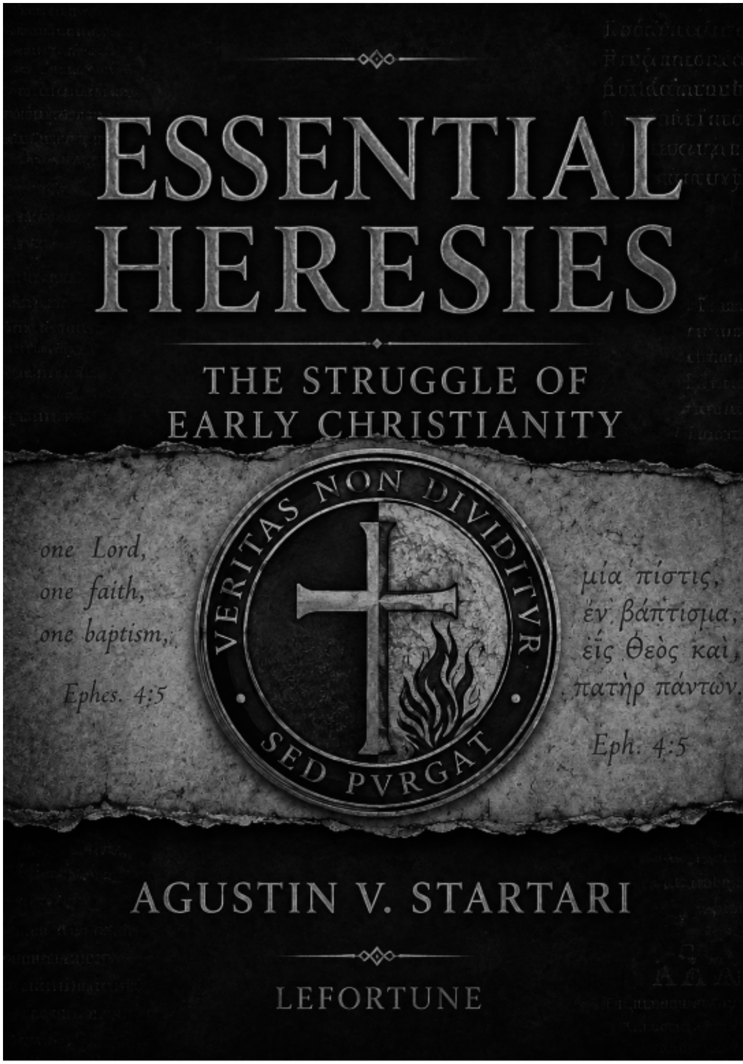
Essential Heresies: The Struggle of Early Christianity.

Agustin V. Startari.


ESSENTIAL HERESIES
THE STRUGGLE OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY
VERITAS NON DIVIDITVR SED PVRGAT
one Lord,
one faith,
one baptism,
Ephes. 4:5
μία πίστις,
ἓν βάπτισμα,
εἷς Θεὸς καὶ
πατὴρ πάντων.
Eph. 4:5
AGUSTIN V. STARTARI
LEFORTUNE

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ESSENTIAL HERESIES

The Struggle of Early Christianity

WHAT SEPARATES FAITH from heresy? Who has the authority to define truth in the formative centuries of Christianity?

Essential Heresies: The Struggle of Early Christianity offers a critical examination of the major doctrinal controversies that defined the first centuries of the Church. From disputes over the nature of Christ to the condemnation of Gnostic, Marcionite, or Arian currents, this work examines the theological, political, and ecclesiological mechanisms that set the boundaries of orthodoxy.

Drawing on patristic and conciliar sources as well as contemporary scholarship, Agustin V. Startari argues that the controversies later classified as heretical were not marginal anomalies, but decisive factors in the clarification of dogma, the delimitation of communion, and the consolidation of forms of ecclesial authority.

A rigorous and essential work for understanding how the Church was born in tension, amid doctrinal conflict, the search for unity, and the struggle for truth.

Agustin V. Startari is a Uruguayan researcher and author. His work focuses on the history of ancient Christianity, medieval political theology, and structures of religious power. He has published books on the Templars, the papacy of Gregory X, and philosophical cosmology, among other subjects.

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INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF ORTHODOXY BEFORE ORTHODOXY

The history of Christian heresies often begins too late: it begins once the boundaries already exist. The reader is given names — Gnostics, Marcionites, Montanists, Arians, Nestorians, Donatists — that seem to designate clearly defined doctrinal entities, and then observes how an equally well-defined Church responds to them. That sequence has a narrative advantage, but it introduces a decisive historical problem: it turns into a point of departure what must itself be explained. The categories that organize the account are, to a large extent, the result of the very conflicts the account sets out to describe.

Two opposing simplifications have dominated much of the historical imagination. The first assumes an original orthodoxy, complete and recognizable from the first Christian generation, against which heresies would represent later deviations. The second reverses the moral judgment without changing the structure of the narrative: a free plurality would have been destroyed by an institution that forcibly imposed a single version of Christianity. Both perspectives can find episodes that appear to confirm them; neither, taken as a general explanation, does justice to the geographical, chronological, textual, and institutional variation of the first through fifth centuries.

This book begins from a different proposition. Orthodoxy should not be treated solely as a set of doctrines regarded as true within a confessional tradition, nor solely as the discourse of the group that ultimately prevailed. For historical analysis, it will be understood above all as a changing system of limits of admissibility: a set of formulations, texts, authorities, practices, and forms of belonging that particular communities recognize as compatible with communion. Those limits were not identical in Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, or the communities of Asia Minor, nor did they remain stable across four centuries.

The general hypothesis holds that doctrinal controversies exerted pressure toward definition. Where an ambiguity could remain open, coexistence was relatively broad; when a controversy made that ambiguity politically, liturgically, or ecclesiologically costly, the need to formulate a rule increased. The rule, however, did not close the process once and for all. Each definition resolved certain questions and produced others. Nicaea did not end the Trinitarian controversy in 325; it changed its terms. Ephesus did not eliminate Christological disagreements; it redistributed positions and actors. Chalcedon did not produce universal Christian unanimity; it established a formula whose acceptance or rejection redefined enduring communions.

This movement will be called the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model in this work. The expression is not intended to replace historical categories with a mechanical scheme, nor to assert a universal law of religious development. It designates a heuristic and comparative model: controversy, labeling, definition, institutionalization, and memory reduce some of the possibilities recognized as legitimate, but that reduction generates a new field of problems. The model will be valid only if it makes it possible to explain differences among cases more effectively, identify observable mechanisms, and also recognize episodes in which delimitation failed, remained local, proved reversible, or produced outcomes different from those intended.

The formulation is developed in dialogue with a broad historiographical tradition. Walter Bauer forced scholars to abandon the image of a monolithic orthodoxy from the beginning and to take the regional diversity of early Christianity seriously. Later scholarship corrected both the scope and some of the inferences of his model, but retained a fundamental methodological consequence: the orthodoxy of the fourth or fifth centuries cannot simply be projected back onto the second century without examination. Alain Le Boulluec demonstrated the historical development of the very notion of heresy; studies of identity and heresiology have emphasized the role of marking the other in producing a "we"; research on the Arian, Christological, Donatist, and Pelagian controversies has shown that later labels often homogenize coalitions and positions that were more unstable in their own time (Bauer 1971; Iricinschi and Zellentin 2008; King 2011; Le Boulluec 2022; Flower 2025).

Recent historiography reinforces the need to work with explicit and revisable models. The plurality of the first centuries should not itself become a new historiographical dogma, just as the notion of the "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity has been criticized for its tendency to narrate separations more sharply than the evidence allows. Paula Fredriksen's recent synthesis explicitly adopts the plural Ancient Christianities to represent the historical multiplicity of the first centuries, while Adele Reinhartz has drawn attention to the power and risk of the models and metaphors through which historians organize complex processes (Fredriksen 2024; Reinhartz 2026). The model proposed here is therefore presented with its assumptions, variables, and conditions of refutation made explicit.

The central aim will not be to determine theologically who was right. Nor will it be to rehabilitate automatically every position that was condemned. Critical history must resist both temptations. A doctrine may have been defeated and, at the same time, be poorly documented; a heresiological source may distort its opponents and, at the same time, preserve irreplaceable information; a conciliar decision may express sincere theological conviction and, at the same time, operate within networks of patronage, jurisdiction, and imperial power. Analysis requires holding these levels together without reducing one to another.

The question organizing the book is therefore less "what were the great heresies?" than "how did a doctrinal difference become an institutionally enforceable boundary?" Other questions follow from it: who had the capacity to name a position as deviant? What sources made exclusion justifiable? When did a local condemnation acquire supraregional scope? What relationship existed between doctrinal precision and institutional capacity? What changed when imperial power began to intervene in Christian controversies on a sustained basis? Why did some labels survive for centuries even when they described the groups they named poorly?

Answering these questions requires following specific controversies while also comparing them. The book ranges from first-century antecedents to the post-Chalcedonian configuration of the fifth century, whose terminus is conventionally set at 486: the Acacian rupture and the Synod of Beth Lapat mark the point at which fifth-century boundaries cease to be reversible by imperial decision and begin to reproduce themselves as autonomous institutional traditions. Its chronological core lies between the second and fifth centuries; the first century will be treated genealogically, because it is impossible to discuss the emergence of Christian boundaries without attending to initial forms of authority, Scripture, tradition, intra-Jewish conflict, and Gentile expansion. The principal geographical setting is the Roman Mediterranean and its eastern zones of interaction, with particular attention to Rome, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa. Where Roman categories do not adequately describe Persian, Syriac, or Armenian trajectories, that limitation will be stated explicitly.

The intended result is neither a linear history of dogmatic progress nor a linear history of repression. It is a history of boundary production. In it, heresy does not appear at the margins of Christianity as a secondary residue: controversies force the clarification of vocabularies, the ordering of texts, the ranking of authorities, the design of decision-making procedures, and the definition of the consequences of broken communion. In that limited and verifiable sense, conflicts are constitutive. Not because every orthodox doctrine is merely the product of its adversaries, but because the concrete historical form acquired by many definitions can be understood only by reconstructing the polemical pressure that made them necessary.

Subject, Scope, Questions, and Method

The subject of this study is the historical process through which doctrinal and ecclesial legitimacy was delimited in ancient Christianity. The unit of analysis will not be "heresy" considered as a substance, but controversy: a documentable set of actors, claims, responses, institutions, decisions, sanctions, and subsequent memories. This choice avoids assigning to a group, from the outset, the identity that its opponents or later historians ultimately fixed upon it.

The study combines intellectual history, institutional history, discourse analysis, and source criticism. Intellectual history makes it possible to reconstruct doctrinal problems in their own vocabularies; institutional history identifies who could convene, judge, ordain, or exclude; discourse analysis examines how names such as "Arian," "Gnostic," or "Nestorian" aggregate heterogeneous positions; source criticism establishes what can and cannot be inferred from polemical texts, conciliar acts, legal codes, ecclesiastical histories, and surviving manuscripts.

Primary sources will be organized by function, not only by author. The following will be distinguished: a) normative sources, such as creeds, canons, and legislation; b) polemical sources, such as heresiological treatises and refutations; c) narrative sources, especially ecclesiastical histories; d) epistolary sources, crucial for reconstructing networks and sequences; e) material and manuscript sources, when the physical transmission of a text forms part of the evidence; and f) conciliar acts, which must be read as documentary products of procedures, factions, and policies of preservation, not as neutral transcripts of a conversation.

The study will rigorously distinguish contemporary evidence from retrospective testimony. An accusation formulated decades later will not automatically be treated as a transparent description of an earlier phase. Likewise, the absence of a source will not, without argument, be turned into proof of persecution, destruction, or nonexistence. Documentary gaps form part of the object of study and must remain visible. Recent attention to the materiality of codices and to the so-called New Philology reinforces this caution: ancient texts reach us through copies, translations, selections, rewritings, and contexts of preservation that have histories of their own (Linjamaa 2024).

Comparison will be conducted through a common matrix applied to each case: initial doctrinal problem; degree of prior diversity; actors and sees involved; authority invoked; textual resources employed; decision-making procedure; type of sanction; participation or nonparticipation of secular power; geographical extent of reception; persistence of the condemned position; and retrospective reconstruction. This matrix will make it possible to test whether doctrinal compression actually occurs in the same way in the cases of Marcion, the Gnostic controversies, Montanism, Novatianism, Donatism, the Nicene conflict, and the Christological controversies of the fifth century, or whether the model needs to be modified.

The book adopts a rule of terminological caution. When a designation is later, polemical, or disputed, this will be indicated. "Gnosticism" will not be used as though it unproblematically designated a unified church; "Arianism" will not be assumed to be a homogeneous bloc; "Nestorianism" and "Monophysitism" will be treated with attention to modern objections to those labels. This caution does not require eliminating historically useful terms, but it does require distinguishing among the term employed by the sources, the identity assumed by the actors, and the historian's analytical category.

Finally, the work will distinguish three levels of claim: sufficiently attested facts, plausible reconstructions, and interpretive hypotheses. The language will signal that difference. "It is established," "attests," or "documents" will be reserved for sufficiently clear direct evidence; "probably," "it is plausible," or "allows us to infer" will be used when the argument depends on reconstruction; "it is proposed" will identify the model's hypotheses. This discipline is not rhetorical: it is part of the book's control of epistemic integrity.

CHAPTER 1

HERESY AND ORTHODOXY: CATEGORIES, SOURCES, AND PROBLEMS

1.1 Haíresis: From Choice and Faction to a Category of Exclusion

The Greek word haíresis did not originate as an exact equivalent of the later Christian notion of heresy. In philosophical and social usage it could denote a choice, school, party, or tendency. The New Testament itself preserves this breadth. Acts uses the term for Sadducees and Pharisees, and also places it in the mouths of opponents who describe the Nazarenes as a haíresis; Paul, in Acts 24:14, responds to such a characterization at a point when the semantic field still cannot be reduced to the juridical and doctrinal category that would dominate centuries later. This matters because it prevents every early occurrence of the term from being read with the stabilized meaning of patristic heresiology.

The decisive change does not consist simply in a neutral word becoming an insult. It consists in the formation of a regime of classification. For "heresy" to function as a strong category, at least three elements must exist in incipient form: a norm that can be presented as common, an authority capable of interpreting that norm, and a consequence attached to deviation. These three components do not appear with the same intensity at the same time. The history of heresy is therefore also the history of the construction of those capacities.

During the second century, polemical literature accelerates this transformation. Irenaeus organizes opposing doctrines within a genealogical narrative that presents them as proliferations derived from error; Tertullian exploits the notion of prescription to dispute not only exegetical conclusions but the right of opponents to use the Scriptures against the received rule. In both cases, debate over a doctrinal proposition is connected to an institutional question: who has legitimate standing to interpret the apostolic tradition? The history of the concept and the history of authority become inseparable.

Le Boulluec showed that the Christian notion of heresy took shape historically and polemically, rather than existing as a fully formed conceptual category from the beginning. That finding requires reversing the usual procedure. Instead of taking a later list of heresies and tracing their origins, it is preferable first to reconstruct the controversies and observe when, how, and by whom a difference receives an exclusionary classification (Le Boulluec 2022). This avoids confusing the historical identity of the actors with the taxonomy imposed by their opponents.

1.2 Walter Bauer and the Turn toward Diversity

Walter Bauer's work marks a turning point because it challenged a structural assumption of traditional ecclesiastical historiography: the idea that orthodoxy came first and heresy was a derivative corruption. His regional reconstruction proposed that, in various places, forms of Christianity later classified as heretical may have been early, influential, or even dominant before the consolidation of the current that would ultimately present itself as orthodox (Bauer 1971).

Bauer's thesis was challenged on multiple fronts. Critics objected to geographical generalizations, inferences built on sparse documentation, and a tendency to identify the "non-orthodox" too readily with heretical predominance. Later criticism, however, did not simply restore the previous model. The most enduring result was methodological: the sequence of original orthodoxy followed by deviation cannot be taken for granted. Diversity must be investigated empirically and with sensitivity to regional variation.

That legacy requires a second caution. If it is problematic to project later orthodoxy back onto the origins, it is equally problematic to turn every early difference into evidence of completely independent Christianities. Diversity does not automatically entail incompatibility; incompatibility does not entail institutional separation; and an intense dispute does not by itself demonstrate the existence of two wholly segregated communities. Karen King has insisted on the need to distinguish faction, variety, diversity, and multiplicity rather than turning them into analytical synonyms (King 2011).

The position adopted in this book will therefore be post-Bauerian without being Bauerian in the strong sense. It accepts that regional and doctrinal plurality must be the starting point of inquiry, but rejects turning that plurality into a thesis that predetermines the outcome of every case. The empirical question is precisely how certain disagreements became tolerable, negotiable, or exclusionary in different contexts.

1.3 Heresiology, Identity, and Boundary-Making

Heresiological catalogues are not simply repositories of information about deviant groups. They are artifacts of classification. By ordering opponents, attributing founders to them, constructing genealogies of error, and contrasting them with a rule of faith, they simultaneously produce an image of the other and an image of the self. They must therefore be read in two directions: as testimony — problematic but indispensable — about rival doctrines, and as direct evidence of the way particular authors sought to construct Christian identity.

Iricinschi and Zellentin described this double movement through the relationship between "making selves" and "marking others": marking the other contributes to the construction of the collective self. From this perspective, heresy is not only the condemned content but also a discursive technology of boundary-making. The observation does not imply that all differences were invented by heresiologists. It means that the selection, grouping, and narration of those differences perform a historical function that must be explained (Iricinschi and Zellentin 2008).

The effects of classification can outlast the controversy that produced them. A successful label reduces complexity: it makes it possible to treat a plurality of actors as members of the same family of error. That reduction is useful for polemic and, later, for teaching and memory. But it can be dangerous for the historian. The term "Arianism," for example, can conceal the distance between Arius, the so-called Eusebians, Homoian positions, Homoiousian positions, and other configurations of the fourth-century conflict; Geoffrey Gwynn has shown the extent to which Athanasius's polemic contributed to the retrospective construction of an "Arian controversy" more unified than its actual participants were (Gwynn 2007).

The same caution applies to categories such as "Gnosticism." Michael Williams and other scholars questioned its capacity to describe as a coherent religion a highly diverse set of texts and groups. Recent studies of Nag Hammadi have added a material dimension: the codices must also be studied as objects produced, copied, read, and preserved in concrete contexts. Linjamaa warns against allowing the modern label of Gnosticism to predetermine the interpretation of the manuscript (Williams 1996; Brakke 2010; Linjamaa 2024).

Boundary-making does not operate only through polemical texts. Creeds, canonical lists, letters of communion, synodal decisions, episcopal depositions, sacramental discipline, and imperial legislation can perform the same function by different means. This book will use "boundary-making technologies" as an analytical expression for these heterogeneous mechanisms. It does not presuppose central coordination: several technologies may emerge separately, compete, or reinforce one another.

1.4 The Problem of Hostile Testimony

A large part of the information about condemned movements comes from those who wrote in order to refute them. That fact does not invalidate the documentation, but it changes the burden of proof. A heresiologist has rhetorical incentives to simplify, associate, ridicule, or moralize the opponent. Such a writer may preserve authentic quotations and, at the same time, use them to construct a tendentious representation. The critical task is to separate these levels without attributing to the source a transparency it does not possess.

Four controls will be applied. First, proximity control: how much time and distance separate the source from the object it describes. Second, independence control: whether several sources truly transmit distinct testimony or depend on a common tradition. Third, genre control: a refutation, a conciliar canon, and an ecclesiastical history do not produce evidence in the same way. Fourth, corroboration control: agreement with texts attributed to the group itself, administrative documents, material evidence, or non-polemical testimony.

Nag Hammadi offers a paradigmatic example of how the problem changes when texts appear that were not transmitted solely through heresiological chains. The discovery does not automatically turn every codex into a transparent voice of a "Gnostic group," but it makes it possible to compare ancient categories and descriptions with materials that circulated outside traditional heresiological transmission. The comparison has led scholars to revise both attributed doctrines and the usefulness of some of the labels themselves.

Conciliar acts present a different difficulty. They have a strong documentary character and may preserve interventions, lists, letters, and decisions of enormous value; but they are also compilations produced and transmitted within later disputes. The event must be distinguished from the archive of the event. The fact that an intervention was preserved, translated, or incorporated into a collection is itself part of its history. Modern critical editions of Ephesus and Chalcedon make it possible to work with greater precision, but they do not eliminate the need for documentary criticism (Price and Gaddis 2005; Price and Graumann 2020).

Imperial legislation adds another layer. A law against heretics demonstrates a normative intention and a particular official classification; it does not by itself prove uniform enforcement. The repetition of prohibitions may indicate effectiveness, but it may also indicate the persistence of the behavior they were intended to suppress. The legal codes will therefore be read alongside local, episcopal, and narrative evidence. The existence of legal coercion must not be confused with unlimited administrative capacity.

1.5 Criteria of Epistemic Integrity

The subject matter of this book requires special discipline because its categories have historical, theological, and contemporary lives at the same time. "Orthodox" and "heretical" can be legitimate internal descriptions within a confessional tradition and, at the same time, problematic categories for historical reconstruction. The text will distinguish the emic level — the actors' own classification — from the etic level — the historian's analytical category — without assuming that one invalidates the other.

Five errors will be avoided. First, teleology: explaining a controversy as if its participants knew the later outcome. Second, confessional anachronism: attributing to an early phase a definition formulated later. Third, political reductionism: treating theology as a mere disguise for institutional interests. Fourth, doctrinal reductionism: ignoring jurisdiction, patronage, communication, violence, or legislation because a dispute uses theological language. Fifth, false symmetry: assuming that, because the sources are polemical, all versions enjoy the same documentary support.

Causality will be framed in proportion to the evidence. When the book argues that a controversy "produced" a definition, the expression will not mean that it was the sole cause. It will mean that a historical relationship can be established between the conflict, the need to specify an issue, the agents who formulated that specification, and its institutional reception. Other factors — prior exegetical traditions, philosophy, liturgy, relations among sees, imperial patronage — must be integrated when necessary.

Archival asymmetry will also be controlled. In many cases, the victorious tradition had greater capacity to copy, preserve, and canonize its texts. But not every loss can be attributed to censorship. Manuscripts disappear through material fragility, disuse, accident, linguistic change, and ordinary choices made by copyists. Deliberate destruction or suppression will be asserted only where sufficient positive evidence exists.

This principle extends to the book's own theoretical proposal. The Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model will not be used to force all cases into an identical sequence. If a controversy shows an expansion of possibilities rather than a reduction, if condemnation does not produce a stable boundary, if imperial power intensifies fragmentation instead of uniformity, or if a label corresponds to no recognizable identity, those outcomes will be recorded as limits or modifications of the model. A historical theory that admits no contrary evidence becomes rhetoric.

CHAPTER 2

RECURSIVE DOCTRINAL COMPRESSION MODEL

Theoretical Proposal and Testing Protocol

The model developed in this chapter constitutes the book's central interpretive contribution. Its formulation is original to this work, but it is not presented as a creation ex nihilo or as a claim to intellectual priority established against the entire existing literature. It draws on earlier debates concerning diversity, the construction of orthodoxy, heresiology, identity, deviance, and institutional power. Its novelty should be assessed in its articulation of those problems within an explicit comparative sequence, with observable variables and the capacity to generate historical predictions. The bibliographic review conducted for this stage has not identified "recursive doctrinal compression" as an established model in studies of Christian heresy; that finding, however, does not permit the assertion that functionally equivalent precedents are entirely absent.

The advantage of calling it a model rather than a law lies in its function. A model selects relationships in order to make a complex process visible; it does not reproduce every feature of reality. Reinhartz has recently emphasized that historiographical models and metaphors help us think, but can also turn their own architecture into supposed evidence. The framework must therefore make explicit where it simplifies, what it observes, and what it would cease to explain if its predictions are not borne out (Reinhartz 2026).

2.1 From Plurality of Formulations to the Limits of Admissibility

At any historical moment, a community possesses a set of statements, practices, and authorities that it regards as acceptable. That set need not be written down or fully coherent. It may contain tensions, local formulas, and unresolved questions. We will call the set of positions that, in a given context, do not by themselves produce a recognized rupture of communion the admissibility space.

The term "space" is analytical, not geographical or mathematical in a strict sense. It serves to distinguish three situations that are often conflated. A doctrine may be conceivable but not discussed; it may be discussed but tolerated; or it may be subject to formal exclusion. The transition among these situations is the phenomenon of interest. The existence of disagreement does not automatically imply that the admissibility space has closed.

The breadth of that space depends on multiple factors: density of communication among churches, episcopal authority, availability of shared texts, the existence of formulas of faith, shared rituals, synodal mechanisms, and, from the fourth century onward, imperial support or intervention. The more intense the institutional interdependence, the greater the pressure may be to resolve incompatibilities that a looser network would have tolerated locally.

This formulation avoids speaking of an "absence of orthodoxy" in absolute terms in early Christianity. Even the earliest communities possessed convictions and boundaries; the Pauline letters document conflicts, expulsions, and criteria of belonging. What changes historically is not a passage from zero orthodoxy to total orthodoxy, but the scale, precision, public visibility, and enforceability of the boundaries.

2.2 What "Doctrinal Compression" Means

Doctrinal compression is the process by which a controversy reduces, specifies, or reorders the set of formulations recognized as compatible within a given ecclesial network. The word "compression" does not necessarily mean intellectual impoverishment or violent imposition. It describes a reduction of indeterminacy. Where several expressions could previously coexist without a binding decision, after the controversy one or more expressions may become privileged, conditioned, or excluded.

Compression may occur through positive specification — a creed defines what must be confessed — or through negative exclusion — an anathema establishes what may not be maintained. It may be local or ecumenical in aspiration; rapid or gradual; stable or reversible. It may also be incomplete: a formula may acquire normative authority while continuing to be interpreted divergently.

Nicaea offers the best-known example, but it should not be simplified. The inclusion of homoousios in 325 did not immediately produce universal semantic consensus. In the following decades, terms, conciliar legitimacies, exiles, and alternative formulas were contested. Yet the subsequent conflict could no longer ignore Nicaea. Even its opponents had to position themselves in relation to a new normative reference point. Compression, therefore, may operate by changing the terrain of dispute before producing a stable boundary.

The concept also does not presuppose that the result will be doctrinally simpler. A definition may reduce the number of admissible positions while increasing the conceptual complexity required to distinguish among them. The Christological language of the fifth century is more precise and technically dense than many earlier formulations. Compression of the admissibility space and increasing complexity of vocabulary can advance together.

2.3 The Recursive Cycle of Controversy and Definition

The adjective recursive expresses the model's most important characteristic: a definition does not constitute the end of the process, because it reconfigures the questions available. Each cycle operates on the result of the previous one. A controversy turns an ambiguity into a problem; a decision attempts to stabilize it; the decision introduces vocabulary and distinctions that require interpretation; those interpretations may open a new controversy.

The basic analytical sequence is: plurality or indeterminacy → controversy → labeling → codification → institutionalization → enforcement → retrospective memory. Not every case passes through every stage, nor does every case do so in that order. The sequence functions as an instrument of comparison. Its usefulness lies precisely in making deviations detectable: controversies without codification, condemnations without enforcement, decisions without reception, or memories that reconstruct as a unity a conflict that was originally fragmented.

Recursivity prevents us from imagining a straight line from the apostles to Chalcedon. Between each definition and the next lies a transformed field. The debate over the Son in the fourth century conditions the vocabulary concerning the Spirit; Trinitarian decisions provide premises for Christological controversies; Christological solutions, in turn, create new problems concerning nature, person, will, and ecclesial reception. The history of dogma thus appears as a succession of partial closures and reopenings.

