

When Emperors Enforced Doctrine

From Nicaea(325AD) Thru Justinian(538AD)

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Originally written as a supplement to the Bible Study [The Pentagon Said The LDS Aren't Christian](#). (The Answer to Why Goes Back 1,700 Years)

I. THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA — 325 AD

The controversy that eventually led to military persecution began with a theological debate: *Was Jesus co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, or was he a distinct and subordinate being?*

- Arius, a popular Alexandrian presbyter, taught that the Son was the Father's only-born Son(Jn.3:16) — a being with a beginning, not co-eternal.
 - His followers were later branded as "Arian". "Arianism" was known as Arius' form of Christianity. There were even "Arian Nations", as we will see later...
 - Emperor Constantine I convened a council of bishops at Nicaea in 325 AD — not primarily for spiritual reasons, but to unify his politically fractured empire.
 - The council produced the Nicene Creed, declaring the Son to be "*of the same substance*" (homoousios) as the Father — a Greek philosophical term found nowhere in scripture.
 - Arius was condemned and exiled. Bishops who refused to sign the creed were also exiled.
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II. THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE — 381 AD

Arianism did not die at Nicaea. It continued to spread, including among many of the peoples on Rome's borders. A follow-up council was convened to settle the matter — again, by imperial demand.

- Emperor Theodosius I convened the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.
 - This council expanded the Nicene Creed to include the Holy Spirit as a third co-equal person — completing the formulation of what became known as the Trinity doctrine.
 - The creed produced here (often called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) is the version still recited in Catholic and Orthodox churches today.
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III. THEODOSIUS I — NICENE CHRISTIANITY BECOMES MANDATORY STATE RELIGION

Before Justinian, it was Theodosius I who transformed a theological formula into a legally enforced requirement — with teeth.

- In 380 AD, Theodosius issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which declared Nicene trinitarian Christianity the only legal religion of the Roman Empire.
 - His own words from that edict:
 - *"We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the name of heretics... They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority."*
 - All other expressions of Christianity — including Arianism — were now criminal.
 - Theodosius closed pagan temples, banned pagan sacrifice, and stripped non-trinitarian Christians of their churches.
 - This set the legal and ideological framework that Justinian would later weaponize militarily.
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IV. EMPEROR JUSTINIAN I — ENFORCER OF ORTHODOXY BY FIRE AND SWORD (527–565 AD)

Justinian I is remembered as Rome's great legal codifier. Less remembered is that his explicit theological goal was an empire populated *only* by Nicene Trinitarian Christians — and that he pursued this goal with his armies.

A. What Justinian Said

- Procopius (Justinian's own court historian) records that Justinian "*determined to close all the roads which lead to error and to place religion on the firm foundations of a single faith.*" — *De Aedificiis (Buildings)*, Book I, Ch. 1
- Codex Justinianus I.5.12 (527 AD) — issued the very year he became sole emperor — declared:
 - "*From those who are not orthodox in their worship of God, earthly goods should also be withheld.*"
- Codex Justinianus I.3.44 / Novella 131 (545 AD) — made the canons of the Nicene councils legally equivalent to Imperial law.
 - Rejecting the trinity was now not merely heresy — it was a civil crime.

B. What That Law Meant in Practice

Non-trinitarian Christians under Justinian's rule were:

- Barred from holding government office
- Barred from practicing law or teaching
- Stripped of the right to inherit property
- Denied the right to testify in court
- Subject to exile or death for public expression of their faith

C. The Three Arian Kingdoms Destroyed

The three kingdoms singled out for destruction all held an Arian view of God:

1. The Heruli — eliminated 476–493 AD
 - Defeated by the Ostrogoths, with the blessing and backing of both the Pope and the Emperor.
2. The Vandals — crushed 533–534 AD
 - Vandalic North Africa conquered by Justinian's brilliant general Belisarius in a campaign of less than a year.
 - Justinian explicitly framed this war as the liberation of Nicene Christians from Arian oppressors.
3. The Ostrogoths — ground down 535–538 AD
 - The Ostrogothic kingdom, which had preserved much of Roman civilization in Italy, was utterly annihilated.
 - Again, Belisarius (and later the general Narses) served as Justinian's instrument.

