

Church History, Lesson #8

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

Intro – Remember from last week how we said that Athanasius lived long enough to see a new generation of younger theologians coming on the scene who were orthodox and were committed to defending the deity of Christ. But he didn't live long enough to see the full victory of the Nicene doctrine of Christ. Well, who were these younger theologians? And what was the full victory of the Nicene teaching?

The Great Cappadocians –

- The ancient region of Cappadocia is in modern day Turkey.
- **Macrina**
 - Macrina, Basil the Great, and Gregory of Nyssa were brothers and sister.
 - Their parents and grandparents were committed Christians who had experienced persecution and there was at least one Martyr in their ancestry.
 - Macrina's parents set her up in an arranged marriage when she was twelve, when the groom died unexpectedly she refused to accept any other suitors and devoted herself to a life of spiritual contemplation and eventually dedicated herself to celibacy.
 - When her brother Basil became arrogant about his educational status, she bluntly confronted him.
 - She challenged her family to withdraw from worldly pursuits and devote themselves to religious study and devotion. She herself, along with her mother and some other women established a religious community in Annesi. Basil went to Egypt to study the monastic life from the monks there.
 - Her influence on her brothers is recorded by her brother Gregory of Nyssa in a treatise called *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.
- **Basil the Great**
 - After being confronted by Macrina and then spending time learning from the Egyptian monks, Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus established a religious community for men.
 - He wrote monastic "rules" for the establishment of these kinds of communities and is considered the father of Eastern monasticism.
 - Basil wanted a life of retreat and contemplation, but was made a presbyter against his will. However, when conflict came between him and his bishop, the bishop of Caesarea, he retreated again to the monastic life.
 - But... when Valens, who was an Arian, became Emperor the bishop and Basil set aside their differences to fight against the heresy.
 - Basil won the hearts of the people by preaching against the hording of the rich and giving away his goods to help the poor.
 - When the bishop died, Basil was the natural candidate to replace him. However, the Arians attacked him on the basis of his questionable health. The orthodox leaders responded that they were electing a bishop, not a gladiator. Basil was elected.
 - Valens announced that he would visit Caesarea. He would normally use these kinds of visits to strengthen the Arians in the area. The imperial officers who preceded Valens were told to subdue the new bishop either by bribery or threats. When they threatened Basil with death, his reply was classic:

All that I have that you can confiscate are these rags and a few books. Nor can you exile me, for wherever you send me, I shall be God's guest. As to tortures you should know that my body is already dead in Christ. And death would be a great boon to me, leading me sooner to God."

When the official in charge said that he had never been spoken to in this way by a bishop, Gregory replied that... *"Perhaps that is because you have never met a true bishop."*

- When Valens arrived, he went to church and laid a rich gift on the altar. But nobody would come forward to receive it! Eventually Basil came forward to receive it, but only after making it clear that it was the bishop doing the Emperor a favor, not the other way around.

- **Gregory of Nyssa**

- Basil was a fighter, Gregory wanted a retired life of contemplation. He didn't want to become the champion of a cause.
- He married a young woman and was happy with her. After she died years later, he took up the monastic life.
- But Basil considered the theological struggles of the time to be too serious to allow his brother to just hide from the conflict, so he forced him to become the bishop of the small village of Nyssa. But Gregory went into hiding when the fight was became too much for him.
- He was one of the main defenders of the Nicene doctrine at the Council of Constantinople.
- After the council affirmed the Biblical doctrine of Christ and of the Trinity, the Emperor Theodosius asked Gregory to travel throughout the empire as a theological advisor.

- **Gregory of Nazianzus**

- Gregory of Nazianzus was a fellow student with Basil the Great. He was the son of the bishop of Nazianzus (which means that bishops were married at that time in Christian history and NOT celibate). His mother's name was Nona.
- Gregory spent most of his youth as a student. He was 30 years old when he and Basil started their monastic community. However their friendship became strained when Basil made him bishop of a small hamlet against Gregory's will. At the same time, his father and mother both died and consequently Gregory fled from his pastoral duties. He was on his way to be reconciled to Basil, when he found out that Basil had died.
- Gregory was in shock. However, he eventually decided that it was his duty to take up the fight against the Arians. He went to Constantinople in 379 AD and started holding services in a home because there were no non-Arian churches in the whole city.
- Eventually, Theodosius became Emperor and expelled all of the Arians. He called the Council of Constantinople in 380 AD.

- **Council of Constantinople**

- Gregory of Nazianzus was called upon to preside over the council. He didn't like the job because according to him, the bishops behaved like a swarm of hornets!
- The Council of Constantinople reaffirmed the Nicene doctrine of the divinity of Christ and also added that the same should be applied also to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it was the Council of Constantinople that first definitively proclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity.
- It was the "Great Cappadocians" and the Council of Constantinople that completed the work of Athanasius.

Ambrose of Milan

- In 373 AD the bishop of Milan died. He had been an Arian. But both the Nicene party and the Arian party were determined to get “their man” into the office of bishop.
- Ambrose was the able governor of Milan and had some promise of obtaining high office in the Empire. However, when tensions broke out over the replacement of the bishop he decided to attend the election. He spoke to the people and calmed them all down.
- Someone from the crowd cried out, “Ambrose, bishop”, and it seemed to please the crowd and they started chanting, “Ambrose, bishop; Ambrose, bishop...” He tried to escape the city several times, but when it became apparent that the emperor would be pleased by his election as bishop he eventually relented.
- However, he was not even baptized yet. He was baptized and “rose through the ranks” of offices in the church to the position of bishop in eight days!
- Even though he was a young Christian, he took his position seriously. He got his brother to help him administratively, and he studied theology. In a relatively short time he became one of the best theologies in the Western portion of the Empire.
- Soon after his consecration as bishop the Goth’s invaded a neighboring region. Milan was called upon to help the refugees and to help pay ransom for many captives. Ambrose raised the money by melting down some of the golden vessels of the church! When some from the Arian party challenged him on this his reply was:

It is better preserve for the Lord souls rather than gold. He who sent the apostles without gold also gathered the church without gold. The church has gold, not to store it, but to give it up, to use it for those who are in need... It is better to keep the living vessels, than the golden ones.”

- Ambrose also had several run-ins with the Emperors of the time.
 - The Emperor Valentinian was just a child, so his mother, Justina held a lot of influence. And she was an Arian.
 - Justina wanted at least one church in Milan to offer Arian worship, but Ambrose would not allow it. He held firm even when his church was besieged by imperial troops. Eventually Justina and her troops retreated.
 - When Theodosius became Emperor, he called the Council of Constantinople. But he also crossed swords with Ambrose after the council.
 - One conflict occurred when some Christians burned down a synagogue. Theodosius demanded that they be punished and that they be forced to rebuild the synagogue. Ambrose objected so forcefully that Theodosius backed down. However, this set the precedent for other religions not receiving the protection of the law.
 - The second conflict with Theodosius was when some rioters in Thessalonica killed the local commandant. Theodosius tricked them by saying he would pardon the rioter, but he used this to only lure them into a celebration and then he sent in soldiers and slaughtered 7,000 of them.
 - Ambrose would not allow Theodosius to enter the church until he showed signs of public repentance! He stopped him at the church door and cried out: “Stop! A man such as you, stained with sin, whose hands are bathed in the blood of injustice, is unworthy, until he repents, to enter this holy place, and to partake of communion.”
 - When Theodosius was on his deathbed he asked to be ministered to by Ambrose, the only person in the empire brave enough to censure him in public!

We should be grateful for these ancient leaders of the church because otherwise we would all be some form of Jehovah’s Witnesses today!