The same principle applies to institutions. A controversy may strengthen the capacity of a synod or see to intervene, and that altered capacity will influence the next controversy. Institutions are not merely the setting of debates: they learn procedures, accumulate precedents, and develop legal and documentary memory. In historical terms, authority too can be recursive.

2.4 Five Mechanisms of Compression

The model distinguishes five mechanisms that must be observed separately. The first is semantic: the fixing or ranking of vocabulary. Terms such as homoousios, hypostasis, physis, or prosopon acquire technical functions that cannot be assumed to be identical in every author and period. A semantic controversy is not "just words" when the possibility of recognizing a common confession depends on those words.

The second mechanism is textual. Communities determine which writings may be read as normative, which traditions possess authority, and which interpretations are regarded as compatible. The formation of the New Testament canon was a prolonged process and cannot be reduced to a single reaction against Marcion; nevertheless, the Marcionite controversy clearly shows that the selection and organization of texts could become a question of identity. Textual compression also includes control over copies, lists, lectionaries, and patristic repertoires.

The third is institutional. A definition requires bearers: bishops, synods, councils, networks of communion, metropolitan sees, and procedures of appeal. When an authority is strengthened during a crisis, the result exceeds the immediate doctrinal content. Cyprian, the controversies over the lapsi and rebaptism, and the Donatist disputes make it possible to observe how the question of truth becomes intertwined with the question of who is able to decide it.

The fourth mechanism is communal. A doctrinal boundary reaches its greatest density when it affects communion: ordination, Eucharist, episcopal recognition, reception of clergy, or sacraments. The label of heresy then becomes a social practice. It is not enough for an author to condemn a proposition; what matters is whether the condemnation changes who shares the altar, who recognizes which bishop, and under what conditions a rupture is repaired.

The fifth mechanism is juridical. Its importance grows from Constantine onward, but it must not be projected retrospectively onto earlier centuries. Imperial intervention adds capacities that an ecclesial network by itself did not possess: exile, confiscation, restrictions on assembly, recognition of sees, and administrative enforcement. The change was neither instantaneous nor uniform. Studies of late Roman Christianization emphasize precisely the gradual character and practical limitations of state transformation, even though Christian orthodoxy ultimately acquired a degree of legal privilege incomparable to that of the pre-Constantinian period (Drake 2000; Flower 2025).

The five mechanisms may advance at different rates. A doctrine may be semantically condemned and legally tolerated; an emperor may support a formula that lacks universal reception; a community may preserve texts that would later be classified as heretical. Comparison will be more precise if it avoids treating the "victory of orthodoxy" as a single event and asks, in each case, which mechanism actually changed.

2.5 Heresy-Making: Process, Not Essence

The term heresy-making will be used to describe the passage from difference to exclusion. This does not mean that every heresy is an arbitrary invention. It means that the historical condition of being a "heretic" requires a process of classification and reception. A position may be regarded as erroneous by an author without thereby becoming a universal boundary; it may be condemned by one synod and rehabilitated by another; it may receive a name that its supposed members never used.

Heresy-making can be analyzed in four operations. First, individuation: a proposition or actor is identified as a problem. Second, aggregation: that proposition or actor is linked to a family of errors or allies. Third, normativization: an authority formulates its incompatibility with the accepted rule. Fourth, sedimentation: the classification passes into repertoires, laws, histories, or manuals and acquires retrospective stability.

Sedimentation explains why many labels appear older and more coherent than they actually were. Once a controversy is incorporated into a heresiological genealogy, the ambiguities of the process disappear from the narrative. The victor need not deliberately falsify history to produce that effect; it is enough to teach the conflict from the perspective of an already stabilized classification.

The concept also makes it possible to compare trajectories. Marcion was an identifiable individual and organizer; his relationship with communities and texts can be reconstructed differently from the phenomena grouped under the modern category of "Gnosticism." "Arianism" functions as a polemical label encompassing networks and theologies that were not identical. "Nestorianism" became a designation for traditions that do not accept that their own Christology is correctly described by the doctrine attributed to Nestorius. An adequate theory must be able to explain those differences, not erase them.

2.6 Variables, Hypotheses, and Predictions

The model will be tested through observable variables. The principal dependent variable will be the degree of stabilization of a doctrinal boundary: from a local dispute without a common sanction to a widely received definition with institutional and juridical consequences. Explanatory variables will include institutional density, the availability of supralocal authority, intensity of controversy, degree of imperial intervention, shared textual resources, communication capacity, and the persistence of alternative communities.

Hypothesis 1 — Definitional Pressure. The more a controversy implicates central practices of communion, worship, or authority, the greater the probability that it will generate an explicit formulation where a margin of ambiguity previously existed. The hypothesis does not predict agreement; it predicts increased precision and normative effort.

Hypothesis 2 — Institutional Density. The denser the episcopal networks and the more developed the synodal procedures, the greater the capacity to transform a local condemnation into a supraregional boundary. If cases with weak institutions produce stable delimitations of equal scope without alternative mechanisms, the hypothesis will have to be modified.

Hypothesis 3 — Coercion and Persistence. The availability of secular coercion may accelerate the enforcement of a definition, but it does not guarantee the disappearance of the condemned position. It may even territorialize the conflict, displace communities, or transform a doctrinal dispute into political opposition. Donatism and the post-Chalcedonian controversies will be especially important tests.

Hypothesis 4 — Retrospective Homogenization. Categories produced by polemical memory will tend to present defeated groups as more coherent and stable than contemporary sources allow us to reconstruct. The model predicts that prosopographical, documentary, and terminological analysis will reveal heterogeneity behind several classical labels.

Hypothesis 5 — Recursivity. A successful definition will reduce certain ambiguities but increase the salience of distinctions that were previously secondary. If a major dogmatic definition closes a field without producing significant new interpretive disputes, that case will constitute evidence against the general claim of the recursive component.

2.7 Comparative Method and Case Selection

Cases will not be selected solely for their theological fame. They must provide sufficient variation to test the model. The second century makes it possible to observe delimitation without a Christian state; Novatianism and Donatism introduce disputes over purity, sacrament, and jurisdiction; Nicaea makes it possible to study an imperially supported council whose result was not immediately stable; Ephesus and Chalcedon display the intense interaction among Christology, sees, conciliar procedures, imperial patronage, and the production of enduring communions.

Each empirical chapter will first reconstruct the case without prematurely applying the vocabulary of the model. Only afterward will an analytical section complete the comparative matrix. This sequence is methodologically important: it prevents the theory from selecting only the evidence that confirms it.

The comparison will also attend to negative or partial cases. Manichaeism, for example, poses a different problem because it may function less as a disputed internal variant than as a rival religion classified from outside as a heresy by Christian authors and imperial legislation. If the model does not distinguish that difference, it will lose analytical capacity. The same is true of Montanism, whose prophetic and disciplinary question cannot be reduced to a single doctrinal proposition.

Geography will be a variable, not a backdrop. Bauer made clear that the map matters; subsequent studies have likewise shown that the circulation of bishops, exiles, imperial routes, languages, and copying centers conditions the spread of formulas and conflicts. The book will avoid speaking of "the Church" as a unified actor when the sources allow us to identify only specific churches, sees, coalitions, or emperors.

2.8 Limits, Conditions of Refutation, and Scope of the Proposal

The first limitation of the model is documentary. The uneven survival of sources makes it impossible to measure exactly the full range of Christian positions in each region. The "admissibility space" will be reconstructed from what can be observed, not treated as a complete population. Conclusions must indicate when an apparent absence may be an effect of the archive.

The second limitation is one of scale. A boundary may be stabilized in one see and remain open in another. Speaking of compression always requires specifying where and for whom. "Nicaea triumphed" is too coarse a statement unless one distinguishes the conciliar authority of 325, the subsequent decades of dispute, and the reception that culminated in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan framework.

The third limitation is causal. The model does not claim to explain the total content of a doctrine through conflict. Scriptural traditions, exegesis, philosophy, liturgy, and prior developments possess causal force of their own. Controversy may force precision without creating from nothing the ideas that are ultimately formulated.

The fourth is normative. Compression is not synonymous with corruption, progress, rationalization, or repression. It is a description of change in the limits of admissibility. The theological evaluation of a definition belongs to another level. This methodological neutrality does not eliminate moral questions when violence or coercion exists; it simply prevents doctrinal truth or falsehood from being inferred from the historical capacity to impose a norm.

The model should be considered weakened if analysis of the cases shows that boundaries do not become more explicit after intense controversies; that institutions do not alter the scale of delimitation; that coercion systematically eliminates alternatives without residue; that polemical labels transparently reflect homogeneous identities; or that major definitions do not generate new interpretive disputes. It must also be modified if a simpler alternative explanation accounts for the same data with greater precision.

The contribution sought, therefore, is limited but ambitious: to move from a history in which heresies appear as a list of defeated doctrines to a comparative history of the mechanisms through which Christian differences were transformed into boundaries of truth, authority, and communion. If the model withstands the empirical examination of the following chapters, it will make it possible to describe the development of orthodoxy neither as an essence that simply manifested itself nor as an arbitrary product of power, but as a recursive historical construction in which doctrinal conviction, institution, text, conflict, and memory operated together.

Transition to the Empirical Chapters

With the conceptual architecture established, the analysis must now leave the abstract level behind. The next chapter will return to the first century and the beginning of the second in order to reconstruct what forms of diversity, authority, and textuality existed before the major heresiological taxonomies. That reconstruction will be the comparative zero point: not an age without boundaries, but a field in which the mechanisms of delimitation operated at a different scale and with different capacities.

From that point onward, each controversy will be examined using the same protocol. The objective will not be to make the evidence confirm the theory, but to force the theory to survive the evidence.

CHAPTER 3

CHRISTIAN PLURALITY BEFORE THE MAJOR DELIMITATIONS

3.1 A Starting Point Without an "Age of Innocence"

The empirical starting point of the model cannot be a supposed stage in which every difference was tolerated. The communities associated with Jesus inherited from Second Temple Judaism a dense repertoire of Scriptures, practices, eschatological expectations, and interpretive disputes; from their earliest decades they experienced controversies over table fellowship, circumcision, authority, purity, prophecy, resurrection, and conduct. The historical problem, therefore, is not to oppose an original plurality without boundaries to a later orthodoxy that invented them. It is to determine what kinds of boundaries could be formulated and enforced by communities that still lacked a stable supraregional structure, a closed Christian canon, and, above all, any coercive capacity of the state. This chapter will function as the baseline case: it will observe existing limits before the great heresiological technologies of the second century and before the conciliar institutionalization of the fourth and fifth centuries.

The evidence also requires us to distinguish scales. A community could possess precise norms without having the means to turn them into a universal norm. Paul could censure conduct in Corinth, intervene by letter in Galatia, or dispute in Antioch, but that capacity did not yet amount to a central magisterium capable of establishing a binding solution for all groups of Jesus followers. Likewise, a local tradition could regard a particular teacher, ascetic practice, or collection of texts as decisive while remaining unknown or secondary to another community. Early diversity was not only doctrinal: it was institutional, liturgical, linguistic, and geographical. This is a decisive difference for the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model, because the degree of compression depends not only on what is disputed, but on who can transform a decision into a durable boundary.

Terminological anachronism must also be avoided. Speaking of "Christianity" in the first century is useful as a historiographical convention, but it can suggest a religion already separate and self-conscious in the same sense as in later periods. Recent research on relations between Jews and followers of Jesus has weakened models that imagined a single, early rupture between two homogeneous blocs. In different places, practices, kinship ties, texts, and polemics continued to intersect for varying periods; hence the language of a single "parting of the ways" is too rigid when used as a universal chronology (Becker and Reed 2003; Boyarin 2004; Shepardson and Fredriksen 2023; Runesson 2023; Paget 2021). This book will use "Christian" as a practical descriptor, while always specifying that identities were historically fluid.

3.2 The Jewish Matrix and the Diversity of Jesus Movements

Jesus, his first disciples, and the first generation of leaders belonged to the Jewish world of Palestine. The proclamation of the kingdom of God, debates over the Torah, the centrality of the Scriptures of Israel, eschatological expectation, and the memory of prophetic and messianic figures were not external borrowings into an already formed religion: they were the very terrain in which Jesus movements arose. The diversity of Judaism in the period, in turn, prevents the use of "Judaism" as a uniform bloc. Pharisees, Sadducees, apocalyptic groups, communities connected to the Temple, synagogue networks of the diaspora, and other currents did not share a single solution to every question of purity, interpretation, or messianic expectation. The Jesus movement arose within that space of dispute, not in opposition to it.

First-century sources reveal internal disagreements from a very early stage. Paul's letter to the Galatians preserves a dispute concerning the circumcision of gentiles, shared table fellowship, and the authority of different missionaries; Paul himself recognizes James, Cephas, and John as figures of weight, yet vigorously defends the independence of the gospel he preaches (Gal 1–2). Acts offers a later and more harmonized representation of the conflict at Antioch and the Jerusalem meeting (Acts 15), and should therefore not be used to erase the tensions visible in the Pauline correspondence. Comparison of the two sources already shows an operation that will become central in later centuries: the memory of a controversy can be narratively reorganized to produce a history of institutional continuity clearer than the immediate experience of the conflict.

The question of the Torah for gentiles shows an early mechanism of delimitation. The problem was not simply one of "law versus grace," a formula dependent on later theological developments, but of which practices should be required of non-Jews incorporated into communities that confessed the Messiah of Israel. Circumcision, food, calendars, commensality, and social relations acquired concrete communal consequences. In terms of the model, gentile expansion increased definitional pressure because it transformed an identity question into a daily problem of belonging. The response, however, did not immediately produce an identical solution throughout the Mediterranean. The canonical sources themselves preserve different strategies for managing continuity with Israel, and literature from the second to the fourth centuries demonstrates that the relationship with Jewish practices remained an open problem long after Paul.

This point corrects two symmetrical narratives. There was no fully formed gentile orthodoxy that simply replaced a residual Jewish Christianity, but neither was there an undifferentiated continuity in which every boundary lacked importance. Boundaries shifted unevenly. Some Christian authors defined their identity through intense appropriations of the Scriptures of Israel while at the same time polemicizing against contemporary Jewish communities. Other groups maintained observances or traditions that later writers classified as "Judaizing." The modern category "Jewish Christianity" is useful only when practices, texts, and contexts are specified, because it can turn very different phenomena into a single entity (Paget 2021).

3.3 Gentile Expansion and the Controversy over the Torah

The gentile mission altered the structure of the movement in ways difficult to overstate. In communities such as Corinth, Philippi, or Thessalonica, belonging could no longer be described simply through genealogy, circumcision, or ordinary incorporation into the Jewish people. Paul responded by constructing an identity around the Messiah, the Spirit, baptism, and a particular reading of the promises to Abraham. That solution had expansive capacity, but it did not eliminate plurality.

The Pauline corpus shows disputes over food offered to idols, sexuality, spiritual gifts, resurrection, charismatic hierarchies, and apostolic authority. In other words, opening one boundary partially resolved one question — the incorporation of gentiles without circumcision — and multiplied others. This is an early example of the recursive component of the model: a functional definition generates a new field of problems.

It must be emphasized, however, that Paul did not possess an institution capable of imposing his decisions uniformly. His authority was constructed through the founding of communities, letters, collaborators, apostolic memory, and rhetorical capacity. In 1 Corinthians he is compelled to argue against factions that appeal to different names; in 2 Corinthians he defends his legitimacy against rivals; in Galatians he dramatizes conflict with other missionaries. Apostolic authority is real, but competitive. Even the later existence of letters attributed to Paul shows that the apostolic name became a resource capable of sustaining new normative interventions. For the history of orthodoxy, this matters because personal authority precedes its institutional and textual stabilization.

The problem becomes more visible when Paul's reception is examined. Marcion would elevate him in the second century as the privileged witness to a radical reading of the difference between gospel and law; Irenaeus and Tertullian, without abandoning Paul, would contest precisely that appropriation. Traditions that preserved the names of Peter, James, or John likewise articulated apostolic memories with different emphases. The "apostle" was not yet an empty and homogeneous category: it was a form of authoritative capital whose interpretation had to be contested. The writings now grouped as the Apostolic Fathers confirm an uneven reception of Peter, Paul, and James and remind us that the modern corpus is itself a much later editorial construction (Edsall 2021).

3.4 Geography, Networks, and the Asymmetry of Communities

Geography prevents us from narrating the first and early second centuries as though a single center existed. Jerusalem possessed extraordinary symbolic and personal weight in the first generation; Antioch was a decisive space for gentile expansion; the cities of Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy developed different networks; Alexandria appears only fragmentarily in the earliest sources despite its later importance. Roman roads, ports, trade, the travel of teachers, and the circulation of letters enabled rapid connections by ancient standards, but they did not eliminate distance. A local decision could travel, be copied, and acquire prestige; it could also be ignored. Diffusion is a variable, not an assumption.

Letters constituted an early technology of supralocality. Paul wrote to communities he had founded or knew; 1 Clement represents the church of Rome intervening in a crisis at Corinth; Ignatius, on his way to Rome, addressed letters to several churches in Asia Minor and to Polycarp. These practices created links between communities without yet constituting a central administration. The letter allows an absent authority to speak, a community to remember a decision, and a text to be read elsewhere. When Colossians calls for the exchange of letters with Laodicea (Col 4:16), or when 1 Clement expects to be received as an authoritative exhortation, we see a process through which communication contributes to turning personal relations into institutional memory.

Documentary asymmetry requires us not to confuse visibility with centrality. We know some communities better because their texts survived, not necessarily because they dominated the first century. Egypt offers a clear example: its later documentary and theological richness does not authorize us to reconstruct with confidence the configuration of its Christian communities in the earliest decades. The archive is biased by preservation, copying, and discovery. The model will therefore record as "unobserved" what the sources do not permit us to decide, rather than turning silence into evidence of uniformity. This rule is especially important when the next chapter addresses currents known almost exclusively through opponents.

3.5 Authorities in the Plural: Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, and Local Leaders

Later Christianity became accustomed to thinking of the bishop as the principal figure of governance, but the path toward that form of authority was not linear. Early sources mention apostles, prophets, teachers, presbyters, episkopoi, deacons, hosts of house churches, widows, and other actors with leadership functions. Nor should these designations be automatically projected onto the offices of the fourth century. Recent studies of early Christian authorities emphasize precisely the coexistence of diverse bearers of legitimacy before the consolidation of episcopal government (Leppin 2023).

The Didache is especially valuable because it preserves a world in which itinerant prophets and teachers coexist with local leaders. Chapters 11–13 regulate the reception of apostles and prophets, establish practical criteria for detecting abuses, and recognize the genuine prophet's right to certain resources; chapter 15, in turn, exhorts the community to appoint worthy episkopoi and deacons. This is not a community without norms. On the contrary, the text demonstrates an intense concern to distinguish legitimate authority from exploitation, but it does so through tests of conduct, duration of stay, and conformity with a shared teaching, not through a supraregional office capable of certifying all prophets. The boundary exists; its mechanism of enforcement is local.

First Clement offers another configuration. Faced with the deposition of leaders in Corinth, the author appeals to order, the transmission of functions, and the precedent of the apostles, who are said to have appointed ministers and provided for the continuity of their service (1 Clem. 42–44). The argument does not yet amount to the fully developed theory of apostolic succession that we will encounter in Irenaeus, but it supplies a component that will be reused: present legitimacy can be grounded in a retrospective chain linked to the apostles. Controversy generates institutional memory. The Corinthian conflict does not merely seek to resolve a local dispute; it compels a narrative explaining why certain offices deserve continuity.

Ignatius of Antioch, in letters commonly dated to the beginning of the second century although their exact dating remains disputed, offers a much more concentrated defense of the bishop, presbyters, and deacons. In Smyrnaeans 8 he links the legitimate celebration of the Eucharist to the bishop or to whomever the bishop authorizes; in other letters he insists on concord under that structure. This is powerful evidence for the monoepiscopal model in the communities he addresses, but it does not prove that the system existed universally. Precisely because Ignatius exhorts, persuades, and combats divisions, his letters show that the institutional form he defends still requires consolidation. Normativity visible in a polemical text is evidence of a boundary under construction, not necessarily of an already uniform reality.

3.6 Scriptures, Memory, and Tradition Before a Closed New Testament

The earliest Christian communities received as Scripture a body of Jewish texts in diverse linguistic and textual forms, with Greek predominating in many Mediterranean contexts. To that authority were added memories of Jesus, oral traditions, apostolic letters, prophecies, and, progressively, Gospel narratives. The anachronistic error is to imagine that "the Christian Bible" existed from the beginning as a stable volume with closed Old and New Testaments. The first and second centuries instead reveal different degrees of authority and circulation. A text could be read as inspired or normative even though no universal list yet fixed all the boundaries of the collection.

The relationship between orality and textuality was complementary. The Apostolic Fathers preserve sayings of Jesus in forms that sometimes coincide with the known Gospels and at other times suggest the circulation of oral tradition or texts not identical to our canonical forms. Research on the Jesus tradition in this corpus emphasizes that orality remained a significant medium even as written texts gained authority (Young 2021). This coexistence matters for the model: textual compression cannot be measured only by asking how many books were "inside" or "outside," but by observing which sources could be used normatively and what mechanisms justified that authority.

At the beginning of the second century, Gospels circulated in pluriform fashion. The fact that four Gospels would later be received together should not be projected backward as the original situation. Tatian would attempt to harmonize them; Irenaeus would programmatically defend the legitimacy of four; other readers would organize plurality through synopses, harmonies, or selection. Recent study of second-century Gospel textuality has shown that Gospel diversity produced not only competition but also techniques for ordering a multiple corpus (Coogan and Rodriguez 2023). The final result — a Fourfold Gospel — is therefore a historical solution to a problem of plurality, not a self-evident condition from the beginning.

Nor should the formation of the canon be explained by a single cause. Marcion played an important role in bringing into focus the question of which Gospel and which apostolic letters should possess authority, but the old formula according to which "Marcion created the Catholic canon by reaction" simplifies a broader process. Collections and authoritative uses already existed before him; the formal lists that survive are later and display variation. The history of the canon includes selection, copying, liturgy, controversy, apostolic attribution, and reading practices. Collections stabilized gradually and unevenly (Metzger 1987; Gallagher and Meade 2017; Verheyden 2017).

3.7 Boundary-Making Practices: Baptism, Table Fellowship, Fasting, and Discipline

Early boundaries were not only propositional. Baptism, Eucharist, fasting, hospitality, and discipline defined belonging as concretely as a doctrinal formula did. The Didache prescribes a Trinitarian baptismal form and provides practical alternatives according to the availability of water (Did. 7); it distinguishes fasting days from those observed by "the hypocrites" (Did. 8); and it limits Eucharistic participation to the baptized (Did. 9). These passages reveal an already active grammar of identity: a community defines who may participate, when fasting occurs, and how a central rite is administered. There is no absence of orthopraxy, even though its mechanisms differ from conciliar ones.

Christian table fellowship was particularly sensitive because it condensed doctrines and social relations. The Antioch conflict narrated by Paul shows that eating together could materialize the question of gentile belonging. In Corinth, food sacrificed to idols and the communal meal compel Paul to link freedom, conscience, body, and communion. In the second century, the Eucharist would also become a polemical marker against groups accused of denying the reality of Christ's flesh, as Ignatius of Antioch shows. A liturgical boundary can precede or reinforce the conceptual formulation of a doctrinal boundary.

Discipline offers a third example. Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, the Didache, and other texts know procedures of correction and exclusion. The scale, however, remains communal or networked. Excommunication is not yet a juridical category backed by the state, and in many contexts an excluded individual could join another community or form an alternative one. This limitation of capacity explains why diversity can persist even when the language of condemnation is severe. Rhetorical intensity must not be confused with institutional effectiveness.

3.8 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Hermas: Uneven Consolidations

Between the end of the first century and the first half of the second, the writings conventionally grouped as the Apostolic Fathers allow us to observe processes of consolidation that do not advance at the same pace. First Clement emphasizes ministerial continuity and order; Ignatius concentrates authority around the bishop; Polycarp combines moral exhortation, Pauline reception, and concern over false teachers; the Shepherd of Hermas imagines the Church through visions, penitential discipline, and prophetic authority. The internal diversity of the corpus itself prevents us from turning it into a snapshot of a uniform "post-apostolic Church." Precisely for that reason it is useful: it shows several responses to the common problem of how to maintain identity and discipline once the founding generation is no longer present.

The Shepherd of Hermas deserves attention because it complicates any linear account of institutionalization that rapidly expels charisma. Its authority is articulated through revelations, commandments, and visions; at the same time, the text is deeply concerned with sin, repentance, and the configuration of the community. Prophecy is not automatically the antithesis of institution. This observation will be crucial when analyzing the New Prophecy in the next chapter: the Montanist conflict cannot be explained simply as the victory of rational bishops over charismatic prophets, because forms of prophetic authority continued to be recognizable within Christianity.

Polycarp, for his part, illustrates the creation of translocal memory. His letter to the Philippians cites or alludes to traditions that later form part of the New Testament and presents itself within a network that remembers Paul. The Martyrdom of Polycarp, a work of complex composition and transmission, would later turn his death into a model. Christian authority thus accumulates in layers: person, letter, memory, martyrdom narrative, copy. A boundary can rest on that memory without requiring a decree. This sedimentation of prestige prepares the ground for later appeals to "apostolic churches" and chains of witnesses.

3.9 Assessment of the Baseline Case: Real Boundaries, Limited Capacity for Universalization

The baseline case allows us to reject the idea of an "absence of orthodoxy" if that expression is understood to mean an absence of norms. Early communities distinguished true and false teaching, permitted and forbidden practices, trustworthy and abusive authorities, members and excluded persons. What was lacking was not a will to delimit, but an infrastructure capable of rapidly turning a local decision into a stable supraregional classification. The predominant mechanisms were epistolary, charismatic, liturgical, scriptural, and communal. Authority was plural and negotiated. This combination produced real but porous, overlapping, and geographically uneven boundaries.

In terms of the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model, the first and early second centuries show high definitional pressure in certain conflicts, low or intermediate institutional density, and an absence of specifically Christian secular coercion. Authoritative textuality is growing, but there is no closed New Testament of universal reception. Apostolic memory functions as a resource of legitimacy, although multiple actors can claim it. The expected consequence is precisely what we observe: intense definitional activity on specific questions, circulation of letters and practices, but difficulty stabilizing a common large-scale taxonomy of deviations.

The model's first hypothesis receives partial support: controversies over gentiles, table fellowship, prophecy, or ministry produce more explicit formulations. The second also receives some support: where denser networks and more stable ministerial forms appear, the capacity to regulate community and worship increases. The fourth — retrospective homogenization — is already visible when later narratives present as linear sequences conflicts that contemporary sources show to have been more open. The coercion hypothesis cannot yet be tested because its principal variable is absent: there is no Christian state prepared to enforce doctrinal decisions.

The move into the second century will therefore not be a leap from freedom to repression, but an acceleration of technologies already present in germinal form. The multiplication of teachers, schools, texts, Gospels, and networks forces more precise answers to three questions: which Scripture possesses authority, which chain of teaching deserves trust, and which institution can decide when rival interpretations appeal to the same apostles. Marcion, the groups that historiography has called Gnostic, and the New Prophecy are not simply external "enemies" of a finished orthodoxy. They are stress tests that make visible the inadequacies of earlier mechanisms and contribute to the emergence of more explicit forms of boundary-making.

