

Sunday, December 26, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 15 The Age of Christian Empire: The First Council of Nicea (325)

The Arian Controversy

- Very soon after the outward peace of the church had been secured by the Edict of Milan, was it was distracted by internal divisions. (Miller, 233) “Heresies similar in nature to that of Arius, had appeared in the church before her connection with the State, but their influence seldom extended beyond the region and period of their birth. After some noisy debates and angry words were discharged, the heresy fell into dishonor, and was soon almost forgotten.” (Miller, 234)
- This all changed after the Edict of Milan. Constantine sat upon the throne of the known world and assumed to be the head of the Church. As such He imposed order, and sought to define the precise tenants of the religion he had legalized. (Miller, 234) Consequently, when the Arian controversy emerged it did not just affect North Africa but Christians across the entire empire.
- Aryanism found its origins in Alexandra, Egypt which we have already seen was a hotbed of metaphysical questioning and philosophical speculation. After freely asserting the doctrine of the trinity, Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria was questioned by Arius one of his presbyters on the grounds that it contained errors that had already been condemned by the church. (Miller, 235)
- Propelled by the emerging controversy, Arius stated his own views on the Trinity; which were substantially the denial of the Savior’s Godhead. Arius maintained that Christ was only the first and noblest of those created beings whom God the father formed out of nothing, that though immeasurably superior in power and in glory to the highest created beings, He is inferior in both to the father. In addition, Arius believed that Christ was the image of the Father, and the vice-regent of the divine power by whom He made the worlds. (Miller, 235)
- In defending his position to another bishops Arius wrote, “The Son has a beginning, but, . . . God is without beginning.” (Shelley, 100)
- “Arius’s views were all the more popular because he combined an eloquent preaching style with a flair for public relations. In the opening stages of the conflict, he put ideas into jingles, which set to simple tunes acted like a radio commercial . . .” (Shelley, 101)
- Over time the dissention became so sharp that an appeal was made to the emperor. Constantine’s initial reaction was to consider this dispute as utterly trifling and unimportant (He probably did not care whether or not Jesus was God). Constantine set a letter encouraging the men not to engage in idle disputes but to seek peace with each other. Hosius, bishop of Cordova, is believed to have drafted the letter and delivered it to Alexander and Arius as the official representative of the emperor. Hosius found that the dispute had become so severe that both parties refused to listen to the bishop despite bearing imperial authority. (Miller, 237-238)
- Around 320, Alexander excommunicated Arius form the church in Alexandria. Arius in turn looked to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia for support and won his backing. As a

result, this theological quibble tested the strength of the two most powerful churches in the Eastern Empire: Nicomedia the political center, and Alexandria the intellectual center. Constantine would be forced to act decisively to quench the growing controversy that was threatening to tear the Eastern portion of his empire apart. (Shelley, 101)

- Jonathan Hill, author of *Zondervan Handbook to the History of Christianity*, represents the typical view of church historians when he writes that the reason for all the doctrinal confusion was that, “. . . no mechanism for making doctrines official had yet developed.” (Hill, 80)

The Council Meets

- “The idea for the council did not come from the bishops. Rather, they had been summoned by the great Roman emperor Constantine. After such a summons and after dealing with such an issue, the church would never be the same.” (Noll, 48)
- Parallel developments led to the council of Nicea. On the one side was the church’s ongoing effort to define the nature of Christ and the character of this work (the Arian Controversy). On the other was the rise to power of an emperor friendly to the church.” (Noll, 48)
- Constantine inserted himself into the doctrinal debate for two reasons which he explains in a letter outlining why he called the for a council to meet at Nicea: “My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settle uniformity (that is, to clarify doctrine for the sake of the church); and second, to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world, then suffering under the power of grievous disease (that is, to end religious strife for the sake of the empire).” (Noll, 51)
- The majority of the bishops present at the council were from the Eastern portion of the Empire. On July 4, 325 AD, three hundred bishops arrived in Nicea with two thousand elders and deacons. (Jones, 39) Some of the more the prominent ones included:
 - Athanasius—the assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, who devoted his life to defending the doctrines determined by the council.
 - Two presbyters dispatched from Sylvester, bishop of Rome
 - Bishop of Carthage (North Africa)
 - A bishop from Gaul
 - Four bishops with Jewish names from Perisa. (Noll, 51)
- Constantine having declared himself a bishop and an apostle called the meeting to order. (Jones, 39) Presiding over the early sessions, he appeared as a glittering figure in his imperial robes, which were no longer the austere purple garment worn by the emperor in Rome but were the jewel-encrusted, multicolored vestments. (Shelley, 101) Addressing the churchmen, Constantine told them that division in the church was worse than war (Shelley, 101) and exhorted them of the importance of peace and union. (Miller, 240) Present for the majority of the meetings over a two month period, the emperor listened to the debate and conversed freely with the various bishops. (Miller, 240)

