

Church History, Lesson 7

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gozalez.)

The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea –

- At the time, (when Constantine was still co-ruling with Licinius) there was a particular emphasis on “the Word” in Christian theology. This was a result of the tendency to equate God with the “Supreme Being” of the pagan philosophers. This Supreme Being was considered to be distant and “impassable”. But the Scriptures taught that God was involved in human affairs and even “emotional”. As a result some Christians taught that this involvement was a function of “the Word” and that God remained impassable.
- This led to too great a distinction between God and “the Word” and eventually Arius taught that “the Word” was not “co-eternal” with God but was the first created being. This was ultimately a denial of the divinity of Christ.
- Arius’ argument was simply that to “grant” Christ divinity was to deny monotheism.
- The controversy itself started as a disagreement between the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, and Arius who was an elder in the city.
- Constantine intervened because he held hopes that Christianity would become the new glue to hold the empire together and he didn’t want Christianity dividing over “minor points of doctrine”.
- In 325 AD Constantine called a council of all the bishops to decide the issue. The Council met in Nicea, a city in Asia Minor and it is considered to be the first “Ecumenical Council”.
- There were approximately 300 bishops, mostly from the Eastern part of the empire.
- Many of these had experienced torture and exile fairly recently, and now the empire was covering their traveling expenses.
- But also, during this great assembly, for the first time in Christian history, there was visible evidence of the “universality” of the church! Bishops came from far and wide! It must have been incredibly encouraging.
- Most of those assembled weren’t concerned about the “minor” differences between Alexander and Arius of Alexandria. Most of them, including Eusebius of Cesarea, hoped for a compromise.
- During the council, a Eusebius of Nicomedia stated the case of the Arians. At that point, the hope of any compromise went out the window because the bishops gathered realized that his position was a denial of Christ’s deity and they cried out, “You lie!” “Blasphemy!” “Heresy!” and Eusebius was shouted down.
- The Council went from hoping for compromise to needing to condemn false teaching.

The NICENE CREED -

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

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

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

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

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

Aftermath of the Council of Nicea –

- The Council of Nicea deposed the bishops who adhered to Arianism. However, Constantine added his sentence of banishment. This set an unhealthy precedent of the power of the state carrying out the decisions of the church.
- Athanasius, who had been a deacon during the Council of Nicea, succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria.

- However, Eusebius of Nicomedia realized the power that the emperor held in these matters and began courting the favor of Constantine. Eventually, he was able to convince Constantine to exile Athanasius.

Julian the Apostate and “the Pagan Reaction” –

- When Constantine died, the army executed most of his relatives to help consolidate power around his 3 sons. 2 of Constantine’s nephews were allowed to live because they were too young to really pose a threat.
- However, eventually, the 3 sons died and Julian was called upon to serve as emperor.
- He didn’t have any desire to persecute Christianity, but he wanted to restore the empire to its former glory and wanted to do so through a restoration of pagan worship. He had been baptized as a younger man, but he became interested in the mystery religions and the literature and religion of ancient Greece when living in Athens.
- He never decreed persecution of Christians, but some local authorities responded to his new pagan policies with persecution and some Christians were martyred during this time.

Now we have to rewind a bit to understand one of the key players of this time...

Athanasius of Alexandria –

- We don’t actually know when or where Athanasius was born. He was probably Coptic, he was probably born to lower class parents in a village somewhere along the Nile River in Egypt.
- He was referred to as the “black dwarf”.
- He was in close contact with the Egyptian monks in his early years. This proved important in his later life. From these monks, Athanasius learned a discipline and austerity that endeared him to the people.
- In the controversies over Arianism that he played such a key part in, his closeness to the people, his disciplined life, his fiery spirit, and his unshakable conviction were his greatest weapons. He was not an intellectual. He was a prophet!
- His writings don’t show the philosophical speculations of Clement or Origen. For him, the central fact of Christianity, indeed all of human history was the incarnation of the Son of God, the presence of God among humanity.
- Alexander wanted Athanasius to replace him as bishop, but he fled to the desert. He eventually relented.
- Because the Arians knew that Athanasius was their greatest foe, they spread rumors about him. They suggested that he dabbled in magic, that he was a tyrannical ruler of the Christians in Egypt, and that he was responsible for the murder of a man named Arsenius.
- Athanasius couldn’t get an audience with Constantine to defend the orthodox faith, so he waited until he went out for a ride and jumped in front of the horse, grabbed the reins and wouldn’t let go until Constantine would listen.
- However, this convinced Constantine that Athanasius might just be a dangerous fanatic. And Eusebius of Nicomedia was able to convince Constantine that Athanasius had claimed to have the power to stop shipments of wheat from Egypt to Rome. Constantine had him banished from Alexandria.
- When Constantine died, and Julian eventually reigned, he didn’t care about the fights among Christians, so all exiled bishops were allowed to return to their churches.
- Athanasius left Alexandria again when Gregory (the bishop who had replaced him) violently attacked the church. But Gregory’s mismanagement was so bad that the people brought Athanasius back. He was free to work and minister for about 10 years.
- After this, there were further intrigues. All told, Athanasius was exiled from Alexandria 5 times.
- Especially at the end, he would just take refuge among the monks in the desert. They had means of communication, and they would just move him around as imperial soldiers got close to his hiding place.
- Athanasius died in 373. He lived long enough to see a new tide of orthodox theologians rising, but not long enough to see the full victory of orthodoxy over Arianism.