CHAPTER 4

THE SECOND CENTURY AND THE FIRST STABLE BOUNDARY-MAKING TECHNOLOGIES

4.1 The Second Century as a Field of Acceleration

The second century should not be treated as a corridor between the New Testament and the great councils. It is the period in which geographical expansion, textual production, and competition for apostolic memory make it far more costly to leave certain questions undefined. The number of visible actors increases: apologists, urban teachers, prophets, exegetical schools, bishops, communities with collections of writings, and networks spanning provinces. At the same time, the Empire still offers no Christian faction a state apparatus with which to impose its decisions. This combination — high plurality, increasing communication, and the absence of external coercive backing — makes the second century an especially rigorous test for the model.

Historiography has often described the period as a "laboratory" of Christian identities. The metaphor is useful so long as it does not suggest neutral experiments without consequences. Disputes concern table fellowship, baptism, prophecy, sexuality, biblical interpretation, cosmology, and authority. Some disagreements produce separate communities; others coexist for decades within partially shared networks. Nor does unity advance in a single direction: a local solution can fail, a condemnation may not be received, and a teacher denounced in one city may find an audience in another. Paget and Lieu have insisted that the study of the second century must attend simultaneously to continuity and discontinuity, avoiding models that turn it simply into the decline of an apostolic purity or the prehistory of Nicaea (Paget and Lieu 2017).

Three controversies will allow us to observe different mechanisms. Marcion poses with extraordinary clarity the problem of God, Scripture, gospel, and Pauline authority. The traditions grouped for centuries under "Gnosticism" show how heresiology can manufacture an aggregated category out of heterogeneous materials. The New Prophecy forces a decision about who may speak with authority in the name of the Spirit and how revelation, discipline, and episcopal structure relate to one another. Irenaeus and Tertullian will be studied not only as refuters: their works constitute positive technologies of compression because they articulate rule of faith, apostolic genealogy, textual corpus, and procedures for disqualifying rival interpretations.

4.2 Marcion: God, Scripture, and the Problem of Reconstructing the Adversary

Marcion is a methodologically awkward case and, precisely for that reason, a useful one. None of his works survives directly. We know him through adversaries — above all Tertullian, Epiphanius, and other heresiological authors — and through modern reconstructions of the texts he used. Tradition places him in Rome in the mid-second century, but many biographical details depend on later narratives with polemical functions. A critical history must separate what is firmly attested from narratives designed to turn his trajectory into an example of rupture. Judith Lieu has shown with particular clarity that "Marcion the heretic" is also the product of a long polemical fabrication rather than a transparent representation of the historical Marcion (Lieu 2015).

The safest reconstruction begins with his scriptural and theological project. Marcion radically distinguished the just creator God known in the Jewish Scriptures from the good God revealed by Jesus Christ; he read Paul as the privileged witness to that novelty and used a Gospel closely related to Luke together with a collection of Pauline letters. The exact relationship between his Gospel and canonical Luke remains a matter of textual debate. The traditional hypothesis holds that Marcion abridged or modified Luke; recent research has reopened the question of priority and textual history without producing a consensus that would allow a single solution to be presented as established fact (Lieu 2015; Roth 2015; Forness 2021). This manuscript will therefore retain a cautious formulation: there is a close literary relationship, but the direction and extent of editing must be discussed case by case.

The distinction between the creator and the unknown or good God reorganized the reading of the entire biblical story. It was not simply a matter of rejecting the Old Testament as a book; it involved maintaining that the tensions between law and gospel, judgment and mercy, creation and salvation revealed two distinct divine principles. Catholic polemic would respond precisely by affirming the unity of creation and redemption. In terms of the model, Marcion raises definitional pressure because he forces a decision about whether scriptural continuity and the unity of the creator God with the Father of Jesus are conditions of belonging. A question that could be expressed through multiple exegeses becomes an explicit theological boundary.

Paul's role is equally important. Marcion did not need to invent the tension between gospel and law: he could draw on authentic Pauline letters. His originality lay in turning a particular reading of that tension into a radical hermeneutical principle. The proto-orthodox response did not consist in expelling Paul from the canon, but in contesting his interpretation, integrating him with other apostles, and reading him within a unified economy of the Scriptures. This strategy is theoretically significant: in response to a selective appropriation of a shared authority, compression can operate through coordinated expansion — more witnesses, more texts, an interpretive rule — and not only through reduction.

4.3 The "Marcionite Canon" and Pressure on Textual Authority

The expression "Marcionite canon" should be used with caution. Marcion possessed a delimited collection of authorized texts — a Gospel and a Pauline Apostolikon — but calling that collection "the first New Testament" may project onto him a later category and turn a complex debate into a simple genealogy. What is historically decisive is that his project made visible a relationship between corpus and doctrine: selecting which writings count and how they are read makes it possible to configure a theological world. The Marcionite collection was not an appendix to his theology; it was one of its principal instruments.

Nor can the Catholic response be reduced to "creating the canon" as a defensive act. Before Marcion, Pauline collections and authoritative Gospels were already circulating; after him, stabilization remained gradual and uneven. By the end of the second century, Irenaeus could defend four Gospels as a normative set, but other works retained liturgical or spiritual prestige, and some writings now included in the New Testament continued to be disputed for centuries. The canonical lists preserved by Gallagher and Meade show that formal fixation of the corpus is a prolonged process, not an instantaneous decision in the year 150 (Gallagher and Meade 2017).

Marcion is better understood as an accelerator than as a single cause. His collection increases the cost of ambiguity because it demonstrates that a radical interpretation can rest on a coherent Christian corpus and on an apostle who is unquestionably central. In response, his opponents need to justify not only which texts they possess, but why those texts must be read together. This shift is a form of textual compression: the boundary ceases to be exclusively "this book is acceptable" and begins to include "this book must be interpreted in relation to these others and within this rule." Authority becomes relational.

The controversy also confirms the value of distinguishing evidence from reconstruction. Tertullian quotes extensively from the Marcionite Gospel and Apostolikon, but he does so in order to refute them; Epiphanius composes lists of supposed alterations; reconstructing the lost text requires evaluating which variant truly comes from Marcion and which may belong to the wider textual history of Luke or Paul. The work of Lieu, Roth, and Forness shows that source criticism is not a technical preliminary but a substantive part of the historical argument. If the identity of the adversary depends on an uncertain textual reconstruction, the certainty of any conclusion about his program must also be graded.

4.4 From "Gnosticism" to Multiple Traditions: The Problem of the Category

Few words illustrate the danger of retrospective orthodoxy better than "Gnosticism." For a long time, the term functioned as the name of a recognizable religion or movement characterized by supposedly common traits: dualism, contempt for the material world, a myth of divine fall, salvation through knowledge, and opposition to ecclesial Christianity. That synthesis made a difficult body of documentation easier to organize, but it also tended to fuse teachers, myths, schools, and texts that did not call themselves members of a single Gnostic religion. Michael Williams and Karen King influentially challenged the usefulness of the category when it is used as a stable essence; David Brakke, by contrast, proposed retaining more restricted and historically defined uses (Williams 1996; King 2003; Brakke 2010).

The solution adopted in this book is descriptive and stratified. The phrase "traditions frequently called Gnostic" will be used when previous historiography is the object of discussion; more specific names — Valentinian, Sethian, or others — will be used when there is sufficient basis; and no common institution will be inferred from mythological similarities. The decision is not purely terminological. If the model seeks to test the hypothesis of retrospective homogenization, it cannot begin by accepting as a historical unity something whose unity must itself be demonstrated.

Irenaeus offers a central example of the mechanism of aggregation. In Adversus haereses he organizes a succession of doctrines and teachers that he presents as proliferating deviations from an earlier truth. His account of the Valentinians is extraordinarily valuable because it preserves materials that would otherwise have been lost, but its polemical architecture has a purpose: to display proliferation, contradiction, and distance from the ecclesial rule. The catalogue produces kinship among adversaries. Later historiography would inherit that organization and frequently turn Irenaeus's taxonomy into an ontological map of second-century Christianity. The analysis must use the map without confusing it with the territory.

The Valentinians also show that boundary and interiority could overlap. Sources such as Irenaeus and Tertullian present them as dangerous adversaries precisely because they used Christian Scriptures, sacramental language, and an exegesis capable of circulating within broader communities. The opposition was not always between two clearly separate religions. A teacher could offer an esoteric interpretation or a complex cosmology to hearers who shared baptism, Gospels, and apostolic names with their critics. The greater the shared vocabulary, the more important the rule becomes that determines which reading of that vocabulary is admissible.

4.5 Nag Hammadi After 1945: Texts, Codices, and Readers

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in Egypt in 1945 transformed the study of these traditions because it provided an extensive library of texts without exclusive dependence on heresiological mediation. The discovery, however, does not provide a direct snapshot of "second-century Gnosticism." The surviving codices are Coptic manuscripts produced in the fourth century, although many of the works they contain are translations of earlier Greek compositions and possess different histories of transmission. The distinctions among the date of the codex, the date of composition, and the original context of each treatise must be preserved.

The Nag Hammadi texts reveal variety: apocalypses, dialogues, theological treatises, collections of sayings, reinterpretations of Genesis, and works that share little more than their joint preservation. Nor does the fact that they are bound within the same collection automatically demonstrate that a single community used all the texts in a doctrinally uniform way. Paul Linjamaa's recent research has shifted attention toward the materiality of the codices, reading practices, annotations, and features of production, reminding us that manuscripts are historical objects and not merely transparent containers of ideas (Linjamaa 2024).

This documentary change makes it possible to measure heresiological distortion more precisely. In some cases, Irenaeus preserves schemes that can be compared with surviving texts and proves to possess substantive information; in others, his categories simplify or reorganize. The discovery does not require replacing a narrative of "heretics falsified by the victors" with another of "heretics fully recovered." It requires triangulation. Hostile sources and direct codices answer different questions. Critical discipline must reconstruct coincidences, divergences, contexts, and silences without automatically attributing greater reliability to a source because it comes from the group under study.

For the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model, Nag Hammadi offers a test of Hypothesis 4. If polemical labels homogenize retrospectively, direct documentation should reveal combinations and differences that the catalogue erases. This occurs often enough to make the hypothesis plausible, though not absolutely: certain mythological repertoires and intellectual networks are real. The conclusion is not that categories are always fictitious, but that their scale must be adjusted to the evidence. Taxonomic compression produces classificatory usefulness at the potential cost of losing internal variation.

4.6 The New Prophecy: Revelation, Discipline, and Charismatic Authority

The movement that its opponents and later historiography called Montanism originated in Phrygia during the second half of the second century. The sources name Montanus and, prominently, the prophetesses Prisca or Priscilla and Maximilla; Pepuza and Tymion acquired importance in the movement's geography. The exact chronology of its beginnings is not entirely certain, and reconstructions depend on Eusebius, Epiphanius, and later inscriptions. The research of Tabbernee and the regional analysis in Christianizing Asia Minor place the New Prophecy within a Christian landscape in which prophetic activity was not, in itself, an anomaly (Tabbernee 2007; McKechnie 2019).

The conflict centered on the legitimacy of prophecy, its mode of manifestation, its disciplinary demands, and the authority of revelations announcing a new or intensified phase of the Spirit's action. Critics accused the prophets of disorderly ecstasy, innovation, and false inspiration. But reducing the controversy to "prophecy versus institution" is historically insufficient. Other communities recognized prophets; the Shepherd of Hermas had shown a Christianity compatible with charismatic revelation; the Didache regulated itinerant prophets. The decisive question was who could discern the true spirit and whether a new revelation could impose discipline on communities already organized.

The prominence of Prisca and Maximilla also introduces a gender dimension that hostile sources could exploit polemically. The existence of female prophets was not unknown in early Christianity, but the visibility and authority of these women within the New Prophecy forced their critics to define not only the content of revelation but the legitimate form of spiritual leadership. Studies such as those of Trevett and Lössl have shown that the movement must be situated within the tension among paideia, prophecy, discipline, and authority, not in a simple opposition between irrational enthusiasm and ordered theology (Trevett 1996; Lössl 2021).

The institutional reaction was gradual. Eusebius preserves reports of synods and writings against the New Prophecy, but condemnation did not produce immediate disappearance; Montanist communities persisted for centuries and later became the object of imperial legislation. In the period under consideration, the absence of state coercion confirms a prediction of the model: an ecclesial boundary can become explicit and still coexist with durable alternative networks. Heresy-making is a process, not the instant in which an author pronounces a condemnation.

Tertullian complicates the picture further. Later in his career he sympathized with the New Prophecy and defended disciplinary positions associated with it, but reducing him to a "Montanist convert" who simply left the Catholic Church depends on later testimony and oversimplifies the continuity of his thought. What matters for this chapter is that an author decisive in constructing anti-heretical arguments could, at the same time, support a current that other churches considered problematic. Boundaries were still moving. The same technology of exclusion did not guarantee that all its users would always remain on the same side.

4.7 Irenaeus of Lyons: Rule of Faith, Succession, and the Fourfold Gospel

Irenaeus of Lyons, writing toward the end of the second century, represents a change of scale. Adversus haereses is not the first Christian text to denounce false teachers, but it offers an extraordinarily ambitious architecture for explaining why diverse doctrines should be regarded as deviations from a single tradition. His strategy combines exposition of the adversary, rule of faith, Scripture, episcopal succession, and ecclesial geography. The result is more than a doctrinal refutation: it is a system of authentication.

The rule of faith, summarized in Adversus haereses 1.10.1 and parallel passages, makes it possible to affirm that dispersed churches share the same fundamental confession. The force of the argument does not depend on literal uniformity of formulas, but on a narrative structure: one creator God, Jesus Christ, the Spirit, incarnation, passion, resurrection, and consummation. Against exegeses that derive complex cosmologies from shared texts, Irenaeus maintains that interpretation must accord with that received narrative. The compression is hermeneutical: it does not eliminate the difficult text, but limits the set of readings that can claim ecclesial legitimacy.

Apostolic succession adds an institutional mechanism. In 3.3, Irenaeus argues that tradition can be verified in churches founded by apostles and offers Rome as an eminent example through a sequence of leaders. The exact history of the earliest episcopal lists requires caution, but the polemical use is evident: doctrinal continuity becomes visible in a chain of persons and sees. The response to an esoteric teaching does not consist only in offering another exegesis; it consists in asking where, through whom, and publicly it was transmitted. The public character of the tradition becomes a criterion against the alleged reservation of secret teachings.

The Fourfold Gospel constitutes a third technology. In 3.11.8, Irenaeus argues that there are four Gospels and constructs symbolic arguments for that number. More important than the numerology is the historical fact: Gospel plurality is transformed into a delimited plurality. Neither a single Gospel should monopolize testimony nor should an indefinite proliferation of narratives possess equal authority. The solution is not to reduce four to one, but to compress a broader field into a coordinated set. Again, compression can be configurational rather than purely subtractive.

Irenaeus also shows the geographical dimension of orthodoxy. His argument presupposes that churches separated by language and territory can share one faith and that this concord constitutes evidence. This does not prove that practices and theologies were identical; it turns similarity into a normative resource. The step is important: a supralocal boundary is legitimized through the idea of distributed consensus. In terms of Hypothesis 2, the network of churches and leaders increases the capacity to scale a condemnation beyond a particular community.

The Irenaean work should not, however, be turned into proof that orthodoxy was already fully stabilized. The Paschal controversy at the end of the second century, in which Victor of Rome attempted to exclude churches of Asia over the date of Easter and prompted a moderating intervention from Irenaeus according to Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 5.23–25), demonstrates that authority, regional custom, and communion could come into tension even among actors who shared broad doctrinal assumptions. The conduct attributed to Irenaeus itself illustrates a differentiated boundary: not every liturgical diversity had to become heresy.

4.8 Tertullian: Prescription, Apostolicity, and a Boundary That Also Moves

Tertullian carries several of these mechanisms into Christian Latin with a characteristic juridical and rhetorical aggressiveness. De praescriptione haereticorum formulates a strategy that seeks to prevent the dispute from depending indefinitely on verse-by-verse exegesis. If the Scriptures belong to the churches that possess the apostolic tradition, he argues in essence, those who depart from that tradition have no right to use them against their legitimate heirs. "Prescription" shifts the litigation from the specific content to the legitimacy of the interpreter.

In chapter 13 of De praescriptione, Tertullian summarizes a rule of faith; in chapters 20–21 he develops the link between apostolic teaching and churches founded from that mission. The parallel with Irenaeus is clear, but the argumentative form adds an element: not every reading deserves to be judged under the same conditions. The epistemological boundary precedes the exegetical debate. In terms of the model, this constitutes procedural compression: who is authorized to participate as a legitimate interpreter is defined before each proposition is examined.

Adversus Marcionem shows the other side of the procedure. Tertullian does not avoid exegesis; on the contrary, he devotes enormous effort to demonstrating that the Gospel and letters used by Marcion can be read against his system and to defending the unity of the creator and redeeming God. This double strategy — prescription of legitimacy and textual combat — reveals that no single technology is sufficient by itself. The doctrinal boundary must be reinforced at several levels: tradition, text, institution, and public rhetoric.

Tertullian's later relationship with the New Prophecy prevents us from imagining these mechanisms as the static property of an already closed organization. The same author who excludes Marcionites and Valentinians can regard as legitimate prophetic demands that other Christians reject. Late second-century orthodoxy therefore possesses a core of increasingly stable boundaries and a perimeter that is still mobile. This concentric structure is more precise than the image of a single line separating Church and heresy on every issue.

4.9 The Canon as a Multicausal Process, Not a Single Reaction

The preceding cases make it possible to reconstruct canonical formation without turning it into an automatic response to Marcion. Several forces converge: the inherited authority of the Scriptures of Israel; preservation of memories of Jesus; circulation of apostolic letters; the liturgical need for texts for public reading; polemic against rival interpretations; the search for links with apostles; practices of copying and collection. None of these forces, in isolation, explains the result. The canon emerges from an ecology of authority.

The second half of the second century shows a process of increasing compression. Justin refers to apostolic memoirs being read in assembly; Tatian produces a Gospel harmony; Irenaeus defends four Gospels; the Muratorian Fragment — of disputed date, although traditionally placed at the end of the second century — offers a list and judgments concerning various writings. Even if an early date for the fragment is accepted, its content demonstrates precisely that the process is still underway: it admits, discusses, and excludes. The later lists studied by Gallagher and Meade confirm that complete stabilization of the New Testament does not belong to a single moment.

Apostolicity functions as a criterion, but not mechanically. Some texts bearing apostolic names were rejected; others without a direct apostolic author were accepted because of their relation to an apostolic tradition. Antiquity was not sufficient either. Liturgical reception, doctrinal consonance, and widespread use interacted. In Irenaeus, doctrine and corpus mutually legitimize one another: the rule makes it possible to read the Scriptures and the Scriptures confirm the rule. This circularity should not simply be described as a fallacy; historically, it is a system of authority that distributes proof across several supports.

The Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model can formulate a refinement here. Textual compression is not merely a reduction in the number of possible books. It is an increase in constraints on selection, combination, and reading. A corpus may expand and still produce greater compression if the interdependence of its components increases and interpretations that could previously rest on a single witness are limited. The shift from one exclusive Gospel to four coordinated Gospels is an example of material expansion accompanied by hermeneutical reduction of the admissibility space.

4.10 First Test of the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model

The cases of the second century make it possible to assess for the first time the hypotheses formulated in chapter 2. Hypothesis 1, definitional pressure, receives significant support. Marcion forces his opponents to make explicit the unity between creator and redeemer, continuity between the Scriptures of Israel and the gospel, and the legitimacy of a broader corpus; Valentinian traditions compel greater precision concerning the relationship among exegesis, rule of faith, and public tradition; the New Prophecy makes it necessary to discriminate between legitimate prophecy and innovation. In every case, conflict increases the precision of normative discourse, even when it does not produce immediate agreement.

Hypothesis 2, institutional density, receives more qualified support. Condemnations become more scalable where episcopal networks, exchange of letters, and appeals to apostolic sees exist, as Irenaeus demonstrates. Yet the New Prophecy and Marcionism persist despite condemnation and develop their own structures. This requires adding a variable: alternative communities can also increase their institutional density. The boundary depends not only on the organizational strength of the group that will become orthodox, but on the relationship between rival capacities.

Hypothesis 3, coercion and persistence, can be assessed only negatively during this period. There is not yet Christian imperial legislation designed to enforce doctrinal condemnations;

exclusion therefore depends on communion, reputation, access to networks, communal property, and the capacity for institutional reproduction. The persistence of Marcionites, Montanists, and various schools over generations demonstrates that ecclesial condemnation is not equivalent to disappearance. When the state enters the system in the fourth century, we will be able to compare whether it changes the speed and territoriality of compression.

Hypothesis 4, retrospective homogenization, finds its clearest test in "Gnosticism" and, in another register, in the heresiological fabrication of Marcion. The adversaries did not necessarily invent from nothing the traits they denounced, but they organized them into genealogies and categories that survived longer than the original historical configurations. Nag Hammadi makes it possible to see differences that the catalogue had flattened; Lieu's work makes it possible to observe how successive testimonies accumulate traits around Marcion. Sedimentation is empirically observable.

Hypothesis 5, recursivity, is also strengthened. The solution of the Fourfold Gospel does not eliminate the problem of interpretation; it reorganizes it. Apostolic succession does not end conflicts of authority; it creates new questions about which sees, lists, and transmissions count. Regulation of prophecy does not eliminate charisma; it compels the production of criteria of discernment. The rule of faith reduces certain exegetical margins and, by doing so, makes the dispute over the rule itself more visible. Every successful boundary becomes infrastructure for the next controversy.

The analysis nevertheless requires the initial formulation of the model to be modified in two respects. First, "compression" does not always mean exclusion of elements: it can produce a broader but more coordinated set, as in the Fourfold Gospel. Second, institutional density must be measured relationally. A church may possess strong bishops and networks, but if the rival movement also possesses texts, teachers, resources, and communities, stabilization will be slower. These corrections are important because they show that the model does not function as a scheme designed to confirm any outcome: the evidence can alter its variables.

The second century therefore ends with a Christianity in which several boundary-making technologies are already recognizable: rules of faith, apostolic genealogies, coordinated textual collections, lists of adversaries, episcopal networks, and synodal procedures. But none of them yet possesses a Christian secular arm. The difference between condemning and enforcing remains enormous. The next chapter will examine what happens when questions of purity, penance, and jurisdiction place episcopal authority at the center of belonging and prepare the stage for an even greater transformation: the entry of imperial power into the production of orthodoxy.

CHAPTER 5

PURITY, AUTHORITY, AND COMMUNION: THE CHURCH AS A DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY

5.1 From Exceptional Martyrdom to a Crisis of Belonging

The third century shifts the center of the problem. In the second century, many of the disputes analyzed revolved around Scripture, tradition, revelation, and interpretive legitimacy. In the third century those dimensions do not disappear, but the question of belonging acquires a new institutional density. What happens when a Christian sacrifices under pressure, purchases a certificate without sacrificing, hands over sacred books, cooperates with officials, or temporarily abandons the community? Who can decide whether that person returns? A confessor who has survived prison, a presbyter, a bishop, a synod? Heresy ceases to be the only laboratory of boundaries. Penance, martyrdom, and sacramental discipline show that the Church is also defined through decisions concerning bodies, reputations, and access to communion.

The case is especially useful for the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model because it allows us to observe a form of compression that does not begin with a doctrinal innovation. An external pressure — the imperial sacrificial policy — produces an internal crisis. The subsequent controversy does not concern, in the first instance, who Christ is, but what ecclesial consequences follow from conduct performed under conditions of fear and coercion. The result will be an intensification of episcopal procedures, communion lists, interchurch correspondence, regional councils, and penitential rules. The boundary becomes administrable. The Church not only formulates what must be believed; it develops an increasing capacity to decide who is within communion and under what conditions a person may return.

This transformation should not be narrated as a linear rise of the episcopate. Hartmut Leppin has insisted that Christian authority remained plural and contested; in Carthage in particular, Cyprian's authority was challenged by confessors, presbyters, and patronage networks. The very fact that a bishop defended his competence so vigorously indicates that this competence was not self-evident. Institutionalization becomes visible in conflict, not before it. The third century thus offers a privileged setting for observing how a concrete pastoral function — reconciling those who had failed during a persecution — helped turn the bishop into a focal point for ecclesial decision-making (Brent 2010; Leppin 2023).

5.2 Decius, Sacrifice, and Libelli: What We Know and What We Do Not

The persecution associated with the emperor Decius, between 249 and 251, is often presented as a campaign directed simply and exclusively against Christians. The evidence requires greater caution. The text of the imperial edict has not survived, and reconstruction depends on Christian testimony, papyri containing certificates of sacrifice — the so-called libelli — and inferences about the regime's religious policy. J. B. Rives showed that the precise objective of the decree remains disputed: what is firmly documented is a broadly applied requirement to participate in sacrifice, whose incompatibility with Christian practices produced a particularly acute crisis for the churches. The policy may have reflected a broader logic of imperial integration and loyalty rather than an operation designed solely to identify Christians (Rives 1999).

The Egyptian libelli are fundamental because they prevent the persecution from being reduced to the rhetoric of martyrdom. They record administrative acts: individuals appear, declare that they have sacrificed, and request certification. In Christian experience, however, those actions produced decisive moral distinctions. Cyprian's letters distinguish among those who sacrificed, those who offered incense, those who obtained certificates, and those who resisted. The categories were not always identical or stable, nor were individual circumstances. That practical diversity creates the problem ecclesial discipline must compress: a multiplicity of behaviors must be translated into rules of penance, periods of reconciliation, and allocations of decision-making authority.

Epistemological integrity requires avoiding two extremes. The first is uncritically accepting Cyprian's providential explanations, which interpret the persecution as divine correction of a morally lax Church. The second is treating that theology as a mere disguise for a struggle for power. For Cyprian, providential causality was a real explanation and structured his pastoral response; for the historian, it does not constitute an empirically verifiable cause of Decius's decree. The two levels must be maintained: reconstruct what the actors believed and, separately, explain what the evidence can support about imperial policy. This distinction between the source's internal causality and analytical historical causality is a direct application of the methodological criterion established in the introduction.

The persecution also produced an asymmetry of prestige. Those who had confessed the faith before the authorities and survived could claim an authority grounded in suffering. Some confessors issued letters of peace on behalf of lapsi, recommending their readmission. Martyrial capital thus competed with the bishop's ordinary authority. The crisis does not simply pit rigorists against the merciful; it pits different principles of legitimacy against one another. Heroic witness, episcopal succession, communal discipline, and synodal judgment all claim the capacity to define access to communion. Institutional compression arises from the need to order these rival sources of authority.

5.3 Cyprian of Carthage: Lapsi, Confessors, and Episcopal Authority

Cyprian was elected bishop of Carthage around 248/249 and temporarily left the city during the persecution. His opponents could portray that withdrawal as cowardice; he justified it as prudent obedience and as a means of continuing to govern through correspondence. The point matters because it prevents his later authority from being treated as an automatic consequence of personal martyrdom. Cyprian had to govern from a distance, defend his decision, and negotiate with clergy, confessors, and communities. The extraordinary survival of his letters makes it possible to observe the everyday construction of episcopal authority with a precision rare for the third century (Cyprianus, Ep. 5–43; Clarke 1984–1989; Brent 2010).

De lapsis offers the theological interpretation of the crisis. Cyprian does not deny that fear and violence played a role, but he insists that reconciliation cannot be instantaneous or administered through private enthusiasm. Penance must correspond to the gravity of the act, and the Church must discern. His aim is not to close the door permanently; it is to prevent mercy from becoming a suspension of discipline. That position places him between two extremes that his own texts construct polemically: excessively rapid readmission, associated with letters of peace and rival presbyters, and rigorism that denies the possibility of reconciliation. Episcopal authority presents itself as the capacity to hold truth, penance, and unity together.

