.

This is who God is. And so I think studying the Trinity, studying Nicene theology, it will bring you eventually to your knees. This is the God who created you.

This is the God who redeems you. This is the Spirit who unites us to the Son, transforms us into His image that we can call upon our blessed Father. Amen.

Well put. If you're married, you know, men out there and your wife says, I want to tell you what I'm like, who I am. He said, not interested.

I don't need to know what you're like and who you are. Not sure how much you love her then. The same way God has revealed Himself to us and is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thank you, Blair Smith, and thank you for listening to Life in Books and Everything, a ministry of clearly reformed. You can get episodes like this and lots of other resources at clearlyreformed.org. And until next time, glorify God, enjoy Him forever and read a good book.