D. The Alliance Between Imperial Power and the Papacy

- The papacy provided the ideological and ecclesiastical framework: Arians were branded heretics deserving no protection of law or mercy.
- Justinian provided the military force.
- In 533 AD, Justinian issued an imperial edict recognizing the Bishop of Rome as head of all churches — a significant political gift to the papacy in exchange for its theological endorsement of his wars.
- The historian J.B. Bury summarizes Justinian's vision plainly: "*He set before himself the ideal of an Empire which should be populated only by orthodox Christians.*"

V. Clarity On The Arian Nations That Were Destroyed

These peoples — the Heruli, Vandals, and Ostrogoths — were eliminated due to 3 factors in common to the 3 nations:

1. They held an Arian view of God and His Son — consistent with the plain text of scripture — and refused to exchange it for the doctrine of the trinity.
 - They believed the Father is greater than the Son — consistent with Jesus's own words ("*My Father is greater than I*" — [John 14:28](#)).
 - They believed the Son had a beginning — consistent with "*the firstborn of all creation*" ([Colossians 1:15](#)).

- They rejected the homoousios formula as an unscriptural, philosophically Greek imposition — which, historically speaking, it was.
- 2. They were geographically positioned within the papacy's direct sphere of influence — specifically in Italy and the western Mediterranean, the Bishop of Rome's own backyard.
- 3. They directly challenged, resisted, or defied the political authority of the Bishop of Rome.
 - Odoacer (Heruli) intervened in a papal election in 483 AD
 - The Vandals sacked Rome in 455 AD and persecuted Nicene clergy in North Africa
 - The Ostrogoths imprisoned and executed Pope John I in 526 AD

These three factors together made these kingdoms the specific obstacles standing between the Bishop of Rome and unchallenged supremacy in the Western Empire of Rome. As each fell, that path cleared.

Justinian understood this perfectly — and stated it plainly. On March 15, 533 AD, he wrote directly to Pope John II:

"We have exerted Ourselves to unite all the priests of the East and subject them to the See of Your Holiness... you are the head of all Holy Churches, for We shall exert Ourselves in every way to increase the honor and authority of your see." — *The Civil Law of Justinian*, translated by S.P. Scott, Book 12, pp. 11–13

Writing separately to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Justinian repeated his decision *"that all affairs touching the Church shall be referred to the Pope, 'Head of all bishops, and the true and effective corrector of heretics.'"*

This decree was issued in 533 AD — the same year Belisarius crushed the Vandals. It was a declaration of intent. Its full practical effect, however, had to wait until the last of the three obstacles was removed.

That happened in 538 AD, when Belisarius drove the Ostrogoths from Rome, ending their stranglehold on Italy. In that same year, Justinian published edicts:

- Compelling all non-Catholics to join the Catholic Church within ninety days or leave the empire
- Confiscating the property of all who refused
- Giving the churches of non-Catholics to the Catholic Church

The historian J.B. Bury states plainly that *"the recognition of the Roman see as the highest ecclesiastical authority remained the cornerstone of Justinian's policy in relation to the West."* — J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 2

Sources: Procopius, *De Aedificiis* I.1; *Codex Justinianus* I.3.44, I.5.12; *Novella* 131; J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 2; *Edict of Thessalonica* (*Codex Theodosianus* XVI.1.2)

VI. The Plain Summary

These three kingdoms — and not the others — were destroyed because all three of the following were simultaneously true of each:

1. They rejected the trinity doctrine in favor of a biblical understanding of the Father and Son
2. They sat directly on top of the papacy's territorial and political base
3. They had each directly defied the authority of the Bishop of Rome

Their elimination was not incidental. It was the precondition for what followed in 538 AD. The Lombards and Burgundians, also Arian, did not share all three factors — and their fate was absorption and eventual conversion rather than annihilation.

These peoples were not destroyed for departing from the Bible. They were destroyed for refusing to depart from it — and for occupying ground that the Bishop of Rome needed in order to rule.

Research for this article was conducted with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic), an AI language model.

Desiring to live by every word that comes from the mouth of Jehovah ([Deut8:3; Matt4:4](#))

-Sid Nash: 06/20/2026. Latest version: <https://sidnash.org/docs/EmperorsDoctrine.html>