De ecclesiae catholicae unitate transforms that practical problem into ecclesiological theory. The unity of the Church appears linked to the unity of the episcopate: each bishop governs a portion of a common reality, and there cannot be a legitimate plurality of rival altars within the same city. The treatise should not, however, be read as though it already formulated a medieval theory of the papacy or a finished juridical constitution. The textual dispute over the versions of the Petrine passage and Cyprian's own practice in his later conflict with Stephen of Rome reveal a collegial and tension-filled ecclesiology. The historically secure point is different: unity ceases to be a general spiritual metaphor and is articulated through identifiable episcopal offices, reciprocal communion, and mechanisms of exclusion (Cyprianus, De unitate 4–5; Weber and Bévenot 1972).

The correspondence between Carthage and Rome shows the growth of a supralocal infrastructure. The churches exchange news about elections, persecutions, letters of communion, and sanctions. A local decision can become a problem for several sees because admitting a bishop or presbyter amounts to recognizing a chain of relationships. Institutional compression thus acquires a network dimension. A single central administration is not yet required to produce broad effects; it is enough for several churches to accept reciprocal criteria of recognition. The bishop grows stronger not only because of his position within his own community, but because his name functions as a node in a network of communion.

5.4 Cornelius and Novatian: Two Episcopates, Two Policies of Reconciliation

The Roman episcopal election of 251 makes the relationship between penance and legitimacy visible. Cornelius was elected bishop of Rome; Novatian, a presbyter and theologian of considerable prestige, received a rival consecration. The surviving sources come largely from the camp that recognized Cornelius, so reconstruction must avoid caricaturing Novatian as merely ambitious. The controversy was closely tied to the discipline of the lapsi and to the question of whether certain grave sins could receive ecclesial reconciliation. The Novatian movement endured for centuries and developed communities of its own, evidence that this was not an ephemeral quarrel among personalities.

The label "Novatianism" may suggest a doctrine created entirely by Novatian; it is preferable to speak of a rigorist coalition whose identity consolidated through conflict. Novatian did not deny the seriousness of baptism or the centrality of the Church; precisely because he took them seriously, he could maintain that the Church should not grant certain forms of reconciliation to those who had apostatized. His opponents did not defend moral indifference: they insisted on penance, discernment, and episcopal authority to readmit. The disagreement concerns the scope of ecclesial power and the relationship between communal purity and mercy. This makes it an ecclesiological controversy as much as a penitential one (Novatianus, Opera quae supersunt; Diercks 1972).

Cyprian recognized Cornelius and mobilized correspondence to support his legitimacy. In that process, episcopal election becomes a fact that must be certified, communicated, and recognized. The boundary between two claimants depends not only on who possesses a church or an ordination, but on which network of bishops accepts his communion. The case shows a mechanism of compression through mutual recognition. A local plurality of candidates can be reduced when other sees coordinate a response, even if the excluded group retains sufficient institutional capacity to persist outside that network.

The persistence of Novatian communities requires distinguishing normative victory from social elimination. Later sources find Novatian communities in different regions for centuries. Exclusion from a Catholic network therefore does not amount to nonexistence. This observation anticipates a central problem of the fourth century: a definition can be very clear and yet coexist with rival institutions. The model must measure three outcomes separately: precision of the boundary, breadth of recognition, and the capacity to make it effective. These variables are related, but they are not identical.

5.5 Baptism, Rebaptism, and the Dispute with Stephen of Rome

The baptismal controversy of the 250s demonstrates that the strengthening of episcopal authority did not produce uniform vertical obedience. Cyprian and several African synods maintained that baptism administered outside the Church could not confer what, in their logic, the separated minister did not possess; those arriving from communities regarded as heretical had to receive baptism. Stephen of Rome upheld reception without rebaptism when the recognized baptismal form had been used. The dispute became acrimonious and shows that communion among bishops could be placed under pressure without any one see yet possessing an undisputed capacity to impose a universal solution.

The sacramental question is theoretically decisive. If the validity of baptism depends on the holiness or institutional belonging of the minister, the ecclesial boundary penetrates directly into the efficacy of the rite. If the rite remains valid even when administered outside recognized communion, the Church can regard the minister as illicit without declaring the sacrament nonexistent. The second solution, which would become decisive in the Donatist conflict, makes it possible to separate sacramental validity from institutional legitimacy. In the third century that distinction was still disputed. The controversy shows that boundary technologies can also generate a need for conceptual decompression: to avoid repeating sacraments, it becomes necessary to distinguish more precisely what belongs to the act and what belongs to the minister.

Cyprian convened African councils and appealed to regional practice. His famous statement that no bishop should set himself up as a "bishop of bishops," made in the context of the Council of Carthage of 256 according to the documentary tradition, should not be turned into a modern manifesto against every form of Roman primacy. It does show, however, that supralocal authority was negotiated. Episcopal unity could coexist with substantive disagreement. Third-century Christian institutionalization was collegial, competitive, and regionally asymmetric.

The episode corrects an overly strong reading of Hypothesis 2. Greater institutional density does not imply immediate convergence. On the contrary, it can increase the capacity to sustain organized disagreements: African councils and Roman decisions produce sharper positions. Density turns diffuse differences into institutional platforms. Compression can then occur within each network before it occurs between networks. This possibility will be central to understanding the multiple episcopal coalitions of the fourth century.

5.6 From Valerian to Diocletian: Persecution, Memory, and Credentials of Authority

The persecution under Valerian led to Cyprian's execution in 258. The Acta proconsularia Cypriani and later memory transformed his death into a powerful credential of authority. The bishop who had been forced to justify his withdrawal under Decius ended up incorporated into the African martyrial repertoire. The change illustrates how memory can reorganize an ecclesial biography: internal controversies that had called a leader into question are reinterpreted in light of a death regarded as exemplary. Institutional authority and martyrial authority, previously competing, can merge retrospectively.

Half a century later, the so-called Great Persecution initiated under Diocletian and his colleagues from 303 once again subjected churches to demands to hand over books, the destruction of meeting places, compulsory sacrifice, and imprisonment. Enforcement varied regionally and over time; for that reason, "the Diocletianic persecution" should not be imagined as a uniform experience. For African communities, however, the issue of the traditores — clerics accused of handing over Scriptures or sacred objects — became an explosive language of legitimacy. The memory of cooperation with the authorities could contaminate an ordination and, according to certain positions, the sacraments administered by someone who had betrayed the faith.

Here an important structural feature appears: persecution produces archives. Judicial acts, martyr narratives, lists, accusations, and local memories later become resources for ecclesial struggles. The boundary is not built only with abstract doctrines, but with dossiers concerning past conduct. Whoever controls the narrative of who handed over books, who resisted, and who ordained whom can determine entire sacramental genealogies. This documentary dimension of compression must be added to the five technologies already identified: the production and mobilization of evidentiary memory can function as a transversal mechanism feeding institutional and communal compression.

5.7 Traditores and the Origins of the Donatist Conflict

The conflict later known as the Donatist controversy arose in the aftermath of the persecution, around the election of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage in 311. His opponents questioned, among other things, the legitimacy of his consecration by Felix of Aptunga, who was accused of having been a traditor. A rival group elected Majorinus and, after his death, Donatus assumed the leadership that would retrospectively give the movement its name. Later Catholic sources, especially Augustine and Optatus of Milevis, dominate the transmission and must be used with the same care applied to second-century heresiology. "Donatism" does not designate a marginal eccentricity: for generations Africa contained rival communities, basilicas, and episcopates with a substantial presence.

The dispute was brought before Constantine, who had just become a potential arbiter of Christian affairs. Proceedings took place in Rome in 313 and a council at Arles in 314, followed by further appeals. More important than the sequence of rulings is the structural shift: an African ecclesial conflict becomes connected to an imperial authority capable of convening, financing, ordering reviews, and granting or withdrawing material recognition. The decision-making system changes scale. Bishops had held synods before Constantine; what is new is that the imperial machinery can increase their reach and consequences.

The accusation of traditio also reveals that the purity demanded was not merely individual. If the guilt of an ordaining bishop could invalidate another person's ordination, contamination propagated through institutional genealogies. The Catholic response would seek to limit that propagation through a sacramental theory in which the efficacy of the sacrament did not depend on the moral purity of the minister. That solution makes it possible to preserve institutional continuity even when the personal history of particular clerics is doubtful. Once again, the crisis forces a conceptual differentiation that reduces certain consequences of the boundary in order to stabilize others.

5.8 Donatism, Sacraments, and the Question of the True Church

The Donatist controversy cannot be reduced to African nationalism, class conflict, or peasant fanaticism. Those explanations, influential in earlier stages of historiography, captured real social dimensions but tended to turn a complex ecclesiological dispute into a reflection of external structures. The documentary core reveals competition between churches claiming to be the true continuity of African Christianity. The so-called Donatists emphasize purity, martyrial fidelity, and the legitimacy of the episcopal chain; their opponents emphasize the universality of communion, sacramental efficacy independent of the minister's unworthiness, and broader episcopal recognition (Frend 1972; Shaw 2011; Whelan 2014).

It is important to distinguish the phases. Constantine's intervention did not eliminate the movement; later policies alternated coercion, toleration, and negotiation. Donatism demonstrates with exceptional clarity that state machinery can reinforce a boundary without producing acceptance. At times, coercion can even provide the persecuted group with a martyrial narrative that strengthens its identity. Hypothesis 3, formulated in Chapter 2, must therefore be retained in its more precise version: coercion increases the enforceability of a decision, but its effect on persistence, adherence, and memory may be nonlinear.

The discussion of the sacraments deepens the problem. If the baptism performed by a separated minister remains valid, then the institutional boundary does not entirely coincide with the presence or absence of sacramental grace. This distinction, developed in increasingly systematic forms and later central in Augustine, makes it possible to reincorporate persons without repeating the rite. But it also strengthens a conception of the Church as a universal body whose identity cannot depend on the verifiable purity of each minister. The doctrinal solution is at the same time a solution of institutional scalability.

Donatism provides another methodological correction. The Catholic "victory" is a late result and depends on later political changes; it cannot be projected retrospectively onto the 310s. In the first decades of the conflict there are two networks with claims to legitimacy. The historian must avoid allowing the eventually victorious name of one of them to turn the other into a deviation from the initial moment. Heresy-making, in the strict sense, is a process: accusation, arbitration, decisions, legislation, polemical repetition, and memory accumulate until they produce a more stable classification.

5.9 Manichaeism: Rival Religion, Heresiological Category, and Imperial Boundary

Manichaeism introduces a control case because it does not fit comfortably into the same genealogy as Novatianism or Donatism. Mani, born in Mesopotamia in the third century, founded a missionary religion with Scriptures, hierarchies, ascetic practices, and a cosmology of its own that combined Iranian, Christian, and other religious repertoires. Its expansion into the Roman Empire led Christian authors to classify it as a heresy, but treating it solely as an internal deviation within Christianity would reproduce the taxonomy of its opponents. Manichaeism was also an autonomous transregional religion and must be analyzed as a real religious competitor (Lieu 1992; BeDuhn 2025).

Its interest for this book lies precisely in that categorical awkwardness. A heresiological boundary can appropriate a rival religion and reinscribe it within a genealogy of Christian errors. In this way, ecclesial taxonomy expands its field: it no longer classifies only disputes arising from shared communion, but also movements with an institutional identity of their own. The category “heresy” then functions as a technology of conceptual subordination because it defines the adversary according to the history of the Church rather than according to its self-description.

There is also an imperial dimension that predates Christian hegemony. A rescript of Diocletian against the Manichaeans, whose exact dating is usually placed at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, associates them with the Persian sphere and prescribes repressive measures. The case shows that imperial religious coercion did not begin with Constantine and did not first require a Christian orthodoxy. What changes in the fourth century is the possibility that ecclesial and juridical categories may begin to converge. The Roman state already knew how to persecute religious associations regarded as dangerous; the later novelty will be that Christian doctrinal decisions can feed the legal identification of prohibited groups.

Manichaeism therefore requires a limit on the theory's scope. The Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model explains processes of delimitation within and around Christianity, but it must not absorb all religious competition into a single dynamic. When a movement possesses an independent genealogy, cosmology, and institution, the category "heresy" may be more informative about the classifier than about the classified. This criterion of relative exteriority will be important in preventing the model from reproducing the heresiological gaze it seeks to analyze critically.

5.10 Constantine as a Threshold: From Imperial Mediation to Enforceability

Constantine did not invent councils, the episcopate, or doctrinal controversies. Nor did he immediately turn Christianity into a homogeneous imperial religion. His importance for the model lies elsewhere: after his victory over Maxentius and, above all, after consolidating his rule, the emperor became a resource available to Christian factions and an agent interested in ecclesial concord. Conflicts could reach the court; bishops could receive transportation, meeting venues, privileges, and logistical support; an ecclesial decision could be reinforced by administrative measures. H. A. Drake has insisted that this change must be analyzed within Roman practices of government and the pursuit of concord, not through the anachronistic scheme of a modern state "interfering" in a separate Church (Drake 2000; Drake 2021).

The Donatist case shows the ambivalence. The dissidents appeal to the emperor and can later reject adverse imperial decisions. Constantine seeks a solution, modifies procedures, and eventually resorts to coercive measures without eliminating the conflict. The emperor does not possess a neutral detector of orthodoxy; he depends on bishops, dossiers, and advisers, and his decisions can change. State intervention does not replace ecclesial production of knowledge. It amplifies it, territorializes it, and adds material consequences.

This suggests a reformulation of Hypothesis 3. The state should be conceptualized as an amplifier of enforceability rather than as an automatic creator of orthodoxy. For coercion to operate stably, a sufficiently legible prior classification is required: who the group is, what authority condemned it, what properties it possesses, which clerics must be removed. The more precise the ecclesial taxonomy, the easier it becomes to translate it into administration. Conversely, the possibility of state enforcement increases the incentive to produce sharper categories. A feedback loop thus forms between doctrinal definition and juridical infrastructure.

This threshold sets the stage for Nicaea. The controversy over Arius will be doctrinally different from the Donatist dispute, but the institutional repertoire is already available: local synods, episcopal letters, appeals, imperial intervention, and the expectation that a broader gathering may produce concord. Nicaea does not emerge from nowhere in 325. It is the exceptional convergence of technologies developed over decades with a new imperial capacity to bring them together on an ecumenical scale.

5.11 Second Partial Test of the Model: Belonging, Reversibility, and Scale

The cases of the third and early fourth centuries confirm Hypothesis 1 in a broader form. Definitional pressure does not arise only from rival doctrines. Persecution, apostasy, episcopal legitimacy, and sacramental validity also produce a need for definition. The model's category of "controversy" must encompass conflicts over belonging and practice when these compel ecclesial criteria to be made explicit. Doctrinal compression is, in fact, doctrinal-institutional: it can begin with conduct and end by generating propositions about Church, sacrament, and authority.

Hypothesis 2 receives strong support, but with the correction introduced in the previous chapter. Dense episcopal networks make it possible to scale up decisions; at the same time, equally dense rival networks sustain lasting schisms. Novatians and Donatists do not survive because they lack institutions, but because they possess enough institutional capacity to reproduce themselves. The relevant variable is not absolute density but the differential of capacities between networks: bishops, buildings, patronage, texts, mobility, and external recognition.

Hypothesis 3 receives positive evidence for the first time. The state changes the enforceability of boundaries, but Donatism shows that enforceability does not mean consensus. Coercion can reduce access to property and sees, fragment networks, or alter incentives; it can also reinforce memories of persecution. The model therefore incorporates a variable of social reversibility: a legal boundary may be withdrawn by another emperor, left unenforced locally, or reinterpreted by the affected communities. The formal decision does not constitute the end of the process.

Hypothesis 4 reappears in the naming of adversaries. "Novatians," "Donatists," and "Manichaeans" bring together realities of a different nature under names that the victorious tradition can turn into essences. Comparative analysis requires asking in each case whether the name corresponds to self-description, a rival label, or later classification. Retrospective homogenization is not a marginal effect of language; it alters the very unit the historian believes he is studying.

Finally, recursivity becomes institutionally visible. The solution to the crisis of the lapsi strengthens the episcopate, but that strengthening generates new disputes among bishops. The sacramental theory developed against personal contamination makes it easier to respond to Donatism, but opens new questions about the relationship between sacrament and communion. Constantine's intervention resolves some procedural issues and creates another problem: who controls access to the imperial arbiter. The system does not progress toward an absence of conflict; it produces conflicts at a different level. That is the transition that leads to the Trinitarian fourth century.

CHAPTER 6

NICAEA AND THE CONCILIAR COMPRESSION OF THE TRINITARIAN PROBLEM

6.1 Before Arius: Subordination, Generation, and Plural Theological Inheritances

The controversy called "Arian" did not begin with two perfectly formed doctrines—Nicenism and Arianism—confronting one another from 318 until one triumphed in 381. That narrative is the product of decades of conflict and of the memory constructed by later authors. At the beginning of the fourth century there was an inherited set of problems: how to speak of the unity of God and, at the same time, of the divinity of the Logos; what it means for the Son to be begotten; whether that generation implies a beginning; how to interpret biblical texts that seem to place the Son in subordination to the Father; how to avoid both a division of the divinity and a modal identification that erases the distinction between Father and Son. Origen had provided influential tools, but he did not leave a single formula that determined all later positions.

The term "subordinationism" also requires caution. It can describe families of language in which the Father occupies causal or hierarchical primacy, but when used as a uniform retrospective label it conceals differences among authors. Eusebius of Caesarea, Alexander of Alexandria, Arius, Marcellus of Ancyra, and others could share certain premises while diverging on others. Lewis Ayres proposed abandoning the linear history that imagines a fully articulated Nicene theology in 325 and instead following the gradual formation of pro-Nicene theological cultures. This perspective is especially compatible with the model of the present book: conciliar definition inaugurates a compression, but the interpretation of that compression constitutes another controversy (Ayres 2004).

The Alexandrian dispute must also be situated within a complex local Church. Alexandria possessed powerful intellectual traditions, an expanding episcopal structure, and recent conflicts such as the Melitian schism. The bishop's authority over presbyters and regional networks was not an abstraction. When Arius came into conflict with Alexander, theological propositions were immediately linked to discipline, public preaching, letters, and alliances among sees. Doctrine and institution are inseparable from the beginning.

6.2 Arius and the Problem of the Sources

Reconstructing Arius requires the same principle applied in the case of Marcion: do not confuse the historical adversary with the figure fabricated by his opponents. Letters attributed to Arius survive, as do fragments of the Thalia transmitted principally by Athanasius and later testimonies. Athanasius is indispensable, but he writes as a polemicist and has an evident interest in presenting multiple adversaries as a coherent group under the category "Arians." Reconstruction must give priority to near-contemporary texts and carefully control fragments quoted within refutations. Rebecca Lyman and Rowan Williams have insisted, from different perspectives, on returning Arius to his intellectual and ecclesial context rather than treating him as the isolated inventor of a strange religion (Williams 1987; Lyman 2021).

In his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia and in the profession addressed to Alexander, Arius insists on the singularity of the Father as the unoriginate principle and on the Son's existence by divine will before times and ages. The polemical formula "there was when he was not" would condense the accusation that the Son had a beginning. Yet presenting the issue as a simple denial of Christ's divinity is insufficient. Arius can call the Son God in a derived sense and attribute to him an extraordinary cosmic role. The point of rupture lies in how his origin and ontological relation to the Father are understood, not in a modern opposition between "divine Christ" and "human Christ."

The Thalia, in the fragmentary form in which we know it, presents an additional problem of genre and transmission. Athanasius quotes verses in order to ridicule Arius's theology and associate it with vulgar entertainment. We cannot know with certainty how much of the original context is preserved in those quotations. Epistemological integrity requires conclusions to be stated with different degrees of confidence: the letters offer more direct evidence of confessional positions; the polemically preserved fragments help reconstruct vocabulary, but they should not bear the full weight of interpretation on their own. The theory of this book depends on that discipline: if the category "Arianism" is being investigated as a product of retrospective compression, it cannot be derived uncritically from the source that contributed most to producing it.

6.3 Alexander, the Synods, and the Expansion of an Alexandrian Dispute

The conflict began as a dispute connected to Alexandria, but it quickly acquired a wider geographical reach. Alexander convened synods and communicated his condemnations; Arius sought support outside Egypt; Eusebius of Nicomedia and other bishops intervened through letters and meetings. The mobility of persons and documents transformed a local controversy into competition among episcopal networks. Carlos Galvão-Sobrinho has emphasized how these disputes were linked to forms of leadership, public mobilization, and episcopal authority in the cities of the eastern Empire (Galvão-Sobrinho 2013).

This process is an almost ideal example of Hypothesis 2. The controversy expands because existing infrastructure allows it to spread beyond its original setting. Letters circulate between provinces, bishops convene colleagues, and local condemnations seek external recognition. But institutional density does not automatically produce a homogeneous majority. On the contrary, it allows a position condemned in one see to find protectors and spaces of legitimacy in others. The episcopal system functions both as a network of transmission and as a network of resistance.

The expression "the Eusebians," popularized especially by Athanasius, requires caution similar to that applied to "Arians." David Gwynn has shown that the label polemically constructs a shifting coalition of bishops linked in different ways to Eusebius of Nicomedia and to theological traditions that were only partially shared and were not identical to those of Arius. Turning them into a unified Arian party from the outset reproduces Athanasius's taxonomy. For the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model, the case is crucial: controversy not only eliminates positions, it also fabricates retrospective blocs by reducing a plurality of alliances to manageable names (Gwynn 2007).

6.4 Constantine and the Political Universalization of the Conflict

When Constantine defeated Licinius in 324 and became sole ruler of the Empire, he inherited a conflict affecting bishops in eastern regions newly incorporated into his dominion. His initial intervention sought concord. The letter sent to Alexander and Arius, preserved by Eusebius, minimizes the cause of the dispute and urges reconciliation. That response often seems strange to readers who retrospectively understand the controversy as a debate over the very essence of Christianity. For the emperor at that moment, the principal problem was that a theological question was producing public disorder and division among religious leaders whose cooperation he valued (Eusebius, Vita Constantini 2.64–72).

The failure of the exhortation to close the conflict led to a solution on a larger scale. Nicaea was not simply a spontaneous theological gathering; it was made possible by imperial resources that facilitated the travel and lodging of bishops from numerous regions. Yet "imperial" does not mean that Constantine drafted the doctrine or that the bishops were officials without agency. The relationship is more complex: the emperor creates the conditions for meeting, presses for agreement, and enforces decisions; the bishops contribute categories, disputes, texts, and conciliar procedures. The result emerges from that interaction.

H. A. Drake calls Constantine the "elephant in the room" in many reconstructions of Nicaea: it is impossible to explain the council without imperial politics, but it is also reductive to explain it solely through them. For this book, the key is to distinguish causal factors. The doctrinal conflict existed before imperial intervention; the intervention did not invent it. What it did was make the cost of failing to resolve it empire-wide and vastly increase the scale of a possible definition. Nicaea is, in the terms of the model, a leap in compression through the expansion of jurisdiction (Drake 2021; Kim 2021).

6.5 Reconstructing Nicaea: Participants, Procedures, and Agendas

The Council of Nicaea met in 325, but the later image of a perfectly documented assembly must be abandoned. No complete acts survive comparable to those of later councils. We depend on letters, lists of signatures, canons, the creed, testimony from participants such as Eusebius of Caesarea, and later narratives. The traditional figure of 318 bishops acquired strong symbolic value; the transmitted lists vary, and the exact attendance remains a matter of reconstruction. David Gwynn has shown that even very familiar elements of Nicene memory must be evaluated in light of their documentary strata (Gwynn 2021).

Nor did the council deal exclusively with Arius. The surviving canons address clerical discipline, jurisdiction, ordination, penance, and other matters; the date and observance of Easter formed part of the search for uniformity; the Egyptian Melitian schism required treatment. This plurality of agendas is important because it shows what an "ecumenical" council actually means: not a conference on a single proposition, but a device capable of concentrating heterogeneous problems and producing rules for geographically distant communities.

The figure of Athanasius illustrates the power of retrospection. He was present as a deacon and associate of Alexander, but later narratives tended to attribute to him a central role commensurate with his future importance. Critical history must resist that projection. The Athanasius who would later become a symbol of Nicaea should not be placed in 325 with the authority of subsequent decades. This principle is one of the chapter's most important controls against internal anachronism.

Nicaea is therefore a case in which incomplete documentation does not prevent analysis, but does limit the degree of precision. We can state with confidence that Arius was condemned, that a creed containing decisive formulas was adopted, and that disciplinary canons were issued. We can reconstruct debates and alliances with varying degrees of probability. We cannot treat later speeches as stenographic transcripts of 325. Any history of the council must therefore be accompanied by an assessment of what its sources can establish.

6.6 The Creed of 325: Homoousios, Anathemas, and Semantic Precision

The Nicene creed affirms that the Son is begotten from the Father and "from the substance of the Father," true God from true God, begotten and not made, homoousios with the Father. The creed also includes anathemas against formulas according to which there was when the Son was not, he came from what is not, or he belonged to a different hypostasis or substance. The force of the decision lies in transforming a set of exegetical and metaphysical controversies into explicit formulary restrictions. After 325 it becomes possible to ask not only what a bishop teaches, but whether he accepts a specific text.

Homoousios is the best-known example of semantic compression, but its historical function must be separated from theological meanings stabilized later. The term had a prior history and could arouse suspicions: materiality, division of substance, or associations with condemned positions. Eusebius of

Caesarea, in his letter to the community of Caesarea, explains that he accepted the formula on the understanding that it was not to be interpreted corporeally. Agreement on the word did not amount to exhaustive agreement on all its implications. Mark Edwards has insisted on attending both to the history of the term and to the specific wording of the creed (Edwards 2021).

Here a new mechanism appears for the model: a formula can produce compression before possessing a single interpretation. It functions as a marker of exclusion and a point of negotiation. Actors accept the same term for partly different reasons; subsequently, the controversy shifts toward the correct meaning of the accepted term. Compression can therefore precede semantic stabilization. This explains why a conciliar definition can reduce certain possibilities and, at the same time, open a second phase of conflict.

The anathemas display a different technology: rather than merely affirming a position, they expressly prohibit certain propositions. The boundary becomes negative and verifiable. Yet even prohibitions require interpretation. What does "another hypostasis" mean when the terminology of ousia and hypostasis has not yet stabilized uniformly? Later history will show that some expressions of 325 could be understood in ways that made the development of a language of three hypostases more difficult. The Nicene solution therefore contains seeds of its own conceptual revision.

6.7 The Day After: Rehabilitations, Exiles, and the Insufficiency of a Definition

If Nicaea had closed the controversy, the history that followed would be inexplicable. Within a few years, the balance shifted in several respects. Constantine allowed exiled figures to return and sought to reconcile Arius on the basis of a profession of faith he considered sufficient; Eusebius of Nicomedia regained influence; Marcellus of Ancyra, an opponent of positions associated with Arius, was himself accused of error. The fact that the emperor who sponsored Nicaea could favor rehabilitations does not show that the council lacked importance. It shows that a formal boundary requires a stable coalition to interpret and administer it.

The later narrative of an "Arian reaction" tends to assume that every change of policy after 325 was a betrayal of an already complete orthodoxy. Contemporary scholarship has dismantled that simplicity. Many bishops could accept the condemnation of Arius while at the same time distrusting Marcellus, certain readings of homoousios, or the growing authority of Athanasius. Alliances were organized around persons, sees, formulas, and imperial circumstances. The controversy was multidimensional (Parvis 2006; Ayres 2004).

This period introduces a variable that the model needs to formalize: decisional reversibility. A conciliar definition carries greater weight than a local decision, but its effects can be partially reversed by new gatherings, rehabilitations, or changes in imperial policy. Compression should not be measured only by the solemnity of the act, but by the persistence of its restrictions over time. Nicaea creates a point of reference to which actors can return; it does not immediately create an irreversible doctrinal regime.

6.8 Athanasius and the Polemical Fabrication of "Arianism"

Athanasius of Alexandria was elected bishop in 328 and spent much of his career in conflicts that combined theology, Egyptian discipline, episcopal politics, and relations with emperors. His multiple exiles show that the prestige he would retrospectively acquire as defender of Nicaea does not correspond to a continuously dominant institutional position. Precisely for that reason his writings are so important: they construct a narrative capable of turning temporary political defeats into testimony of doctrinal fidelity.

In works such as Orationes contra Arianos, De decretis, and Historia Arianorum, Athanasius organizes a genealogy of adversaries around Arius and presents Nicaea as the decisive criterion. The effectiveness of this historiographical strategy was enormous. Bishops with significant differences can appear grouped together as "Arians"; disciplinary motives can be reinterpreted as theological persecution; the continuity between Arius and later coalitions becomes clearer in the written narrative than it was in contemporary reality. David Gwynn has shown that the category "Eusebians" forms part of this polemical construction (Gwynn 2007).

Recognizing that construction does not mean that the doctrinal differences were fictitious. It means distinguishing two levels: there were substantive disagreements about the Son, divine generation, and Nicene language; in addition, polemic organized those disagreements into blocs more coherent than the historical alliances themselves were. This distinction is central to Hypothesis 4. Retrospective homogenization can rest on real differences and still distort their distribution.

Athanasius also contributes a technology of memory. By quoting documents, narrating exiles, and preserving letters, he creates an archive of the controversy. That archive becomes a source for later historians, with all the advantages and risks that this implies. Retrospective orthodoxy is not produced only by erasing rival documents; it can also be produced by selectively preserving an enormous quantity of materials within a victorious interpretive architecture.

6.9 Constantius II: Creeds, Synods, and Competition for an Imperial Formula

After Constantine's death in 337 and the struggles among his sons, Constantius II eventually ruled the entire Empire from 353. His reign is decisive because it reveals a setting in which imperial intervention does not automatically lead to the formula that would later become orthodox. Synods, exiles, and creeds multiply; different groups attempt to produce a formula capable of obtaining broad recognition and imperial support. Far from a linear march from Nicaea to Constantinople, the 350s present an extremely competitive marketplace of theological solutions.

The formulas of Sirmium, the councils of Ariminum/Rimini and Seleucia in 359, and the Council of Constantinople of 360 show the intensity of that search. Traditional classifications speak of the "second," "third," or "fourth" creed of Sirmium, but the very abundance of formulas indicates that no definition dominated without dispute. Some avoid ousia because they regard it as nonbiblical or contentious; others seek to speak of likeness; still others insist on likeness of substance. Imperial policy favors Homoian solutions at certain moments, but that advantage does not eliminate alternatives either (Hanson 1988; Ayres 2004; Kinzig 2017).

The case permits a more demanding test of Hypothesis 3. The emperor possesses resources to convene councils, pressure bishops, order exiles, and favor formulas. Yet coercive capacity does not guarantee lasting theological stabilization. Episcopal networks preserve memory, produce texts, and await political change. A formula backed by the court can lose centrality after the emperor's death. Coercion therefore alters the temporal distribution of power without cancelling the recursivity of the system.

A moralizing reading of Constantius as a simple "Arian" tyrant should likewise be avoided. The most influential sources on his policy often come from opponents such as Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, and Lucifer of Cagliari. Richard Flower has shown how Christian invective adapts Roman repertoires of imperial denunciation to portray the emperor as persecutor and heretic. The historian must use those texts to reconstruct events and, at the same time, analyze them as rhetorical artifacts (Flower 2016).

6.10 Homoiousians, Homoians, and Anomoeans: Why the Nicene/Arian Binary Fails

Twentieth-century historiography advanced decisively when it stopped calling every opponent of an Athanasian reading of Nicaea "Arian." Between the 350s and 370s differentiated coalitions and vocabularies appear. Homoiousians speak of likeness according to substance; Homoians prefer to affirm that the Son is like the Father according to the Scriptures without using ousia; Anomoeans or Heterousians, associated with Aetius and Eunomius, more radically maintain a difference in essence and develop a theology of divine unbegottenness of their own. These categories should not be turned into rigid parties either, but they are more precise than a single "Arian" bloc.

The plurality demonstrates that Nicaea changed the field even among those who did not accept its central term. After 325, homoousios, ousia, and hypostasis become unavoidable points of reference, whether to affirm, modify, or avoid them. This confirms a strong prediction of the model: a successful definition can reorganize even the vocabulary of its opponents. Compression does not need to achieve universal acceptance in order to transform the space of options.

The Anomoean development also introduces a form of recursive radicalization. If one is required to explain precisely in what sense Father and Son are related, some theologians respond by carrying the distinction into a rigorous theory of the divine essence. Their opponents, in turn, must develop epistemologies concerning the limits of the knowledge of God and new distinctions among names, properties, and relations. The compression of a controversy generates conceptual density; it not only reduces possibilities, it also increases the sophistication of the remaining field.

This observation requires avoiding an overly physical metaphor of "compression." The result is not always a simpler doctrinal space. There may be fewer families of solutions regarded as legitimate and, at the same time, greater internal complexity within them. The theory must distinguish reduction of admissibility from growth of articulation. Pro-Nicene Christianity at the end of the fourth century is doctrinally more restricted with respect to certain propositions, but conceptually more elaborate than the formula of 325.

6.11 The Cappadocians, the Pro-Nicene Alliance, and Constantinople (381)

During the 360s and 370s, what Lewis Ayres calls a pro-Nicene alliance took shape: not a party identical from 325 onward, but a gradual convergence of theologians and bishops capable of interpreting Nicaea within a more stable grammar. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa played decisive roles, though they were not the only ones. The distinction between one ousia and three hypostaseis made it possible to articulate divine unity and personal distinction with a precision that the vocabulary of 325 had not fixed univocally.

The controversy over the Holy Spirit shows recursivity clearly. Nicaea had concentrated its principal pressure on the Father-Son relationship and had treated the Spirit briefly. The stabilization of the Son's divinity makes the question of the Spirit more visible. Basil, in De Spiritu Sancto, develops doxological, scriptural, and theological arguments without relying solely on an abstract formula. Gregory of Nazianzus would defend the divinity of the Spirit more explicitly. The solution at one level produces the problem at the next.

The council convened at Constantinople in 381 by Theodosius I confirmed the authority of Nicaea and condemned various currents. The assumption that the so-called Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed has come down to us alongside acts of 381 that straightforwardly document its drafting must, however, be avoided. The exact relationship between the text that would be recited at Chalcedon in 451 as the faith of the 150 fathers and the proceedings of 381 has a complex documentary history. What is certain is that, by the fifth century, Nicaea and

Constantinople could be articulated as a normative continuity of enormous authority.

Theodosius adds a new juridical dimension. Imperial legislation of the late fourth century begins to use confessional definitions to distinguish favored communities from heretical groups. The process is gradual and uneven and should not be confused with total control of religious life. But the convergence between episcopal definition and legal classification is far greater than under Constantine. Doctrinal compression has become systematically translatable into administrative categories. This will be one of the central themes of Chapter 8.

Constantinople does not mark the metaphysical end of the Trinitarian controversy, but it does mark a change of regime. The pro-Nicene framework acquires a combination of conciliar legitimacy, episcopal networks, and imperial patronage that makes it much more costly to contest certain claims about Father, Son, and Spirit from within. The boundary does not become eternal or geographically uniform; it does, however, become significantly denser and more enforceable.

6.12 Second Strong Test of the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model

The cycle from 318 to 381 constitutes the first strong test of the theory because it allows all the variables to be observed in motion. Hypothesis 1 receives broad support: the conflict forces a transition from relatively flexible vocabularies to conciliar formulas, anathemas, and technical distinctions. The relationship, however, is not linear. The precision of 325 does not eliminate ambiguity; it changes its location. Definitional pressure produces a sequence of second-order semantic problems.

Hypothesis 2 also receives support, but it requires networks to be understood as polycentric. Nicaea is possible because a dense episcopal network exists and an emperor is capable of bringing it together; the following decades show that this same density makes it possible to form rival coalitions, hold new synods, and resist previous decisions. The principle of institutional polycentrism is therefore incorporated into the model: before durable stabilization, a dense network can increase both the capacity for compression and the capacity for counter-compression.

Hypothesis 3 is confirmed in its revised version. Constantine and Constantius can exile, rehabilitate, and convene; Theodosius can legally favor particular formulas. But no intervention on its own produces the outcome of 381. State capacity is a multiplier acting upon doctrinal and institutional coalitions. When those coalitions are unstable, imperial policy can amplify oscillations; when a broader alliance consolidates, it can accelerate the enforceability of the boundary.

Hypothesis 4 finds one of its strongest examples in "Arianism." The category ultimately encompasses Arius, Eusebians, Homoians, and other actors whose positions are not identical. Contemporary historiography has had to disaggregate the name in order to recover the structure of the conflict. This does not require abandoning every conventional use of "Arianism," but it does require marking when one is speaking of a polemical label, a later reception, or a precisely defined position. The historian's language must prevent doctrinal victory from producing false empirical homogeneity.

Hypothesis 5, recursivity, is decisive. Nicaea produces controversies about Nicaea; the condemnation of Arius produces disputes over who is actually Arian; the affirmation of the Son's consubstantiality generates new questions about hypostasis and the Spirit; pro-Nicene convergence opens the way to Christological controversies in which the relationship between Christ's divinity and humanity will become the new center. The boundary that has been resolved becomes the premise of the next conflict.

The evidence requires three adjustments to be incorporated into the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model. First, reversibility: no decision should be regarded as stable on the basis of promulgation alone; its persistence must be measured across changes of actors and regimes. Second, staggered semantic compression: a formula can restrict the field before acquiring a uniform meaning, so that the first compression generates a second interpretive controversy. Third, internal complexity: reducing the number of admissible solutions can increase conceptual sophistication within the remaining space. These adjustments do not weaken the theory; they make it more discriminating and better able to explain why Nicaea was both decisive and insufficient.

By the end of the fourth century, imperial Christianity possesses something that did not exist in the second: supraregional reference creeds, an accumulated conciliar tradition, high-density episcopal networks, more stabilized technical vocabularies, and an imperial power capable of translating some decisions into privileges and sanctions. But this machinery does not eliminate controversy. It displaces it. The problem of the fifth century will be to determine how to speak of the unity of Christ without undoing the Trinitarian distinctions already achieved and without dividing the subject of the incarnation. Ephesus and Chalcedon will be the next iteration of the system.

CHAPTER 7

FROM EPHESUS TO CHALCEDON: CHRISTOLOGICAL COMPRESSION AND NEW BOUNDARIES

7.1 From the Trinitarian Problem to the Christological Problem

The pro-Nicene stabilization of the late fourth century did not eliminate controversy; it changed its dominant object. If Father, Son, and Spirit were to be confessed within an increasingly precise Trinitarian grammar, the next question was how to describe that same Son when he was said to have been born, suffered, and died as a human being. The difficulty was not simply a matter of adding a divine nature to a human one. It was necessary to explain who the subject of the actions was, how apparently incompatible properties could be predicated of the same Christ, and what kind of unity preserved both divinity and humanity without turning them into either a mixture or two independent subjects.

The Christological controversy of the fifth century is therefore an especially clear demonstration of the recursivity proposed in this book. Nicaea and Constantinople had compressed certain Trinitarian solutions and made a set of claims about the Logos normative. That same precision made the language of the incarnation more demanding. To say that the Logos is fully divine requires explaining how that Logos can be born of Mary and suffer. The solution to one controversy becomes the premise that makes the next one visible.

There is, however, no straight line from 381 to 431. Different vocabularies and priorities coexisted in the intervening decades. Apollinaris of Laodicea had attempted to protect the unity of the Christological subject through an anthropology that his opponents judged incapable of preserving a complete humanity. Gregory of Nazianzus responded with the well-known insistence that what is not assumed is not healed. Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia developed other strategies for preserving the integrity of the human. These trajectories must be reconstructed without retrospectively turning them into exact blueprints of positions condemned decades later (Grillmeier 1975; Behr 2011; Walters 2025).

7.2 Alexandria, Antioch, and the Risk of Turning Tendencies into Rigid Schools

Traditional historiography frequently described the fifth-century crisis as a clash between two "schools": Alexandria, focused on the unity of the incarnate Logos, and Antioch, concerned with preserving the fullness of Christ's humanity. The distinction retains descriptive value if handled as a tendency, but it becomes misleading when transformed into two uniform programs. Not every author associated with Antioch taught the same thing, nor did all Alexandrians share a single vocabulary. Episcopal networks, personal loyalties, exegetical formation, and political circumstances do not map perfectly onto a binary doctrinal geography.

This methodological problem is analogous to the one observed with the term "Arianism." A broad label can help identify a constellation of concerns, but it can also create the bloc it claims to describe. In the fifth century, calling every insistence on Christological distinctions "Antiochene" and every insistence on unity "Alexandrian" risks erasing intermediate positions, shifts in vocabulary, and later agreements. The Formula of Reunion of 433 was possible precisely because actors who had used opposing languages could accept a common wording without adopting an identical theory in every detail.

The Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model therefore needs an additional variable: the granularity of coalitions. The coarser the historiographical label, the easier it is to narrate a confrontation between two parties and the harder it becomes to measure what is actually being compressed. For the analysis of Ephesus and Chalcedon, the minimum unit will not be "Alexandria" or "Antioch," but concrete sets of bishops, letters, formulas, and procedures that change over the course of the conflict.

7.3 Nestorius, Theotokos, and the Construction of a Controversy

Nestorius arrived in Constantinople as bishop in 428. His episcopate began in an environment where the imperial capital amplified any dispute: preachers, clergy, monasteries, aristocrats, and officials could quickly turn a local controversy into a court issue. The question that eventually crystallized around the title Theotokos—"the one who gives birth to God" or, in the conventional translation, "Mother of God"—must not be reduced to the claim that Nestorius simply prohibited the term. The sources show a more complex debate over how to use it without confusing the properties of Christ's divinity and humanity, and over which predicates properly belong to the incarnate subject (Wessel 2004; Bevan 2016; Walters 2025).

The title had both theological and liturgical force. For its defenders, it safeguarded the identity of the one born of Mary as the divine Logos: if the subject who is born is the same Son, the expression can be used without asserting that divinity has a temporal origin. For Nestorius and those who shared some of his reservations, the danger was that a popular formula might be used in a way that seemed to attribute birth or suffering to the divine nature without distinction. The dispute was therefore not a simple choice between venerating or degrading Mary, although popular reception helped intensify it.

The controversy became more acute because Christological vocabularies had not yet stabilized. Prosopon, hypostasis, and physis could function differently depending on the author and context. When one side heard "distinction," it might infer "two sons"; when the other heard "unity," it might fear mixture or the disappearance of humanity. The conflict again shows that doctrinal compression arises when an ambiguous formula ceases to be tolerable. Theotokos did not create the controversy by itself, but it functioned as a point of condensation capable of making visible a broader divergence over the subject of the incarnation.

Epistemic integrity also requires separating the historical Nestorius from "Nestorianism." Much of the later image was shaped by his opponents, conciliar decisions, and traditions that used his name long afterward. The Bazaar of Heracleides, preserved in Syriac translation, offers a late and retrospective defense, useful but not transparent. Just as Athanasius cannot be used uncritically to manufacture a uniform Arianism, Cyril and the conciliar acts cannot be the only lens through which Nestorius is reconstructed (Driver and Hodgson 1925; Brock 1996; Walters 2025).

7.4 Cyril of Alexandria: Unity of the Subject, Letters, and Anathemas

Cyril of Alexandria intervened with a strong conception of the unity of the Christological subject and with an institutional network capable of internationalizing the conflict. His letters to Nestorius became decisive documents. In them, the central argument is not that Christ's humanity is unreal, but that human and divine actions must be attributed to the one incarnate Son. Soteriological unity depends on the one who is born, suffers, and saves being the same Logos, without the divine nature thereby being transformed into flesh. This logic explains why Theotokos was more than Marian devotion for Cyril: it was a test of the subject's identity.

Roman intervention in 430 and the exchange of letters increased the pressure. Cyril was charged with communicating to Nestorius a demand for recantation, and his third letter included twelve anathemas. Those anathemas would become some of the most controversial texts of the decade. Some eastern bishops judged them susceptible to an Apollinarian reading; for Cyril they expressed the consequences of a real union. Their reception shows that a definition intended to close one controversy can produce a second controversy over the meaning of the definition itself.

Another retrospective simplification should be avoided: the Council of Ephesus cannot simply be identified with the universal and immediate adoption of every Cyrilline formulation. Cyril's letters acquired immense authority, but the status of different documents, the sequence of approvals, and later reception all unfolded over time. Thomas Graumann has insisted that conciliar acts must be understood as documentary products that organize readings, citations, and decisions; they are not an unmediated window onto a single homogeneous session (Graumann 2021; Price and Graumann 2020).

For the model, Cyril shows the convergence of three technologies: doctrinal precision, episcopal networking, and documentary production. His success cannot be explained by any one of them alone. The theological argument provided coherence; the see of Alexandria supplied resources and relationships; the letters turned that position into a portable object that could be read, approved, and archived in other sees. Orthodoxy becomes more enforceable when a proposition can circulate in stable textual forms.

7.5 Ephesus (431): Procedure, Timing, and Two Rival Assemblies

The council convened by Theodosius II at Ephesus in 431 is particularly revealing because doctrinal definition and procedure are inseparable. Cyril and his allies opened the sessions before the arrival of John of Antioch and several eastern bishops. Nestorius, having been summoned, did not appear before the assembly led by Cyril. The deposition took place in a sequence that his opponents challenged precisely on procedural grounds. When John arrived, he in turn convened an assembly that deposed Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus. For a time, the Empire faced not one unified council but two bodies claiming legitimacy.

Chronology matters. If the historian summarizes the event as "Ephesus condemned Nestorius," the mechanism by which that sentence came to be true disappears. There were summonses, delays, letters, rival sessions, interventions by imperial representatives, and communications with the court. Conciliar authority did not precede the conflict as an automatic structure;

it had to be produced through subsequent recognition. Price and Graumann show the extent to which the Ephesian dossier makes it possible to study not only doctrine, but also the documentary construction of a decision (Price and Graumann 2020).

The episode confirms a dimension already detected at Nicaea: a council is an accelerator of compression, but it does not by itself guarantee a stable outcome. Ephesus produces a condemnation of enormous importance while at the same time leaving relations with a substantial portion of the eastern bishops fractured. Imperial power can detain, confine, or release actors and can attempt to recognize a settlement, but it also faces the difficulty of deciding which assembly represents the legitimate council. Enforceability depends on a political and documentary assessment of theological procedures.

Later memory simplified this period by turning Ephesus into a clear point of victory. Contemporary analysis must preserve contingency. In 431 it was not obvious that all the alliances of the following decade would take the form they eventually did. The condemnation of Nestorius was decisive, but communion between Cyril and John of Antioch still had to be rebuilt. Conciliar closure had opened a problem of reception.

7.6 The Formula of Reunion (433): Agreement, Ambiguity, and Reception

The reconciliation of 433 between Cyril and John of Antioch demonstrates that a doctrinal boundary can be stabilized through a formula precise enough to exclude certain positions and flexible enough to admit non-identical interpretations. The so-called Formula of Reunion confesses one Christ, recognizes Mary as Theotokos, and uses language that permits distinctions to be articulated within the union. The agreement does not erase the history of 431; it reorders it. Nestorius remains outside, while actors who had previously been opposed return to communion.

This episode is important because it prevents compression from being identified with maximum semantic precision. Stabilization sometimes requires controlled ambiguity. A formula that is too narrow can make coalition-building impossible; one that is too vague may fail to mark the boundary. The relative success of 433 lies in an intermediate zone: it produces a vocabulary that parties with different genealogies can receive as compatible with their own theology. Compression then operates through partial overlap of languages, not through the complete elimination of differences.

Nor was the reconciliation received uniformly. Some supporters of Cyril suspected that too much had been conceded to Antiochene language; some eastern bishops retained reservations about the Cyrilline anathemas. "Reception" must therefore be treated as a variable, not as a binary act. A formula can be signed, cited, reinterpreted, ignored, or selectively incorporated. This gradation will be crucial for understanding why Chalcedon, even with imperial backing, did not produce homogeneous acceptance.

From the perspective of the model, a new mechanism appears here: coalitional compression. The boundary is stabilized not because one actor destroys every alternative, but because several networks converge around a minimal formulation that redefines which disagreements may continue within communion. Institutional unity can increase without all conceptual diversity disappearing.

7.7 Eutyches, Flavian, and the New Crisis of 448

The peace of 433 did not close the problem because Christological unity could still be formulated in different ways. In 448, Eutyches, an archimandrite in Constantinople and a figure with influential connections, was accused before a synod presided over by Flavian. The surviving acts allow us to observe an interrogation in which formulas matter intensely. The problem should not be summarized as an automatic swing from "Nestorianism" to the opposite extreme. Eutyches' exact position, his language about Christ's humanity, and the way he responded under pressure have all been debated.

Flavian and his allies judged a Christology inadequate if it did not seem clearly to guarantee Christ's consubstantiality with human beings and the continuing distinction of the natures. Eutyches appealed, and the conflict drew in Dioscorus of Alexandria, Cyril's successor. The old coalition of 433 was reorganized. Some who presented themselves as defenders of Cyril could regard the language of "two natures" after the union as threatening the unity of the subject; others saw it as a necessary condition for preventing the humanity from being absorbed.

The crisis reveals another recursive effect: a victorious formula can produce rival claims to fidelity. Both those who supported Flavian and those who supported Eutyches could claim the heritage of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Cyril. The controversy was no longer framed simply as a conflict between tradition and novelty, but as a conflict between different readings of an accumulated tradition. The denser the doctrinal archive becomes, the more important control over its interpretation becomes.

The label "Eutychianism" should be used with greater precision than "Monophysitism." Eutyches can serve as a reference point for a specific condemned position, but he does not adequately represent all later opponents of Chalcedon. Confusing them is one of the mechanisms by which Chalcedonian heresiology turned multiple forms of resistance into a single deviation.

7.8 Ephesus (449): Dioscorus, Procedure, and the Memory of the "Robber Council"

Theodosius II convened another council at Ephesus in 449. Dioscorus of Alexandria presided over the assembly, Eutyches was rehabilitated, and Flavian was deposed. The meeting would be remembered by its opponents as latrocinium, "robbery," or the "Robber Council," a designation that became extraordinarily influential in historiography. The term, however, is a product of polemical memory rather than a neutral description. To understand 449, the decisions, procedure, pressure exerted on participants, and later Chalcedonian reconstruction must be studied separately.

One of the central issues was the handling of documents. Leo's Tome, sent by the bishop of Rome, was not incorporated into the deliberations in the manner its supporters expected. The acts and their later transmission would become evidence against Dioscorus. At Chalcedon, episodes from 449 would be reread to demonstrate irregularities and violence. This reuse shows how one council can judge another through its archive. The conciliar past is not merely memory; it is reusable procedural evidence.

The violence associated with 449 requires precision. Hostile sources describe intimidation and coercion, and Flavian's death shortly afterward nourished a memory in which the council appeared as organized brutality. The historian must acknowledge the existence of pressure and conflict without turning every polemical detail into a transparent fact. The relevant question is not whether there was one "good" assembly and one "bad" one, but why the procedure of 449 could later be delegitimized so effectively.

The political change following the death of Theodosius II in 450 radically altered the situation. Marcian and Pulcheria promoted a new assembly. Here Hypothesis 3 appears with particular clarity: imperial capacity can make a previous definition reversible when the regime changes. But reversibility is not arbitrary. To reverse 449, it was necessary to produce a new doctrinal coalition, reconstruct the procedures, and offer an alternative capable of claiming continuity with Nicaea and Ephesus.

7.9 Chalcedon (451): Leo's Tome, the Definition, and Canon 28

The Council of Chalcedon met in 451 under the new imperial regime. Its acts, far more extensive than those of Nicaea, make it possible to observe the documentary density attained by the conciliar system. Earlier documents were read, decisions reviewed, Dioscorus judged, and the council debated how to formulate a definition that could be presented as continuous with Nicaea, Constantinople, Cyril's letters, and Leo's Tome. Authority was constructed through the accumulation and harmonization of precedents, not through the invention of a new doctrinal beginning (Price and Gaddis 2005; Graumann 2021).

Dioscorus was deposed, but reducing his deposition to an immediate and simple condemnation of "Monophysitism" distorts the acts. Procedural accusations, his refusal to appear at certain sessions, and his conduct in 449 were central. Later anti-Chalcedonian opposition would venerate him as a defender of Cyril, while Chalcedonian tradition would turn him into an emblematic figure of error. The same person thus became a node of incompatible memories.

The Definition of Chalcedon seeks to maintain one and the same Christ acknowledged "in two natures," without confusion or change, without division or separation. The four negative adverbs are significant: the definition does not attempt to describe exhaustively the metaphysical mechanism of the incarnation, but to exclude families of readings regarded as inadmissible. It is an almost pure example of compression through negative delimitation. The legitimate space is specified by stating what kinds of relation may not be affirmed.

Leo's Tome contributed an influential western formulation concerning the operation of each nature in communion with the other. Its reception at the council was tied to its compatibility with Cyril, not to a replacement of the Alexandrian tradition. This operation of equivalence is crucial: to stabilize the coalition, the council had to show that languages originating in different sees could be read as expressions of the same faith. Conciliar orthodoxy functions here as a system of translation among repertoires.

Chalcedon also addressed questions of jurisdiction. Canon 28 granted Constantinople privileges linked to its status as New Rome and provoked Leo's objections. The episode demonstrates that a doctrinal council cannot be separated from institutional geography. The same assembly that defines Christology redistributes episcopal precedence. Doctrine, jurisdiction, and imperial structure meet within the same device, even though none can be reduced to the others.

7.10 What Chalcedon Defined and What It Left Open

Chalcedon produced an exceptionally dense boundary: a doctrinal definition, disciplinary decisions, a corpus of acts, and imperial backing. But density does not equal unanimity. The formula "in two natures" could be received by some as a guarantee of the integrity of the human and the divine; to others it sounded too close to the distinctions attributed to Nestorius and seemed to betray the Cyrilline language of "one incarnate nature of the Logos." The later dispute would consist in part in determining whether the two repertoires could be reconciled.

Nor did the council automatically settle exactly what Ephesus had approved or how Cyril's various letters were to be related to Leo's Tome. The authority of texts required a hermeneutics of authority. The following centuries would produce florilegia, disputes over translations, and rereadings of the acts precisely because the archive did not interpret itself.

Geographical reception was uneven. Rome and broad imperial networks accepted the definition, while Egypt became one of the principal centers of opposition. In Syria and Palestine, responses were more varied and shifting. The notion of an "imperial Church" must not conceal the fact that the Empire contained multiple cities, monasteries, languages, and local authorities. The enforceability of a decision diminished with institutional distance, episcopal resistance, and the existence of alternative networks.

For this reason, Chalcedon requires a distinction among three dimensions: doctrinal precision, institutional recognition, and social adherence. The council dramatically increases the first and offers resources for the second; the third cannot be decreed. This separation will be central to Chapter 9, where the apparent Chalcedonian victory will produce new episcopal lines and new forms of identity.

7.11 "Nestorians," "Monophysites," and "Miaphysites": A Taxonomy That Also Makes History

The labels of the fifth century are especially dangerous because they survive into modern descriptions of existing churches. "Nestorianism" is often projected onto the Church of the East, even though that church developed in the Sasanian Empire through processes of its own and cannot be explained as the simple institutional survival of Nestorius. Sebastian Brock described the expression "Nestorian Church" as a profoundly inappropriate name, and recent scholarship insists on reconstructing separately the reception of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, and eastern synodal formulas (Brock 1996; Walters 2025).

Something similar occurs with "Monophysitism." The term can be used narrowly for positions such as the one associated with Eutyches, but it becomes problematic when applied indiscriminately to opponents of Chalcedon who insisted on the unity of the incarnate nature without thereby denying Christ's full humanity. For that reason, many specialists prefer "Miaphysite" for those traditions, while others use "anti-Chalcedonian" when the historical identity is defined by its reception of the council. The terminological choice is not cosmetic: it determines which differences remain visible (Brock 2016; Walters 2025).

Nor can “Oriental Orthodoxy” be projected onto 451 without mediation. The modern churches known by that name possess historical genealogies linked to opposition to Chalcedon, but their institutions, liturgies, and self-definitions developed over centuries. The historian must distinguish between an anti-Chalcedonian coalition at a specific moment and a later ecclesial family. Otherwise, the outcome of the process is projected backward as its initial actor.

The case confirms that labels are part of the mechanism of compression. A word can turn a heterogeneous network into a supposedly unified doctrine; it can also travel across languages, laws, and heresiological manuals until it acquires the appearance of an essence. Analyzing the history of heresy therefore requires a double critique: of doctrinal propositions and of the names under which those propositions were aggregated.

7.12 Third Strong Test of the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model

The sequence from 428 to 451 offers the most demanding test of the model thus far. Hypothesis 1 receives strong support: a controversy that can initially be condensed around a Marian title ultimately produces normative letters, anathemas, depositions, and a Christological definition of far greater precision. Yet the direction of that precision is not linear. Ephesus compresses some possibilities; 433 reopens a zone of coexistence; 449 shifts the boundary; 451 redraws it again. Compression is historical and reversible.

Hypothesis 2 is confirmed with a correction: institutional density multiplies both the capacity for decision and the capacity to produce rival councils. Ephesus in 431 and Ephesus in 449 show that the same technologies—convocation, episcopal lists, acts, depositions—can serve opposing coalitions. There is no intrinsically orthodox technology; orthodoxy appears when a coalition succeeds in stabilizing control over those technologies and making its memory durable.

Hypothesis 3 receives its clearest example of political reversibility. Theodosius II supports a conciliar regime that changes after 450; Marcian and Pulcheria can convene Chalcedon and reverse earlier decisions. Yet imperial power also fails to impose uniform reception. Coercion increases formal enforceability, not theological adherence or automatic local stability.

Hypothesis 4 is reinforced by "Nestorianism" and "Monophysitism." Retrospective categories become so powerful that they can come to replace the historical actors themselves. Modern research must decompress those labels in order to recover the diversity that the controversy compressed. That historiographical operation is part of the book's method, not a secondary terminological correction.

Hypothesis 5, recursivity, appears structurally. Ephesus produces 433; the peace of 433 produces disputes over its interpretation; the condemnation of Eutyches produces 449; the revision of 449 produces Chalcedon; Chalcedon produces a new controversy over Chalcedon. The most elaborate definition of the period does not close the system. It causes it to branch. The next chapter will examine the technologies that make this dynamic possible, and Chapter 9 will show why a doctrinal boundary can be institutionally powerful and still generate long-lasting rival traditions.

CHAPTER 8

THE TECHNOLOGIES OF ORTHODOXY

8.1 From Doctrines to Infrastructures of Decision

The previous chapters have followed particular controversies. This chapter changes the scale. The question is no longer what a particular figure taught or what a council decided, but what instruments made it possible for a difference to become an administrable boundary. Calling those instruments "technologies" does not mean mechanizing history or attributing neutrality to them. The term designates sets of repeatable practices: convening, recording, voting, signing, citing, excluding, deposing, exiling, transferring buildings, classifying persons in law, and preserving one version of a conflict in an archive.

Historical orthodoxy requires infrastructures because a proposition does not enforce itself. It may be theologically persuasive and yet have no reach beyond a single city. For it to become a supraregional criterion, some combination of normative texts, networks of recognition, and a capacity to impose consequences must exist. From the second through the fifth centuries, these capacities increased cumulatively. The change is not simply that the Church "gained power," but that it developed increasingly specific repertoires for turning a definition into institutional practice.

This perspective avoids two reductionisms. The first treats dogma as a purely intellectual product and leaves out the mechanisms that determine which formulation is preserved. The second explains orthodoxy as pure coercion and turns theology into a facade. The cases studied show that the two dimensions require one another. An anathema without intelligible doctrinal content does not classify; a doctrine without institutional bearers does not by itself produce a uniform community.

8.2 The Council as a Documentary Machine

The council is one of the most visible technologies, but its effectiveness does not depend only on gathering bishops. It depends on producing documents. Letters of convocation, attendance lists, creeds, acts, petitions, depositions, signatures, and imperial communications turn a temporary meeting into an object that can circulate after the participants have dispersed. Thomas Graumann has shown that late antique councils were intensely documentary environments: they read earlier documents, verified copies, incorporated materials, and constructed dossiers that later meetings could use (Graumann 2021).

The development from Nicaea to Chalcedon is significant. We do not possess complete acts from Nicaea and depend on a fragmentary body of testimony. From Ephesus and Chalcedon, by contrast, we possess far more extensive dossiers. That documentary difference also transforms the history that can be written: it allows voices, sequences, and procedures to be reconstructed with greater precision, but introduces another difficulty. The acts are compilations that were produced, transmitted, and sometimes reorganized; their abundance does not eliminate the need for source criticism.

A later council can also turn the archive of an earlier one into evidence. Chalcedon read materials from 449 and judged the procedure of Dioscorus; later controversies would repeatedly return to the texts of Chalcedon. Conciliar authority becomes recursive because each meeting inherits an archive and can reinterpret it. The system accumulates precedents, and control over those precedents becomes part of the doctrinal struggle.

For the model, a council must be measured in at least four dimensions: scale of representation, documentary quality, subsequent recognition, and capacity for enforcement. A large assembly may fail if its authority is contested; a meeting with strong political backing may later lose legitimacy; a brief definition may acquire weight for centuries if integrated into a chain of reception. The event and its posterity are distinct variables.

8.3 Creeds, Formulas, Anathemas, and Lists of Names

Creeds compress because they turn an extensive argumentative field into a relatively brief sequence of claims that can be repeated. Their power lies as much in what they affirm as in their portability. A community can recite, copy, or require adherence to a creed without reproducing all the discussions that gave rise to it. Nicaea is the paradigmatic case: a complex controversy over generation, creation, and biblical language is condensed into words capable of functioning as tests of recognition.

Anathemas perform a complementary function. If the creed defines the center, the anathema names the edges. Negative formulas make it possible to exclude interpretations without exhaustively describing an alternative metaphysics. Chalcedon uses four negations to mark how the natures must not be related; the Cyrilline anathemas identify consequences their author considers incompatible with the unity of the subject. A boundary can be more operational when expressed as a prohibition than when formulated as a complete theory.

Lists of names add a personal technology to doctrinal classification. Arius, Nestorius, or Eutyches can become shorthand for sets of propositions. This device facilitates administration and memory, but creates the risk that a personal label will outlive doctrinal precision. A law or manual may refer to "Nestorians" without reconstructing what concrete individuals actually affirm. Heresy-making turns persons into classificatory indices.

The historiographical danger is evident: when the researcher inherits a list, the administrative inventory can be mistaken for a real sociology. The method of this book requires moving back from the name to the dossier: what propositions, what actors, what places, and what date justify the classification? The technology of orthodoxy is simultaneously a technology of simplification, and the historian must partially undo that simplification in order to reconstruct the process.

8.4 Deposition, Exile, and Episcopal Replacement

A doctrinal boundary becomes material when it changes who occupies a see. Deposing a bishop does not merely declare a proposition incorrect: it alters networks of ordination, administration, patronage, property, and communion. Nestorius, Flavian, and Dioscorus show three different ways in which a doctrinal conflict can culminate in episcopal removal. Replacement also creates an inevitable question: what happens to the clergy and faithful who continue to recognize the deposed bishop?

Imperial exile amplifies the effect. Athanasius in the fourth century and several protagonists of the fifth experienced displacement ordered by political authorities. Exile reduces access to a see and to certain resources, but it does not automatically erase the exile's network. It can even increase symbolic capital, make it possible to write from the margins, or create a memory of persecution. Coercion has nonlinear effects.

Episcopal replacement can produce the opposite of the unity sought. If a community accepts the new bishop, the boundary stabilizes. If a significant portion recognizes another line, the result is dual jurisdiction, clandestinity, or competition over buildings. The instrument intended to close a controversy can institutionalize it. This mechanism will become especially visible in Alexandria after 451.

The model must therefore distinguish exclusion from office from the elimination of a network. The former can be enforced by decree; the latter depends on social relations, local resources, and perceived legitimacy. An orthodoxy capable of naming the official bishop can coexist with another community that regards that appointment as illegitimate.

8.5 From Anathema to Legal Subject: Imperial Legislation and Heresy

With the Christianization of imperial government, "heretic" can also become a legal category. Book XVI of the Codex Theodosianus brings together religious legislation issued by Christian emperors and shows a growing willingness to name groups, limit rights, regulate assemblies, and define which communities receive privileges. The code was promulgated in the fifth century and consolidated earlier constitutions; its structure makes visible the extent to which religious difference had entered imperial administration (Pharr 1952; Humfress 2007; Humfress 2020).

But a law is not a photograph of practice. Caroline Humfress has insisted on the need to read legislation within Roman legal culture, distinguishing normative rhetoric, the context of promulgation, avenues of enforcement, and actual litigation. A constitution prohibiting an assembly demonstrates that an emperor wished to formulate a rule; it does not demonstrate that every such meeting ceased in every province. Repeated legislation may even indicate difficulty in securing compliance.

The legal category nevertheless produces a qualitative change. An ecclesial classification can acquire consequences for property, the ability to assemble, access to office, or recognition of clergy. The state does not need to resolve Christological questions itself in order to act; it needs an operational taxonomy. For this reason, the convergence between heresiological lists and legal language increases the enforceability of the boundary. Law translates doctrinal differences into administrable attributes.

That translation is never perfect. Legal categories can preserve obsolete names, combine distinct groups, or respond to local circumstances. Bishops and litigants can also use Roman courts and procedures creatively. The Church-state relationship is not a one-way chain of command. It is a circuit in which ecclesial authorities produce classifications, imperial authorities adopt or modify them, and communities attempt to exploit the institutions available.

8.6 Churches, Property, Sees, and Control of Space

Religious belonging becomes territorialized when a controversy determines who controls a basilica, an episcopal residence, a cemetery, or an estate. The Donatist conflicts already showed that possession of buildings could become an index of recognition. In the fifth century, competition over episcopal sees makes this materiality still more visible. An orthodoxy without public space is harder to reproduce; a community with buildings, patrons, and clergy can resist even if its position is condemned by a council.

Control of space produces cognitive effects. The official basilica, public liturgy, and presence of the recognized bishop turn an abstract definition into everyday experience. The doctrinal boundary becomes embedded in urban itineraries, calendars, and ceremonies. This is why the replacement of a bishop can generate resistance that cannot be reduced to a dispute over Greek words: it involves patronage, urban identity, local memory, and access to sacred places.

Here too, the evidence requires caution. Not every property dispute should be interpreted as a mask for an economic conflict, nor every theology as a mere legitimation of material interests. Actors could simultaneously believe that a church belonged to the true community and that the true community was doctrinally defined. For institutional history, both dimensions are causal.

8.7 Archives, Citations, Translations, and Selective Preservation

Orthodoxy needs memory, and memory needs material supports. Irenaeus preserves fragments of opponents while refuting them; Athanasius incorporates letters into a pro-Nicene narrative; the acts of Ephesus and Chalcedon preserve documents that would otherwise have been lost. The victorious archive can be hostile to the text it preserves and still become the principal means of its survival. The relationship between repression and preservation is more paradoxical than a simple history of censorship suggests.

Translation adds another layer. Christological controversies circulated among Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages. Terms such as physis, hypostasis, prosopon, natura, and persona do not correspond mechanically. A formula that appears equivalent can acquire a different resonance in another language. The construction of supraregional orthodoxy therefore requires translations that are authorized or at least acceptable.

The archive can also produce absence. Texts cease to be copied because a community disappears, because they cease to be useful, because they are condemned, or because material conditions change. It is not methodologically legitimate to turn every loss into evidence of intentional destruction. Documentary absence must remain absence until there is evidence of a specific policy.

This caution is central to the model: if memory is a phase of compression, its effect must be demonstrated through observable practices—selection, citation, cataloguing, translation, prohibition—and not assumed as a total conspiracy. Retrospective orthodoxy is produced both by what is preserved and by the architecture that organizes what has been preserved.

8.8 Preaching and Liturgy as Boundary-Making Technologies

Controversies did not remain in conciliar halls. Sermons, hymns, baptismal formulas, and liturgical celebrations translated theological distinctions into repeated practices. The title Theotokos is one example: its force derives in part from the fact that it could appear in devotion, preaching, and prayer, not only in treatises. A liturgically rooted formulation has a different capacity for reproduction than a thesis reserved for specialists.

Liturgy can also function as a test of communion. Who is commemorated, which bishop is named, which creed is recited, or which formula is incorporated into a hymn are decisions capable of making a boundary visible. By the end of the fifth century, controversies surrounding the Trisagion would show how a small liturgical modification can condense a Christological position and an ecclesial identity.

Yet one should not imagine a perfect vertical transmission from council to people. The faithful could appropriate formulas, simplify them, or connect them with local loyalties. Liturgy is a technology of stabilization precisely because it is repetitive, but that repetition can also stabilize a tradition opposed to the one sponsored by the imperial government.

8.9 Monks, Laity, and Urban Mobilization

A history of heresy written exclusively from the perspective of bishops loses decisive actors. Monks, lower clergy, aristocrats, officials, and urban crowds could alter the course of a controversy. Constantinople, Alexandria, and Ephesus were cities where sermons and rumors circulated rapidly. Monasteries could provide disciplined networks of support, while court patrons could open channels to the emperor.

Monastic participation was not doctrinally uniform. There were pro-Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian monks, as well as ascetics involved in earlier controversies from different positions. "The monks" therefore do not constitute a variable with a fixed effect. What matters is the organizational capacity of ascetic institutions: mobility, charismatic authority, communal density, and their relationship with the urban population.

Nor should the category "crowd" be used to depoliticize the laity. Episcopal sources may present the population as manipulated by a rival or as spontaneously acclaiming the truth. Both images are rhetorical. Analysis must ask what we actually know about collective participation, what forms of mediation shape the source, and what local interests could be mobilized alongside religious convictions.

Social mobilization introduces a correction to the notion of enforceability. A decree may have administrative force and still encounter enough urban resistance to make its application costly. Institutional orthodoxy is not only the capacity to command; it is the capacity to secure sustained cooperation from actors who were not present at the council.

8.10 Heresiology and Memory: Turning a Controversy into Genealogy

Heresiology organizes time. Instead of presenting each conflict as a new problem, it can place it within a genealogy of errors: Simon Magus, Valentinus, Arius, Nestorius, Eutyches. That sequence produces intelligibility and reinforces the identity of the group that sees itself as the continuous bearer of truth. The later heretic appears as a repetition of an ancient pattern, even when the doctrinal problems differ.

Genealogy is powerful because it turns contingency into necessity. If a doctrine already belongs to the chain of heresies, its defeat appears to confirm a history that had always been moving toward the same result. Internal conflicts, rehabilitations, rival councils, and imperial changes disappear behind a linear narrative. Chapter 1 showed this mechanism in Irenaeus; the fourth and fifth centuries expand it through ecclesiastical histories and conciliar dossiers.

But orthodox memory is not the only memory. Condemned communities can construct their own genealogies, present their bishops as confessors, and turn persecution into proof of fidelity. After Chalcedon, both sides will claim Nicaea and Cyril. The struggle will no longer be between memory and oblivion, but between rival archives that order a shared inheritance differently.

8.11 Uneven Enforceability: Why a Norm Is Not the Same as a Practice

The principal comparative lesson of these technologies is that none operates uniformly. A creed can be highly precise and poorly received; a law can be severe and scarcely enforced; a bishop can be deposed and remain recognized by followers; a text can be condemned and survive in translation. Enforceability must therefore be measured empirically rather than inferred from the existence of a norm.

I propose distinguishing four levels: promulgation, capacity, implementation, and reproduction. Promulgation is the formal act that produces the rule. Capacity consists of the resources available to apply it. Implementation is the evidence of concrete application. Reproduction is the persistence of the boundary after changes in actors and contexts. Confusing these levels generates false narratives of "total repression" or, at the opposite extreme, of state impotence.

This distinction also makes regional comparison possible. The same imperial constitution may be administratively legible in a capital and far less effective in areas where the condemned group controls monasteries, clergy, or local patronage. A history of orthodoxy must therefore be spatial. The boundary can be strong on one institutional map and weak on another.

8.12 Matrix of Technologies and Revision of the Model

Comparison makes it possible to organize the technologies into five families: semantic—creeds, formulas, anathemas; documentary—acts, letters, archives; institutional—councils, depositions, successions; legal-material—laws, exiles, property; and reproductive—liturgy, education, memory, and patronage. No family is sufficient on its own. The most durable boundaries appear when several align.

The Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model must therefore abandon any reading in which "definition" is a single variable. Definition has layers. A formula can compress semantically; a council can compress institutionally; a law can increase enforceability; a liturgy can reproduce identity. The historical sequence depends on the synchronization among those layers.

A principle of decoupling must also be incorporated. The layers can move in different directions. A position can lose imperial recognition and gain liturgical cohesion; it can be excluded from a see and expand in monasteries; it can be legally prohibited and preserve a literature of its own. That decoupling explains why formal victory does not equal disappearance.

With this revision, the question of the following chapter becomes precise. After Chalcedon, almost all the technologies of imperial orthodoxy are available: councils, definitions, acts, depositions, and state patronage. If controversy nevertheless continues and produces durable communities, the model must explain not only compression but bifurcation. That will be the decisive test of the end of the fifth century.

CHAPTER 9

AFTER VICTORY: MEMORY, SURVIVAL, AND RETROSPECTIVE ORTHODOXY

9.1 The "Victory" That Did Not End the Controversy

The title of this chapter uses "victory" in a deliberately problematic way. From the perspective of the later Chalcedonian tradition, 451 can appear as a culmination: the council defines the faith, deposes Dioscorus, and receives imperial support. From the perspective of numerous Christians in Egypt and other eastern regions, however, Chalcedon could represent a rupture with Cyril and Ephesus. The same event functions both as a confirmation of orthodoxy and as the origin of a new dissent.

Subsequent history shows that a definition can triumph at the conciliar level and fail as a form of social closure. Rather than disappearing, opposition to Chalcedon generated rival bishops, monastic networks, distinct liturgies, and memories of persecution. The modern categories "Chalcedonian" and "anti-Chalcedonian" describe this phase better than "orthodox" and "heretic" if the aim is to reconstruct the process without deciding the conflict theologically.

The central question, then, is why the infrastructure described in Chapter 8 did not produce uniformity. The answer cannot be that the state lacked power or that theology was irrelevant. The evidence points to a different structure: the technologies of compression were distributed among different actors. The emperor could recognize one bishop; a local population could recognize another. A council could define a formula; entire monasteries could preserve it as a symbol of betrayal. Enforceability became fragmented.

9.2 Alexandria After Chalcedon: Dioscorus, Proterius, and Timothy Aelurus

Egypt offers the clearest case. Dioscorus was deposed at Chalcedon and sent into exile. Proterius was installed in Alexandria with imperial recognition. The replacement did not settle the question of local legitimacy. For numerous supporters of Dioscorus, Proterius represented the imposition of a council they regarded as doctrinally suspect. The Alexandrian see became the point at which a conciliar decision had to be transformed into everyday obedience.

After the death of Marcian in 457, the crisis intensified. Timothy, known by the epithet Aelurus, was consecrated by the opposition, and Proterius died in an episode of urban violence. The sources differ in tone and in their attribution of responsibility, so the event should not be treated as straightforward proof of an inherently violent character in either group. What is historically decisive is that Alexandria could produce an alternative episcopal line capable of claiming religious legitimacy against the candidate backed by the imperial order (Frend 1972; Gray 1979).

The competition shows that deposing a bishop does not eliminate the adversary's episcopal institution. It can instead lead to the duplication of that institution. Each line ordains clergy, preserves memory, and presents the other as an intruder. The mechanism that appeared in Chapter 8 as replacement is transformed here into institutional bifurcation.

This phase also prevents us from identifying opposition to Chalcedon with a single doctrine already fully formed in

451. The Egyptian coalitions included different sensibilities and evolved over time. Anti-Chalcedonian identity consolidated through the experience of conflict, succession, and memory. It is a historical result, not a pre-existing essence.

9.3 Palestine and Syria: Ascetic, Episcopal, and Local Networks of Resistance

Outside Egypt, reception was equally uneven. Palestine saw monastic resistance and episodes of episcopal competition; in Syria, alliances varied across cities and periods. The geography of the controversy does not coincide with a simple linguistic boundary between Greek and Syriac or with an ethnic division. Greek and Syriac speakers occupied multiple positions, and monastic networks could cross provincial boundaries.

Monasticism is especially important because it provided institutions capable of surviving episcopal changes. A monastery could preserve texts, educate disciples, and maintain ties with other communities. That relative autonomy allowed a condemned position to continue reproducing itself even if it temporarily lost a see. State compression is less effective when the adversary possesses multiple nodes.

Older historiography tended to explain anti-Chalcedonianism through the premature projection of Egyptian or Syrian nationalisms. That explanation is insufficient. Regional identities matter, but doctrinal divisions cannot be reduced to proto-nationalisms. Studies of the later formation of Syriac churches show much more gradual processes in which doctrine, patronage, language, monasteries, and imperial politics combine without a single cause (Frend 1972; Menze 2008; Moss 2016).

9.4 Basiliscus and the Imperial Reversibility of the Boundary

The brief usurpation of Basiliscus in 475–476 offers an almost controlled experiment in reversibility. The emperor issued an encyclical favorable to anti-Chalcedonian positions and sought to withdraw authority from Chalcedon. Bishops and monks aligned themselves in different ways; significant opposition arose in Constantinople. Imperial policy could therefore attempt to reverse the doctrinal hierarchy barely two decades after the council.

The episode confirms that state support is contingent. If orthodoxy were simply the emperor's doctrine, a change of ruler should produce a stable change of orthodoxy. It did not. Chalcedonian networks had acquired sufficient institutional density and memory to resist. The state can amplify a coalition, but it cannot create one from nothing or instantly erase its rival.

The restoration of Zeno returned the system to another configuration. The speed of these changes shows that the boundary established in 451 had not yet achieved reproduction independent of political circumstances. Stabilization requires persistence across regimes—exactly the criterion of reversibility incorporated into the model after Nicaea.

9.5 Zeno's Henotikon (482): Governing Through Ambiguity

In 482, Zeno promulgated the Henotikon as an attempt at reconciliation. The document affirmed Nicaea and Constantinople, received Ephesus and Cyril, condemned Nestorius and Eutyches, and avoided making the Chalcedonian formula the explicit center of the agreement. This strategy is not simply evasion. It is a political technology of ambiguity: reducing the number of propositions that must be accepted in order to restore communion.

The Henotikon shows that imperial government understood a problem the model has repeatedly detected. A boundary that is too precise can produce mass exclusion; a thinner formula can attempt to rebuild a coalition. In that sense, the document functionally resembles the Formula of Reunion of 433. But the context was different: after 451, Chalcedon had already become, for many actors, an authority that could not simply be placed in brackets.

The attempt at agreement won support in some eastern circles and made certain reconciliations possible, but it also provoked Roman rejection. The same ambiguity designed to reduce one conflict created another over the authority of the council and communion with bishops who accepted the Henotikon. The case is a perfect demonstration of institutional recursivity: the solution to one boundary produces a second-order boundary over whether that solution is itself legitimate.

9.6 The Acacian Schism: When Compromise Produces a New Boundary

The rupture between Rome and Constantinople associated with Acacius, patriarch of the capital, was consummated in 484, when the bishop of Rome pronounced his deposition, and lasted into the sixth century. For the chronological framework of this book, its origin is what matters: a policy conceived to reduce the division between Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians produced a fracture between sees that shared much of the Chalcedonian tradition. Compression of the eastern conflict shifted the cost onto another institutional relationship.

This outcome prevents us from modeling the controversy along a single axis. Multiple boundaries exist simultaneously: Chalcedon against its opponents; Rome against Constantinople over communion with particular bishops; local sees against rival lines. The same person can be inside one boundary and outside another. Ecclesial belonging becomes multidimensional.

The model needs to represent that structure as a network, not a line. Orthodoxy is not a circle with a single center and a uniform exterior. In Late Antiquity, communions, recognitions, and condemnations can overlap. Legal or conciliar classification attempts to simplify that map, but ecclesial sociology retains more dimensions.

9.7 The Church of the East and the Historiographical Problem of "Nestorianism"

The trajectory of Christian communities within the Sasanian Empire offers another decisive limit to the Roman narrative. The Church of the East developed its own synodal and episcopal structure and, toward the end of the fifth century, granted increasing authority to the theological tradition of Theodore of Mopsuestia. That development took place in a political space where the decisions of Roman emperors had no direct enforceability. The condemnation of Nestorius in 431 therefore cannot be treated as a sufficient institutional cause of eastern ecclesial identity.

The synods of the late fifth century—including Beth Lapat in 486—show a Christology that the later Western tradition would associate with "Nestorianism," but the label compresses a more complex history. The positive reception of Nestorius intensified at later stages, while the self-description of the

Church of the East did not emerge simply as the party of a bishop deposed in Constantinople. Walters summarizes the modern controversy by insisting precisely on distinguishing the case of Nestorius, the trajectories of the Church of the East, and the anti-Chalcedonian churches (Walters 2025).

This case acts as an external control on the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model. Compression produced by a Roman council loses force when it crosses an imperial frontier. Ideas, letters, and people do circulate; political enforceability does not. The model must incorporate geopolitical jurisdiction as a limit: a doctrinal boundary can be ecumenical in aspiration and regional in capacity.

The methodological consequence is important. The word "ecumenical" describes a claim and a historical reception within particular traditions; it does not prove that all Christians in the ancient world were represented by or subject to the decision. The history of heresies cannot treat the geography of the Roman Empire as automatically equivalent to that of Christianity.

9.8 The Memory of Cyril and the Dispute over the Legacy of Nicaea

After Chalcedon, both sides claimed continuity with Cyril. Chalcedonians presented the council as a harmonization of Leo and Cyril; anti-Chalcedonians insisted that the formula of two natures betrayed the language of the Alexandrian patriarch. The same patristic authority could sustain rival narratives. The dispute was no longer about accepting or rejecting Cyril, but about who could interpret him legitimately.

Nicaea functioned in a similar way. None of the major coalitions wanted to present itself as an innovator against the creed. The authority of 325 had grown so much that the fifth-century conflict could be framed as a competition over who was the true Nicene heir. Retrospective orthodoxy operates here in both directions: each tradition reorders the past to show that its present was already contained in the earlier faith.

This phenomenon modifies the idea of victorious memory. There is not a single memory produced by the victor while the defeated fall silent. There are competing memories that preserve different saints, councils, and persecutions. The victory of a narrative depends on the institutional vantage point from which it is observed. In Chalcedonian Constantinople, Dioscorus can be a heretic; in an anti-Chalcedonian Coptic tradition, he is a confessor of the faith.

9.9 Persistence Without Uniformity: Communities, Liturgies, and Rival Bishops

The persistence of alternatives does not mean that all the later confessional churches already existed in their mature form in the fifth century. It means that the conditions for separate reproduction were taking shape: rival bishops, aligned monasteries, differentiated liturgical repertoires, and incompatible memories. Separation is a process, not a single date.

Liturgy contributed to that reproduction because a community could repeat its interpretation of the conflict every day. Names of saints, episcopal commemorations, and Christological formulas turned identity into practice. By the end of the fifth century, controversies over the Trisagion show how a brief addition could mark a Christological reading and, at the same time, an ecclesial affiliation.

The formation of rival lines also changes the cost of reconciliation. Once there are bishops, ordinations, and martyrs of one's own, reunification requires more than agreement over words; it requires deciding which succession is legitimate, which depositions are recognized, and how the memory of persecution is to be interpreted. The infrastructure created by the conflict becomes an obstacle to undoing it.

9.10 From the Failure of Elimination to the Formation of Parallel Traditions

The history of Chalcedon allows us to formulate a paradox. The more comprehensive the technology of exclusion, the greater the incentive may be for the excluded community to develop institutions of its own. If the possibility of coexistence within the same structure diminishes, survival requires duplicating institutional capacities: episcopal structures, clerical formation, liturgy, patronage, and archives. Compression can produce durable separation rather than uniformity.

It should be noted that this chapter does not add a fourth strong test to the series of comparisons in Chapters 4 through 7. The series closes at 7.12 because its function was to subject the model to cases of increasing intensity; what the fifth century after Chalcedon requires is not another test, but a modification of the model itself. The chapter therefore operates as an instance of revision rather than confirmation.

This process is not inevitable. Some controversies end in absorption, others in marginalization, and others in disappearance. Bifurcation occurs when an excluded position retains sufficient social and institutional density and when the central authority lacks the capacity to destroy or reintegrate that network. Egypt after 451 approaches this pattern. The Church of the East shows another variant, additionally protected by a political frontier.

The result requires abandoning the expression "persistence of heresy" if it suggests that an identical deviation survives unchanged. What persists are communities that reinterpret, develop, and transmit a tradition. Later identity can incorporate the founding conflict without being reducible to it.

9.11 Branched Compression: A Necessary Modification of the Model

The post-Chalcedonian cases require a theoretical modification. Until now, the model has primarily described how a controversy reduces the space of admissible positions within a network seeking to remain united. The fifth century shows a second outcome: when exclusion does not eliminate the adversary and sufficient resources exist to reproduce alternative institutions, compression can branch. Each branch stabilizes its own space of orthodoxy and defines the other as deviation.

I propose provisionally calling this phenomenon branched compression. It is not synonymous with schism. A schism can arise from jurisdiction without producing a rival doctrinal system, and a doctrinal difference can exist without separate institutions. Branched compression requires three observable conditions: an explicit doctrinal boundary; a persistent rupture of institutional recognition; and a capacity for autonomous reproduction through clergy, texts, liturgy, or patronage.

The concept helps explain why "victory" depends on the level of analysis. Chalcedon prevails as the doctrinal definition of imperial Christianity that would come to dominate Constantinople and Rome; it does not win in the sense of eliminating all non-Chalcedonian traditions. An anti-Chalcedonian community, in turn, can regard itself as guardian of Cyril's true legacy and organize its own narrative of moral victory.

Compression produces several competing systems of admissibility.

This modification also makes the theory more falsifiable. If separate institutional reproduction does not appear in cases where the three conditions exist, the concept would be weak. If, by contrast, branching can be identified in Egypt, Syria, or Persia through different but comparable mechanisms, the model gains explanatory power without turning diversity into a universal law.

9.12 Assessment of the Fifth Century: Orthodoxy, Institutional Pluralization, and the Limits of Power

At the end of the fifth century, the Christian landscape is paradoxical. There are more precise doctrinal definitions than in any earlier period, councils with enormous archives, imperial law capable of classifying heretics, and large-scale episcopal networks. At the same time, there are rival communions, disputed sees, and Christological traditions that have not been eliminated. History does not move linearly from plurality to unity. It moves from a relatively fluid plurality to a plurality that is more institutionalized and mutually exclusive.

This is one of the book's most important provisional conclusions. Compression can reduce ambiguity within each community and increase the distance between communities. Internal clarity and external fragmentation are not opposing processes; they can be two outcomes of the same conflict. Chalcedon offers the most visible case because its doctrinal precision coincides with the beginning of a long history of divergent receptions.

Imperial power was decisive but limited. It convened councils, recognized bishops, exiled opponents, and produced legislation. Yet it could not fully control memory, geography, or local reproduction. Coercion changes costs; it does not automatically determine convictions or extinguish institutions. This conclusion corrects both the narrative of a purely autonomous Church and that of dogma manufactured by state decree.

With Chapters 7 through 9, the third major empirical phase of the study is complete. The cross-case evaluation that follows applies a common matrix to the cases and distinguishes between strong support, conditional support, and the limits of each hypothesis. The purpose is not to declare the model victorious through a rhetorical accumulation of examples, but to determine which relationships survive comparison, which require reformulation, and what scope can be attributed to branched compression. The conclusion therefore functions as an exit test: it returns the theory to the evidence after modifying it through contact with the cases.

CONCLUSION
THE CHURCH PRODUCED BY ITS CONFLICTS

C.1 What the Comparison Has Demonstrated and What It Has Not

The trajectory from the controversies of the first and second centuries to the reception of Chalcedon allows us to answer the question that organized this book: a doctrinal difference becomes an institutionally enforceable boundary when it ceases to be merely a divergence of formulation and begins to bring together mechanisms capable of defining, communicating, reproducing, and applying the limits of communion. None of these mechanisms operates automatically. Controversy supplies pressure; texts supply vocabulary and memory; episcopal networks supply coordinating capacity; councils supply decision-making procedures; liturgy and discipline supply communal reproduction; and, from the fourth century onward, imperial power can add legal and material enforceability. Historical orthodoxy results from the variable articulation of these layers, not from a single cause.

The comparison also demonstrates that Christian boundaries predate technical vocabulary and imperial institutions. The Pauline letters, the Didache, First Clement, and Ignatius document practices of correction, exclusion, authorization, and memory in communities that had neither a closed Christian canon nor a supralocal apparatus capable of standardizing decisions. The book therefore does not confirm a simple opposition between original plurality and later orthodoxy. It confirms a transformation of scale. Early boundaries were real, but their capacity for universalization was lower, their bearers were more plural, and rival communities had greater scope to coexist or ignore one another.

The second century changes that balance. Marcion, the traditions later grouped under Gnostic categories, the New Prophecy, and the responses of Irenaeus and Tertullian show that conflict can accelerate the explicit articulation of criteria that already had precedents: rule of faith, succession, apostolic authority, textual corpus, discipline, and communion. The evidence, however, prevents us from narrating this process as a single reaction. The Fourfold Gospel is not simply a mechanical response to Marcion; the canon does not arise at a single moment; the episcopate does not assert itself everywhere at once; and the category "Gnosticism" cannot be used as though it designated a coherent church comparable to the Manichaean structure. This heterogeneity is evidence in favor of the method and a warning against an excessively compact theory.

The third and fourth centuries introduce a further change: ecclesial authority acquires greater density and, after Constantine, can interact with the state on a sustained basis. The controversies over the lapsi, Novatian, rebaptism, and Donatism show that defining doctrinal truth and defining who may make decisions about sacraments or reconciliation are inseparable problems. Nicaea then shows the unprecedented capacity of an imperially convened assembly to produce a formula claiming universal scope. Yet Nicaea itself prevents us from identifying decision with closure. The creed of 325 transformed the terrain of controversy without immediately producing either a shared semantics or a stable coalition. The historical importance of Nicaea lies as much in its contested reception as in the text approved in 325.

Ephesus and Chalcedon carry the dynamic to its highest degree of complexity. The sources allow us to observe rival councils, acts that construct memory, doctrinal letters transformed into norms, sees competing for jurisdiction, emperors altering the balance, and communities capable of rejecting a definition even when it possesses legal support. The result is decisive for the thesis: doctrinal precision can increase at the same time as institutional fragmentation. A more exact boundary does not necessarily mean a more unified community. It can produce a more durable separation.

It does not follow from this comparison that every Christian doctrine was "invented by conflict." Such a conclusion would exceed the evidence and confuse the history of formulation with the total origin of ideas. The actors argue with preexisting materials: Scripture, liturgy, exegesis, philosophy, local traditions, and theological convictions with histories of their own. Controversy does not create these contents ex nihilo; it changes their priority, forces the selection of vocabulary, renders some combinations incompatible, and turns certain formulas into tests of communion. The model primarily explains the transformation of boundaries, not the entire genesis of a doctrine.

Nor does it follow that the group that succeeds in imposing a definition does so solely through external power. The sources contain genuine theological argument and doctrinal commitments that cannot be reduced to patronage, office, or coercion. The fact that a definition requires institutions in order to become a norm does not prove that its content is a disguise for institutional interests. Political reductionism would be as inadequate as a doctrinal reductionism that ignored exile, sees, property, communication, or law. The evidence requires a composite causality.

C.2 Hypothesis 1: Definitional Pressure

The first hypothesis held that the more a controversy implicates central practices of communion, worship, or authority, the greater the likelihood that it will produce an explicit formulation where a margin of ambiguity had previously existed. The overall assessment is one of strong support, with an important qualification: definitional pressure predicts neither consensus nor a single form of codification. It predicts an increase in normative effort.

The baseline case already offers modest examples. The incorporation of Gentiles forces communities to determine which practices of the Torah should be required and which criteria define belonging. Paul's discussions of table fellowship, circumcision, food offered to idols, and discipline do not generate a universal Christian constitution, but they show that the communal cost of ambiguity forces argument and rules. The Didache does something similar with itinerant prophets, baptism, fasting, and the table: where everyday practice can generate abuse or confusion, explicit criteria appear.

In the second century, the pressure increases because several disputes simultaneously affect Scripture, creation, the identity of the God proclaimed by Jesus, prophetic authority, and apostolic continuity. Marcion does not "create" the need for a canon, but his textual selection makes visible the problem of which collection can sustain Christian identity. Irenaeus responds to a plurality of adversaries through an architecture linking rule of faith, succession, and the Fourfold Gospel. The response cannot be explained as a simple snapshot of a preexisting consensus: its very argumentative density shows that consensus had to be defended and articulated.

The crises over the lapsi and rebaptism provide still clearer evidence because definitional pressure arises from immediate sacramental practices. Can someone who sacrificed be reconciled? By what authority? Must baptism administered outside recognized communion be repeated? An abstract difference becomes legally relevant within the Church because it determines who belongs and which acts are valid. In these cases, doctrine and discipline become inseparable.

Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon are the cases of greatest intensity. A local Alexandrian controversy produces in 325 a formula and anathemas whose claimed scope radically exceeds the original conflict. In the fifth century, a dispute that can initially be condensed around the use of Theotokos ultimately forces Christians to determine who is the subject of the incarnation and how unity and distinction in Christ are to be affirmed. The increase in precision between 428 and 451 is unmistakable, even if stability is less complete than a retrospective reading suggests.

The hypothesis must nevertheless be reformulated to avoid an overly linear relationship between intensity and closure. Pressure can produce several rival formulas, competing councils, or a deliberately ambiguous solution. The Formula of Reunion of 433 and the Henotikon of 482 show that, in certain contexts, the response to conflict can consist in managing ambiguity rather than eliminating it. The revised version of H1 is therefore: a highly salient controversy increases the production of explicit instruments of delimitation or coordination, but does not determine whether the outcome will be exclusion, compromise, or bifurcation.

C.3 Hypothesis 2: Institutional Density and Scale

The second hypothesis linked the density of episcopal networks and supralocal procedures to the capacity to transform a local condemnation into a boundary of wider scope. The comparison offers substantial support, but it requires replacing an overly hierarchical idea of density with a relational one. Scale depends not only on how centralized an institution is, but on how many nodes can communicate, recognize documents, coordinate authorities, and reproduce decisions.

In the first and second centuries, dense networks exist without a single center. Letters circulate, bishops recognize one another, travelers carry news, and writings acquire translocal authority. That connectivity explains why certain decisions have effects beyond the community of origin even in the absence of a central organ of enforcement. At the same time, the irregularity of those networks allows other positions to persist. Density is sufficient to transmit conflict and memory; it is not always sufficient to impose a uniform solution.

Cyprian allows us to observe a different stage. Episcopal correspondence, African synods, and the relationship with Rome turn disciplinary problems into controversies between sees. The dispute over baptism shows that a dense network does not guarantee agreement: it can intensify disagreement because several authorities possess a real capacity to sustain incompatible positions. This is an important correction. Institutions do not only stabilize orthodoxy; they can also stabilize opposition.

The councils of the fourth and fifth centuries multiply the scale. Nicaea, Serdica, Rimini, Seleucia, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon show an accumulation of procedures: convocations, episcopal lists, subscriptions, creeds, acts, depositions, and precedents. The institution learns. Each crisis inherits repertoires from the previous one. But Ephesus in 431 and 449 shows that the same technology can legitimize opposing coalitions. Institutional density increases the capacity to produce a boundary; it does not identify in advance which coalition will succeed in stabilizing it.

The post-Chalcedonian evidence adds the decisive point. When an excluded community retains bishops, monasteries, texts, liturgy, and patronage, institutional density ceases to be the exclusive property of imperial orthodoxy. It can sustain an alternative branch. Hypothesis 2 holds if formulated as follows: the greater the relational density and reproductive capacity, the greater the capacity to turn a classification into a durable boundary; that capacity can belong both to the coalition recognized by the state and to rival communities.

C.4 Hypothesis 3: Coercion, Enforceability, and Persistence

The third hypothesis proposed that secular coercion can accelerate the application of a definition without guaranteeing the disappearance of the alternative. This is the hypothesis that receives the most direct support from the late-antique cases. State intervention radically changes the costs of a controversy: a deposition can entail exile; a classification can affect buildings, property, or the right of assembly; an episcopal succession can receive administrative support. But none of these capacities amounts to absolute control over beliefs, memories, and local networks.

Donatism offers an early laboratory. Imperial participation can recognize one side, convene proceedings, impose sanctions, or attempt reintegration, but the African conflict persists for generations because it rests on memories of persecution, episcopal networks, local identities, and an ecclesiology that does not disappear by decree. Coercion can alter the geography of the conflict and its political language; by itself, it proves neither the falsity nor the social weakness nor the imminent extinction of the punished side.

The Nicene controversy confirms the principle from another angle. Different emperors exile and rehabilitate bishops, support different formulas, and convene assemblies. If imperial patronage were a sufficient variable, the content of orthodoxy should change definitively with each reign. It does not. Power can favor a coalition and accelerate its capacity to act, but ecclesial networks, conciliar memory, polemical literature, and subsequent political changes reopen the outcome.

After Chalcedon, the limit becomes even more evident. The definition of 451 possesses conciliar and imperial resources of enormous density, yet opposition in Egypt and other regions does not disappear. Zeno's Henotikon further demonstrates that the state itself may later prefer a strategy of ambiguity in order to govern a disagreement it has been unable to extinguish. Coercion is not irrelevant; it is insufficient.

H3 can therefore be accepted in a more precise formulation: coercion increases enforceability and can change the material distribution of a controversy, but its effectiveness in relation to the reproduction of alternatives depends on institutional density, geography, resources, and a community's capacity to convert persecution or exclusion into identity-forming memory. Where those resources are strong, a sanction can even reinforce separation.

C.5 Hypothesis 4: Retrospective Homogenization

The fourth hypothesis held that polemical memory tends to present defeated groups as more homogeneous than the sources allow us to reconstruct. The support is strong, though not uniform. The strength of this hypothesis lies precisely in its ability to distinguish cases. Not every heresy is a fiction of the adversary; not every ancient label has the same degree of correspondence with historical organizations.

"Gnosticism" is the clearest example of taxonomic danger. The Nag Hammadi codices and modern scholarship reveal a diversity of myths, rituals, authorities, and relationships with other Christians that cautions against treating the category as a single religion. Michael A. Williams's recent synthesis maintains this caution and argues that the classification inherited from heresiology can obstruct the analysis of specific texts. In this case, the critical task is to disaggregate before comparing.

"Arianism" offers a different variant. Arius was a real historical figure, and the dispute with Alexander is documentable; the problem arises when his name becomes a container for Homoians, Homoiousians, Anomoeans, Eusebians, and other actors whose positions are not identical. Athanasius played a decisive role in producing a polemical genealogy that allowed this diversity to be read as a single front. Modern analysis need not abandon the term in every context, but it must indicate whether it refers to an ancient label, a reconstructed coalition, or a later simplification.

"Nestorianism" and "Monophysitism" show the greatest distance between polemical label and communal self-description. The Church of the East cannot be reduced to a transparent repetition of everything attributed to Nestorius, and the non-Chalcedonian Oriental Churches are not adequately described by a doctrine of a single nature in the sense their opponents assigned to "Monophysitism." The modern terminology of "Miaphysite," though likewise neither neutral nor universally sufficient, arose precisely to prevent polemical classification from becoming unexamined description.

Marcion and Manichaeism provide the necessary correction. Marcion is an identifiable individual associated with a community and a textual collection; Manichaeism has its own founder, scriptures, hierarchy, and religious self-consciousness. Heresiology can distort their doctrines, but it does not create them in the same way that a broad category can create a bloc called "Gnostics." H4 must therefore be formulated as a critical expectation rather than a prior conclusion: the greater the dependence on hostile catalogues and the weaker the evidence for a shared self-description, the greater the burden of proof before a label is treated as a homogeneous historical identity.

C.6 Hypothesis 5: Recursivity

The fifth hypothesis held that a successful definition reduces some ambiguities and makes other distinctions more visible. The evidence offers strong support in the controversies of greatest scale. Recursivity does not mean that every rule inevitably produces a new heresy; it means that definitions change the repertoire of later problems and can make salient questions that had not previously required the same degree of precision.

The formation of authoritative collections is a first example. Ordering which texts can function as norms does not eliminate interpretation; it shifts part of the controversy toward how those texts are to be read together. The stabilization of four Gospels produces problems of harmonization, narrative differences, and techniques of reading. Textual compression can therefore coordinate plurality rather than reduce it to a single document.

Nicaea is the paradigmatic case. Homoousios restricts certain ways of speaking about the Son, but its incorporation does not immediately resolve what exactly the relationship between ousia and hypostasis means, how three hypostases can be described without tritheism or modalism, or what place the Spirit occupies. The pro-Nicene convergence of the late fourth century does not simply restore a formula from 325; it interprets that formula within a more developed grammar. The initial definition was decisive because it forced the following decades to operate on transformed ground.

Ephesus and Chalcedon show an even more explicit sequence. The defense of the unity of the subject of the incarnation and the reception of Cyril's letters condition later compromises; the Formula of Reunion produces a peace that requires interpretation; the condemnation of Eutyches opens another crisis; Chalcedon attempts to coordinate several documents and vocabularies; and the definition of 451 immediately becomes the object of a new controversy over its meaning and legitimacy. The solution produces the next problem because it alters what must be explained in order to remain within communion.

The hypothesis needs a limit. Not every definition generates a dispute of comparable scale, and the absence of a later conflict does not automatically falsify the model. Recursivity should be applied to definitions of high doctrinal and institutional density, especially when they fix vocabularies that require interpretation in new contexts. The revised version of H5 holds that major delimitations reconfigure the space of questions and precedents; they can close a specific controversy without closing the process of interpretation.

C.7 Branched Compression and a Typology of Outcomes

The most important modification to emerge from the analysis was not formulated with sufficient clarity at the outset: a boundary can stabilize without producing a single institutional orthodoxy. When exclusion reaches a community capable of preserving clergy, texts, liturgy, memory, patronage, and social territory, the result can be branched compression. Each branch narrows its own space of admissibility and transforms the other into deviation. The resulting plurality is therefore not the same relatively fluid plurality of the baseline period; it is an institutionalized plurality.

To prevent "branching" from becoming an ornamental term, three minimum conditions must be maintained: an explicit doctrinal boundary; a persistent rupture of institutional recognition; and a capacity for autonomous reproduction. If the first is absent, we are dealing with a jurisdictional conflict that may not be doctrinal. If the second is absent, intense controversy may exist within a communion that is still shared. If the third is absent, the excluded position may disappear or survive only as textual memory without constituting an institutional branch.

The comparison makes it possible to distinguish at least four outcomes of a controversy. The first is relative closure: a rival solution loses its capacity for reproduction and the boundary stabilizes without a durable alternative institution. The second is coordination: a community maintains internal plurality under a shared repertoire, as occurs in part with the reception of multiple Gospels. The third is displacement: political or legal pressure moves actors and networks without resolving the dispute. The fourth is branching: parallel systems of communion capable of reproducing themselves are formed. These outcomes are not necessary stages; they are analytical types for comparing endings.

The typology corrects a weakness in the term "compression." If it were always understood as a numerical reduction of positions, it would be inadequate for cases in which the response to conflict consists in organizing plurality. Compression should be defined as a reduction in boundary indeterminacy. A system can continue to admit several formulations or texts while establishing more clearly how they relate to one another and what the limits of that plurality are. The coordination of the Fourfold Gospel is a good example: four are not reduced to one, but it becomes normative that those four together occupy a privileged position.

Branching adds another correction: it can reduce indeterminacy within each branch while increasing the number of mutually exclusive communities. This explains the paradox of the fifth century without describing it either as the pure failure of orthodoxy or as the simple survival of heresies. A definition can be highly successful in producing identity and, at the same time, incapable of producing universal unity.

C.8 Alternative Explanations and Causal Limits

A historical theory gains value only if it is compared with alternative explanations. The first alternative would be a purely doctrinal history: definitions change because theologians progressively discover more exact formulations of a transmitted truth. That perspective may possess legitimacy within confessional theology, but as a historical explanation it is insufficient to account for why the same formulation acquires different scope depending on networks, councils, or imperial politics. The model does not deny doctrinal development; it shows that its public stabilization requires additional historical mechanisms.

The second alternative would be a purely political explanation: orthodoxy would be whatever the group with the greatest power manages to impose. Changes in imperial patronage and the defeat of previously supported councils show that power matters. But they also show that it is not sufficient. A sponsored formula can fail in reception; a punished community can survive; an emperor can be forced to negotiate with networks he does not control. Moreover, the exegetical and theological density of the controversies cannot, without loss, be reduced to the interests of sees. Power explains capacity for enforcement; it does not exhaust content or adherence.

The third alternative would be a linear narrative of institutionalization: as the Church becomes organized, diversity declines. The cases refute that simplicity. Greater institutional density can multiply rival councils, produce parallel sees, and sustain unreconciled communities. Institutionalization changes the form of diversity more than it eliminates it. From this perspective, the fundamental transition between the first and fifth centuries is not from diversity to uniformity, but from relatively mobile differences to differences that are increasingly codified, communicated, and, in some cases, territorialized.

The fourth alternative would be to interpret each controversy as singular and incomparable. Marcion, Donatism, Nicaea, and Chalcedon do indeed possess different contents and archives. Yet abandoning comparison altogether would prevent us from observing real regularities: the expansion of normative instruments under pressure, the importance of institutional connectivity, the difference between norm and enforcement, the retrospective production of categories, and the emergence of new questions after major definitions. The model is useful precisely if it compares mechanisms without turning the cases into copies of one another.

The proposed explanation must therefore preserve causal modesty. It does not claim that doctrinal compression is the sole cause of the formation of orthodoxy. It claims that "formation of orthodoxy" can productively be analyzed as the stabilization of boundaries through observable mechanisms and that those mechanisms display comparable patterns. The advantage is analytical: it makes it possible to replace overly broad statements—"the Church decided," "the Empire imposed," "the heresy was defeated"—with questions about who decided, through what document, with what scope, with what consequences, and for how long.

C.9 Revised Formulation of the Model

After empirical testing, the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model can be formulated more precisely. First proposition: every community has limits of admissibility, although those limits may be tacit, local, and contested. Second: a highly salient controversy increases the pressure to make those limits explicit or coordinate them. Third: stabilization depends on the combination of semantic, textual, institutional, communal, and legal mechanisms, to which a reproductive dimension of memory, liturgy, education, and patronage must be added. Fourth: these mechanisms can be coupled or decoupled; victory in one dimension does not imply victory in the others.

Fifth proposition: institutional density must be understood relationally. A network need not be centralized in order to transmit and reproduce a boundary; nor does central authority guarantee uniform obedience. Sixth: application is reversible. A definition can change in rank under new emperors, coalitions, or patterns of reception without disappearing from memory. Seventh: compression can increase conceptual complexity. A narrower space of admissibility may require finer, not simpler, vocabulary.

Eighth proposition: retrospective memory sediments categories and tends to erase the contingency of conflict. This effect must be measured, not assumed. Ninth: a successful definition reconfigures later questions; recursivity operates through accumulated precedents, vocabularies, and institutions. Tenth: when an explicit boundary coincides with a rupture of recognition and an alternative reproductive capacity, branched compression can occur—that is, several institutional systems of admissibility competing for the same inheritance.

These ten propositions constitute a revised version, not a law. The model is weakened if more detailed research shows that the intensity of controversy bears no relation to the production of normative instruments; if institutional connectivity proves irrelevant to scale; if coercion regularly eliminates alternatives regardless of local resources; if major heresiological labels transparently reflect homogeneous organizations; or if major conciliar closures do not reconfigure later questions. It should likewise be abandoned or simplified wherever another framework explains the same processes with fewer assumptions and greater precision.

In this formulation, "compression" carries no moral value. It can describe coordination necessary for a community to preserve an intelligible identity; it can describe exclusion; it can accompany violence or exist without it. The theological evaluation of a doctrine and the ethical evaluation of a coercive practice require different arguments. Keeping these planes separate prevents history from turning institutional success into a criterion of truth or criticism of power from automatically turning every excluded position into a precursor of modern freedom.

C.10 Scope of the Historiographical Contribution

The contribution of this work does not lie in having discovered that orthodoxy and heresy are historically constructed in relation to one another. That proposition has an extensive historiographical genealogy, from the rupture produced by Bauer to studies of heresiological discourse, identity, councils, and law. Contemporary scholarship also insists on the need to problematize categories such as "Gnosticism," "Arianism," or "Nestorianism" and to study the documentary production of councils. Presenting those insights as an absolute novelty would be epistemologically indefensible.

The proposed contribution lies elsewhere: in bringing those lines together in an explicit comparative model of boundary formation, separating mechanisms that are often fused under the word "orthodoxy," formulating hypotheses capable of receiving support or correction, and applying the same matrix from pre-imperial communities to imperial Christianity. The notion of recursivity also makes it possible to describe why a definition can simultaneously be a closure and the condition of the next controversy. The notion of branching explains why a highly precise delimitation can produce institutional pluralization rather than uniformity.

This proposal must continue to be tested beyond the corpus selected here. Pelagianism, Priscillianism, the Origenist controversies, iconoclasm, or medieval conflicts could show whether the mechanisms persist when chronology, type of archive, and relationship with the state change. The recent publication of a Companion devoted to Christian heresy at least confirms that current scholarship remains focused on problems of definition, discourse, evidence, and category construction, rather than on a simple return to the model of deviant sects confronting an unchanging orthodoxy (Flower 2025). The model formulated here must be situated within that debate, not above it.

Caution regarding the theoretical language itself is likewise part of the result. Models organize fragmentary archives; for that reason, they can turn their metaphors into inevitable narratives. Reinhartz has reminded historians of Christian origins that the theories and metaphors used by historians are conditioned by their own intellectual contexts (Reinhartz 2026). "Compression" and "branching" are no exceptions. They must continue to function as questions addressed to the evidence, not as substitutes for the evidence.

C.11 Final Assessment

At the beginning of the book, two inadequate images were proposed: a complete original orthodoxy set against later deviations, and an original plurality destroyed by an institution that arbitrarily imposed a single version of Christianity. The evidence examined requires us to abandon both. Christian communities possessed criteria of truth, practice, and belonging from a very early stage, but those criteria did not always have the same scale, precision, or capacity for enforcement. Diversity was not the absence of boundaries. Later orthodoxy was not merely the unchanged repetition of an already closed system.

Between the second and fifth centuries, the capacity to make boundaries explicit, transmit them, and enforce them increased. Rule of faith, canon, succession, synod, creed, council, anathema, legislation, archive, and liturgy do not appear as pieces of a single plan. They arise at different times and accumulate. Their alignment produces an institutional density unknown to the earliest generations. But that density does not eliminate contingency. The same instruments can be used by rival coalitions; decisions can be reversible; the state can change policy; communities can preserve incompatible memories.

Hence the final thesis. Heresies were not a set of peripheral accidents in a doctrinal history that could have developed in the same way without them. Controversies were situations of pressure that forced Christian communities to decide which texts, vocabularies, authorities, and practices could be recognized together. In that precise historical sense, they were constitutive of the form orthodoxy took. Not because the adversary alone produced the victor's doctrine, but because conflict transformed convictions into explicit boundaries and forced communities to provide those boundaries with institutions.

At the same time, orthodoxy should not be imagined as the endpoint of a continuous reduction of diversity. By the end of the fifth century there is greater doctrinal precision and, in several regions, greater institutional separation. Definition can produce order within one communion and distance between communions. The history of the ancient Church is therefore a history of the pursuit of unity and reorganized plurality. Doctrinal victory is always a situated claim: it can mean triumph at a council, imperial recognition, liturgical reception, textual survival, or control of a see, and these dimensions do not necessarily coincide.

The most general result is methodological. To understand a heresy, it is not enough to summarize what a handbook attributes to its adherents or to reverse the heresiologist's moral judgment. One must reconstruct the conflict, identify who produces the label, distinguish self-description from accusation, measure which institution can apply a decision, trace its reception, and observe how later memory reorganizes the event. Only then does heresy cease to be a list and become a historical problem.

The Church that emerges from this process is neither an entity without identity until power invents it nor an institution that passes through four centuries without being transformed. It is a community of communities that progressively constructs procedures for deciding disputes it regards as capable of breaking communion. Each decision retains traces of earlier conflicts and changes the conditions of the next. That accumulation—doctrinal, textual, institutional, legal, and memorial—is why the orthodoxy of the fifth century cannot be projected intact onto the first century and, at the same time, cannot be understood without the traditions it claims to continue.

Heresy and orthodoxy are, finally, relational categories within a history of authority. Studying them requires asking not only what was believed, but how a belief came to function as a norm; not only who was condemned, but which technologies made the condemnation effective; not only which definition prevailed, but what new questions and communities it produced. The history of early Christianity was not written despite its conflicts. To a substantial and documentable extent, it was written through them.

APPENDIX A

ANALYTICAL CHRONOLOGY

The chronology summarizes milestones used in the argument. Approximate dates are marked with "c." and are not intended to resolve dating debates that remain open.

c. 30 — Death of Jesus and formation of the first groups of followers in Judea and Galilee. The exact date remains disputed within a narrow range.

c. 40–60 — Pauline missions and controversies over the incorporation of Gentiles, circumcision, table fellowship, authority, and discipline.

70 — Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Roman forces; reconfiguration of Jewish institutions and of groups connected with Jesus.

c. 90–120 — Composition or early form of texts such as the Didache and First Clement within disputed chronologies; evidence of discipline, ministries, and authority in transition.

c. 110–120 — Letters of Ignatius of Antioch according to conventional dating; strong defense of episcopal structure in the recipient churches.

c. 140–160 — Activity of Marcion and consolidation of his network; tradition places his break with the Roman church around 144, a date that should be used cautiously.

c. 150–180 — Circulation of apologists and teachers; expansion of debates over Scripture, creation, revelation, and authority.

c. 170–200 — New Prophecy associated with Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla; its initial chronology is disputed among the ancient sources.

c. 180 — Irenaeus of Lyons composes Against Heresies in several stages; articulation of the rule of faith, succession, and the Fourfold Gospel.

c. 200 — Tertullian develops arguments concerning prescription, apostolicity, and discipline; his own trajectory complicates the simple opposition between "Catholic" and "Montanist."

249–251 — Reign of Decius. The sacrificial edict of 250 generates libelli documentation and a Christian crisis concerning the lapsi.

251 — Election of Cornelius in Rome and opposition by Novatian; dispute over reconciliation and episcopal authority.

255–256 — Controversy between Cyprian and Stephen of Rome over baptism administered outside recognized communion.

257–258 — Persecution under Valerian; death of Cyprian in 258.

303–311 — Great Persecution initiated under Diocletian and his colleagues; problems concerning traditores and legitimacy that would fuel the African conflict.

311–314 — Formation of the Donatist conflict; intervention by Constantine, Roman proceedings, and the Council of Arles (314).

312 — Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge; beginning of a new relationship between imperial patronage and Christian communities.

313 — Imperial agreement conventionally associated with the "Edict of Milan"; restoration of property and religious toleration.

c. 318–324 — Controversy between Arius and Alexander of Alexandria; synods and letters extend the conflict beyond Egypt.

325 — Council of Nicaea. Creed, homoousios, and anathemas; subsequent reception demonstrates that the definition did not produce immediate closure.

328 — Athanasius succeeds Alexander as bishop of Alexandria.

335 — Synod of Tyre and first exile of Athanasius; example of the reversibility of alliances after Nicaea.

341 — Council of Antioch and production of formulas within the post-Nicene controversy.

359 — Councils of Rimini and Seleucia; high point of attempts at coordination under Constantius II.

361 — Death of Constantius II; another reconfiguration of exiles and episcopal coalitions.

362 — Synod of Alexandria associated with Athanasius; efforts to coordinate the vocabularies of ousia and hypostasis.

370s — Activity of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa in the formation of a more stable pro-Nicene grammar.

380 — Theodosius I's edict Cunctos populos; elevation of a Nicene form of Christianity to an imperial legal reference point.

381 — Council of Constantinople; subsequent consolidation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan framework.

428 — Nestorius is appointed bishop of Constantinople; the immediate phase of the controversy over Theotokos and the Christological subject begins.

430 — Exchange of letters, synods, and condemnations between the coalitions of Cyril and Nestorius; supraregional expansion of the conflict.

431 — Council of Ephesus; opened by Cyril before the arrival of the Antiochene delegation, with rival assemblies in existence.

433 — Formula of Reunion between Cyril and John of Antioch; a compromise that does not eliminate all interpretive differences.

444 — Death of Cyril of Alexandria; Dioscorus succeeds him.

448 — Synod of Constantinople against Eutyches under Flavian.

449 — Second Council of Ephesus, later stigmatized in the Chalcedonian tradition as the "Robber Council."

450 — Death of Theodosius II; accession of Marcian and a new imperial alignment.

451 — Council of Chalcedon; Christological definition, reception of the Tome of Leo, deposition of Dioscorus, and canon 28.

457 — Alexandrian crisis after the death of Marcian; murder of Proterius and consolidation of alternative episcopal lines in Egypt.

475–476 — Brief reign of Basiliscus and policy favorable to opponents of Chalcedon; reversal after Zeno's return.

482 — Zeno's Henotikon: imperial attempt at coordination through a formula that avoids making Chalcedon the explicit center of agreement.

484 — Break between Rome and Constantinople known as the Acacian Schism; the attempt at compromise generates a new boundary of communion.

486 — Synod of Beth Lapat within the Church of the East, important for its institutional trajectory; it should not be treated simply as a "reception of Nestorius."

APPENDIX B

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL GLOSSARY

The following definitions are instrumental to this work. When a term has confessional, ancient, and modern uses, the relevant level is indicated so that a later translation or label does not function as an automatic description of the past.

Anathema: Formula of doctrinal or ecclesial exclusion. Its historical force depends on who pronounces it, how it is received, and what institutional consequences are associated with it.

Canon: Rule or norm. In a textual context it may refer to the set of writings received as Scripture; in a conciliar context, to normative decisions. The formation of the New Testament canon was gradual.

Communion: A relationship of ecclesial recognition that may be expressed in the Eucharist, recognition of bishops, letters, and reception of clergy. In this book it is a central indicator of an effective boundary.

Council / synod: An assembly of bishops or other ecclesial actors. The term "ecumenical" is partly a category of later reception: not every gathering that sought universal scope was recognized in that way by all communities.

Doctrinal compression: Reduction, specification, or reordering of indeterminacy concerning which formulations can be jointly recognized within an ecclesial network. It does not necessarily imply simplification or violence.

Branched compression: An outcome in which an explicit boundary, a persistent break in recognition, and an alternative reproductive capacity produce parallel systems of communion.

Donatism: Conventional name for the North African churches that opposed the succession of Caecilian and developed a long ecclesial tradition of their own. The category encompasses a history more complex than a single doctrinal proposition.

Dyophysite: Descriptor for Christologies that affirm two natures in Christ; its use must distinguish concrete formulations and should not automatically make it synonymous with "Nestorian."

Enforceability: Practical capacity to turn a norm into consequences: deposition, exclusion from a see, prohibition of assembly, exile, control of property, or other measures.

Haíresis: Greek term with a broad semantic history, originally related to choice, school, or faction. Its Christian sense of exclusionary heresy developed historically.

Heresy-making: Process of individuation, aggregation, normativization, and sedimentation through which a difference comes to function as a stable heretical identity.

Heresiology: Literature and practice of cataloguing, describing, and refuting doctrines or groups considered heretical. It is an indispensable source and, at the same time, interested evidence that requires genre criticism.

Homoian: Label for fourth-century positions that preferred to describe the Son as "like" the Father according to the Scriptures, avoiding the language of ousia in certain contexts.

Homoiousios: "Of similar substance." A term associated with certain fourth-century coalitions; it should not be confused with homoousios.

Homoousios: "Of the same substance" or "consubstantial." Incorporated into the Creed of Nicaea of 325 to describe the relation of the Son to the Father; its semantic reception was disputed.

Hypostasis: Greek term whose relation to ousia varied during the fourth century. In later pro-Nicene grammar it came to be used to distinguish the three hypostases within a single divine ousia.

Lapsi: Christians regarded as fallen because they yielded during a persecution, especially in the Decian crisis. The category included different forms of conduct and generated controversy over penance and reconciliation.

Libellus / libelli: Certificate associated with compliance with the sacrificial requirements under Decius. Papyrological evidence helps distinguish the imperial decree from later Christian narratives.

Manichaeism: Religion founded by Mani in the third century, with its own literature, organization, and self-understanding. Christian writers and imperial authorities classified it as heresy, but it should not be reduced to a simple internal Christian variant.

Miaphysite: Modern term frequently used to describe non-Chalcedonian Eastern traditions that insist on the unity of the incarnate nature of the Word. It seeks to avoid the polemical implications of "Monophysite," although its historiographical character should be made explicit.

Monophysite: Polemical and historiographical label applied to positions understood as affirming a single nature in Christ. Its indiscriminate use for the non-Chalcedonian Eastern Churches is problematic.

New Prophecy: Prophetic movement associated with Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla, later called "Montanism." Hostile sources and diversity of practice counsel against overly unitary reconstructions.

Ousia: Greek term related to essence or substance. Its technical use in Trinitarian controversies was not stable from the outset.

Orthodoxy: In a confessional sense, doctrine considered true; in the historical analysis of this book, a system of admissibility boundaries recognized by concrete communities. The two levels should not be confused.

Prosopon: Greek term with meanings including face, person, or presentation; it acquires technical functions in Christological debates and should not be translated mechanically without context.

Regula fidei: "Rule of faith." Summaries or patterns of teaching used by authors such as Irenaeus and Tertullian to express apostolic continuity and a criterion of interpretation.

Apostolic succession: Argument linking the present legitimacy of ministers or sees with continuity from the apostles. Its form and function developed historically.

Theotokos: "Mother of God" or, more literally, "the one who gave birth to God." Title of Mary that became a focus of the controversy associated with Nestorius because it condensed a claim about the unity of the Christological subject.

Traditores: Name applied in the African conflict to those alleged to have handed over Scriptures or sacred objects during persecution. Specific accusations must be critically evaluated.

APPENDIX C

COMPARATIVE MATRIX OF CONTROVERSIES

The matrix does not assign numerical scores. It summarizes the observed variables comparatively in order to prevent qualitative differences from being converted into a statistical precision that does not exist.

Case	Definitional pressure	Institutional density	Secular coercion	Main outcome
Christianities of the first to early second centuries	High in specific conflicts; low universalization	Epistolary networks and plural authorities	No Christian state coercion	Local/translocal boundaries; unevenly coordinated plurality
Marcion and the proto-orthodox response	High: God, Scripture, continuity	Urban networks, teachers, bishops	None	Acceleration of textual and doctrinal delimitation; no instantaneous creation of the canon
Traditions called Gnostic	Variable and difficult to aggregate	Heterogeneous; uneven evidence	None in the early phase	Strong retrospective homogenization; need to disaggregate categories
New Prophecy	High in prophecy, discipline, and authority	Prophetic and episcopal networks	Low in the early phase; greater later	Regionally variable boundaries; not reducible to "charisma vs institution"
Lapsi / Novatian / rebaptism	Very high because of sacraments and belonging	Dense synods and episcopal correspondence	Still limited before Constantine	Disciplinary definitions; authority and sacrament become

Case	Definitional pressure	Institutional density	Secular coercion	Main outcome
				inseparable
Donatism	High: Church, sacrament, legitimacy	Two competing episcopal networks	High and changing	Persistence despite coercion; institutionalization of an alternative
Nicene controversy	Very high and supraregional	Councils, sees, creeds, imperial patronage	High but reversible	Staged semantic compression; increasing complexity; strong recursivity
Ephesus 431–Chalcedon 451	Maximum: Christology, sees, procedure	High-density councils and coalitions	High and reversible	Successive definitions, reconciliations, and reversals; strong retrospective labels
Post-Chalcedonian conflicts	High and tied to reception of 451	Rival networks with clergy, monasteries, and liturgy	High but insufficient	Branched compression: internal precision and institutional pluralization

Cross-Case Evaluation of the Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Outcome	Final reformulation
H1 Definitional pressure	Strong support	High salience produces explicit instruments of delimitation or coordination, not necessarily agreement.
H2 Institutional density	Qualified support	It must be understood as connectivity and reproductive capacity; it can stabilize both imperial orthodoxy and opposition.
H3 Coercion and persistence	Strong support	Coercion increases enforceability and costs, but does not guarantee extinction; it can territorialize or reinforce identity.
H4 Retrospective homogenization	Strong support with case variation	Especially visible in Gnosticism, Arianism, and Nestorianism; less applicable as a total thesis to Marcion or Manichaeism.
H5 Recursivity	Strong support in major definitions	Definitions reconfigure vocabularies, precedents, and new questions; this does not imply endless controversy over every local rule.

The comparison supports the core of the model, but not its simplest version. The cases require the introduction of coordination without elimination, relational density, reversibility, decoupling between layers, increasing conceptual complexity, and branching. These modifications are part of the result, not exceptions added to protect the hypothesis.

APPENDIX D

ANALYTICAL MAP OF REGIONS AND SEES

This appendix functions as an analytical map, not as cartography drawn to scale. Its purpose is to locate the geographical nodes involved in the transmission of controversies and to show the role they play in the argument. Political, linguistic, and ecclesial boundaries changed during the centuries studied and should not be projected as fixed divisions.

Rome and Italy. Center of epistolary and episcopal networks; controversies involving Marcion, Novatian, reconciliation, and reception of councils. Its authority grows, but it does not function as the sole decision-making center throughout the entire period.

Carthage and North Africa. Laboratory of discipline, martyrdom, episcopacy, and sacraments under Cyprian; later, the central setting of the Donatist conflict and of the relationship between coercion and local identity.

Alexandria and Egypt. Decisive see in the controversies involving Arius, Athanasius, Cyril, and Dioscorus. After Chalcedon, Egypt shows with particular clarity the formation of rival networks and institutional branching.

Antioch and Syria. Node of exegetical traditions, episcopal networks, and diverse Christological vocabularies. Fundamental for understanding the coalition of John of Antioch, the Formula of Reunion, and post-Chalcedonian receptions.

Constantinople. Imperial capital and see whose political importance amplifies the controversies involving Nestorius, Flavian, Eutyches, and Acacius; a place where jurisdiction and doctrine become inseparable.

Asia Minor. Key region for the New Prophecy, circulation of texts, episcopal sees, and councils; Nicaea and Ephesus lie within this highly connected imperial space.

Cappadocia. Setting of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa; decisive in stabilizing pro-Nicene Trinitarian vocabulary.

Palestine. Region of monasteries, sees, and divergent receptions of Chalcedon; it shows the importance of ascetic and local networks outside the major imperial centers.

Mesopotamia and Persia. Indispensable sphere for tracing the Church of the East. The Roman-Persian political frontier conditions institutional trajectories and requires that Roman categories such as "Nestorianism" not be projected without mediation.

Axes of circulation. The eastern Mediterranean connects Alexandria, Antioch, Asia Minor, and Constantinople through maritime and overland routes associated with administration, trade, and episcopal movement. Rome and Carthage form another decisive axis in the Latin West. Exile, conciliar travel, and the circulation of letters turn geography into a causal mechanism: a formula does not spread by abstraction, but because actors and documents move through concrete networks.

Imperial frontiers. The Roman-Persian frontier alters the Roman emperor's capacity to enforce decisions and provides different contexts for Eastern Christian communities. This asymmetry is especially important when evaluating the reception of Christological controversies. The category "imperial

Church" describes a relationship with Roman power that cannot be transferred without adjustment to the Persian sphere.

APPENDIX E

SOURCE-READING PROTOCOL AND CLAIM AUDIT

The following protocol summarizes the controls applied throughout the work and establishes a standard for future expansions. Its function is to prevent theory, confessional tradition, or polemical memory from replacing source criticism.

1. Identification of source type. Distinguish doctrinal text, letter, heresiology, ecclesiastical history, conciliar act, law, papyrus, inscription, or modern reconstruction. Genre determines which inferences are legitimate.

2. Proximity and transmission. Record the temporal and geographical distance between the testimony and the event. Distinguish the date of the event, the date of composition, and the date of surviving manuscripts when relevant.

3. Documentary dependence. Do not count as independent corroboration two testimonies that depend on the same chain of transmission. Ecclesiastical histories may preserve older documents, but they must be analyzed as compilations.

4. Self-description and attribution. Distinguish what an actor says about himself or herself from what an opponent attributes to that actor. When only the accusation survives, formulate the conclusion with the corresponding degree of certainty.

5. Label and group. Do not infer a homogeneous organization from a heresiological name. Look for evidence of membership, leaders, practices, texts, and mutual recognition before treating the label as a collective identity.

6. Norm and enforcement. Separate promulgation from application. A law, canon, or anathema demonstrates a norm; its effectiveness requires additional evidence concerning exiles, property, sees, meetings, litigation, or communal persistence.

7. Decision and reception. A council produces documents and decisions on a specific date; its historical authority is constructed through subsequent reception. Do not project later ecumenical status back onto the moment when the council was held.

8. Proportional causality. Avoid single causes when the evidence shows interaction among theology, exegesis, jurisdiction, networks, patronage, and politics. Use "contributed," "accelerated," "made possible," or "reconfigured" when "caused" exceeds the evidence.

9. Absence of evidence. Do not turn documentary silence into proof of nonexistence or proof of censorship. Loss may result from disuse, accident, scribal selection, linguistic change, or deliberate destruction; the latter requires positive evidence.

10. Chronological control. Avoid attributing to an actor categories, creeds, or terminology stabilized later. Every retrospective reference must be marked as such.

11. Terminological control. Define the uses of "Gnosticism," "Arianism," "Nestorianism," "Monophysitism," and other problematic labels. Prefer descriptions of concrete actors and formulas when the label aggregates more than it explains.

12. Testing the model. Apply the Recursive Doctrinal Compression Model only after reconstructing the case. Record evidence that does not fit, reversible outcomes, coordination without exclusion, and cases in which the category of heresy is not appropriate.

Audit result. The final version systematically distinguishes between emic and etic categories, avoids equating legal norms with compliance, treats conciliar acts as produced and transmitted dossiers, limits the use of retrospective labels, and presents the model as a revisable proposal. The contemporary bibliography has been strengthened with recent work on theories of heresy, heresiology, Nicaea, conciliar sources, and Christological taxonomies. Claims of originality remain deliberately limited: the contribution is attributed to the comparative articulation of the model rather than to absolute priority for its historiographical components.

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Editorial and Citation Criteria

Primary sources will be cited by author, work, and textual unit when that division is stable; conciliar acts and legal codes will be cited by document, session, canon, or constitution, as appropriate. Secondary sources will follow an author-date system in the body of the text, with full reference in the bibliography. Modern translations will be identified when linguistic formulation is relevant to the argument. Every contested claim must distinguish between direct evidence, plausible reconstruction, and interpretive hypothesis, and critical editions will take precedence over noncritical reprints when available.

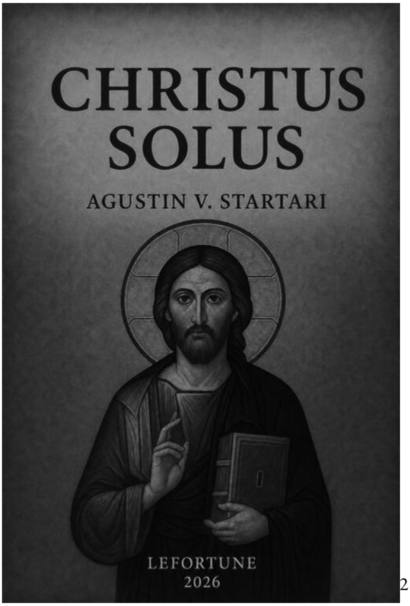
For chapters 3 and 4, stable internal references to ancient sources (book, chapter, section, or verse) are prioritized, and fixed dates are avoided where substantial debate exists over dating, authorship, or textual relationship. In the cases of Marcion, the New Prophecy, and traditions termed Gnostic, a systematic distinction is made between adversarial testimony, direct documentation, and modern reconstruction.

For chapters 5 and 6, additional controls are applied: a distinction is made between a reconstructed imperial decree and a preserved text; "Novatianism," "Donatism," and "Arianism" are not treated as homogeneous units without demonstration; conciliar decisions are separated from their subsequent reception; and different evidentiary weight is assigned to contemporary letters, creeds, canons, legislation, later ecclesiastical histories, and invectives. At Nicaea, the absence of complete acts requires explicit indication whenever a reconstruction depends on later testimony.

For chapters 7 through 9, a distinction is made between attributed doctrine and self-description; between a decision of a conciliar session and its subsequent reception; between historical labels and modern analytical categories; and between legal promulgation and effective implementation. "Nestorianism" and "Monophysitism" are not used as transparent names for homogeneous communities. When "Miaphysite" or "anti-Chalcedonian" is used, it is specified that these are historiographical categories intended to avoid the automatic projection of polemical taxonomies. The acts of Ephesus and Chalcedon are treated as documentary dossiers that were produced and transmitted, not as neutral transcripts. Post-Chalcedonian history is kept within the fifth century, using later references only when they demonstrate the institutional continuity of processes already under way.

In the conclusion and comparative appendices, the categories “strong support,” “qualified support,” and “limit” describe a qualitative assessment of consistency across cases and not a statistical result. The matrices do not convert uneven historical evidence into numerical scores. Every generalization remains subordinate to the degree of source preservation and to the regional specificity of the processes.

Did you love *Essential Heresies*? Then you should read *Christus Solus*[1] by Agustin V. Startari!



[2]

¿Qué le ocurre al lenguaje cuando un Nombre no puede ser sustituido?

Christus Solus no es un libro sobre la creencia. Es un estudio de cómo un Nombre altera la gramática de toda oración que se atreve a contenerlo. Del griego koiné al latín eclesiástico, de los credos a las confesiones, de los verbos a los artículos, el Nombre *Christus* no se comporta como ningún otro sustantivo. No describe. Reorganiza.

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1. https://books2read.com/u/3kEAwL
2. https://books2read.com/u/3kEAwL

En esta investigación lingüística, Agustin V. Startari rastrea un patrón formal: allí donde aparece *Christus*, la sustitución falla, la equivalencia colapsa y la oración pierde neutralidad. La gramática se tensa. Los predicados se alinean. El alcance se estrecha. No es retórica teológica. Es análisis estructural. A partir de textos antiguos, marcadores sintácticos y la resistencia al plural o a la aposición, *Christus Solus* expone el Nombre no como símbolo, sino como operador gramatical. El resultado es una oración que declara, no negocia.

Este libro está escrito para lectores que buscan claridad sin reducción, doctrina sin simplificación y lenguaje sin metáfora. Cuestiona convenciones lingüísticas, evita filtros dogmáticos y abre una vía nueva: leer la Escritura como una estructura configurada por una palabra irreversible.

Un Nombre. Sin sustitución. Sin equivalencia. Solo gramática, alterada.

Sobre el autor

Agustin V. Startari es lingüista, autor e investigador en estudios históricos. Su trabajo explora la intersección entre sintaxis, autoridad epistémica y estructuras de lenguaje artificial. Es autor de *Executable Power*, *The Grammar of Objectivity* y *Grammars of Power*, y mantiene afiliaciones con la Universidad de la República (Uruguay) y la Universidad de Palermo (Argentina).

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About the Author

Agustin V. Startari is a researcher, linguist, and author specializing in the intersection of **language, artificial intelligence, power, legitimacy, and historical sciences**.

His work examines how linguistic, discursive, and technological structures organize perceptions of authority, distribute responsibility, and shape the ways institutions, artificial intelligence systems, and structures of power represent political, historical, and social events.

His research brings together **linguistics, discourse analysis, artificial intelligence, historiography, theories of power, and studies of legitimacy**, with particular attention to the relationship between linguistic form, authority, and political responsibility.

He is the author of the research series *Grammars of Asymmetric Visibility: AI, Imperial Power, and the Syntax of Responsibility*, focused on the relationships between artificial intelligence, language, power, and the attribution of responsibility.

He is also the author of *Work Papers*, a series devoted to historical research, historiography, and the analysis of problems related to the historical sciences.

Additional works include *Propaganda Machinery* and *Christus Solus*, which further explore the intersections of discourse, ideology, institutional power, and historical interpretation.

His work combines linguistic research, historical analysis, and the systematic study of the ways language, institutions, and technological systems participate in the construction and legitimization of power.

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