- Early on the churchmen were split into three factions: one supported Arius, a second renounced his teachings, the third group did not even understand his positions but desired peace. Once it was made known that Arius believed that Christ had been created instead of having existed eternally the fireworks began. (Jones, 39) Nearly everyone agreed that they should condemn Arius. (Jones, 39)
- The council's key assertions were as follows:
 - *Christ was very God of very God:* Jesus himself was God in the same sense in which the Father was God. Differentiation between Father and Son may refer to the respective tasks each took on or to the relationship in which each stand to the other. But the key matter is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all truly God.
 - *Christ was of one substance with the Father:* John 10:30
 - *Christ was begotten, not made:* That is Jesus was never formed as all other things and persons had been created but was from eternity the Son of God.
 - *Christ became human for us and for our salvation:* Christ could not have brought salvation to his people if Christ were only a creature. Humanity could not pull itself up to God. Salvation was of God. (Noll, 58)
- In addition, the council moved to summarize their rulings in a binding creedal statement that eventually became known as the Nicene Creed. Arius' logic continued to hold sway over some, resulting in refusal to adopt the Creed. Finally, the First Council of Constantinople in 381, called by Emperor Teheodosius, reaffirmed the decision of 325 along with minor revisions and additions. (Noll, 58)

First Council of Nicea (325)	First Council of Constantinople (381)
We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker <i>of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.</i>
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, <i>begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons)</i> , Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];	by whom all things were made;
Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;	who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate <i>by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary</i> , and was made man;
He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;	<i>he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate</i> , and suffered, <i>and was buried</i> , and the third day he rose again, <i>according to</i>

	<i>the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;</i>
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	from thence he shall come again, <i>with glory</i> , to judge the quick and the dead;
	<i>whose kingdom shall have no end.</i>
And in the Holy Ghost.	And in the Holy Ghost, <i>the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.</i>
	<i>In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.</i>
[But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]	

- Of the 300 bishops present, only two in addition to Arius refused to sign the creed thereby resulting in their banishment from the church as well as imperial exile. Two years later, in 327 favoring peace over truth, Constantine tried to reinstate Arius. He was opposed by then Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria on the grounds that Arius still did not believe in the deity of Christ. (Jones, 40)
- “Although the decision reached was right, the way of reaching it by the combined efforts of the Emperor and the bishops and enforcing it by the power of the State, showed the departure of the Catholic Church from Scripture.” (Broadbent, 44)

Impact of the First Council of Nicea upon the Church

- In a sense Constantine was a genius. He established competing authorities (Arius and Athanasius) among the bishops to keep control over them. What Constantine needed was an official religious body of authorities under him who wanted to enforce their belief; then, if he sided with their religious beliefs, he could enforce his political beliefs. The main issue never was truth but power and authority.
- The Council of Nicea set Bible believers up to butchered by erecting a final authority for the Christian apart from God’s word. Consequently, 325 marks the end of New Testament Biblical Christianity as found in the New Testament. From here on any assembly taking Biblical paths would have to withstand an Imperial Church State in order to maintain the purity and integrity of its congregation.

- While these bickering theologians (representing less than one sixth of the preaching and teaching bishops) were establishing “orthodoxy,” their local churches were accepting and practicing in candle lighting, prayers for the dead, kissing pieces of wood and clothing, sprinkling holy water, and pretending to drink literal blood.
- Every one of these pagan superstitions came from rejecting the authority of the bible and replacing it with some other authority. The three competing authorities for the word of God which produced this mess are identified in the word of God:
 - Science—I Timothy 6:20
 - Tradition—Colossians 2:8
 - Philosophy –Colossians 2:8
- After Nicea final authority is vested in the councils and so its is to this day, the Roman Catholic Church places the creeds of these councils on an equal footing with inspired Scripture. The Catholic Church was now positioned to be the final authority for the next 1,000 years.

The General Councils of the Church and the Development of Catholicism

- Like Nicea, many of these councils were not reprehensive of the entire body of Christ. Sometimes major portions of the church were only sparely represented. The first eight councils were convened by emperors and that last thirteen by popes. (Geisler, 704)
- Christendom is divided over the number and nature of the ecumenical church councils. Roman Catholics accept twenty-one ecumenical councils; the Eastern Orthodox accept the authority of the first seven; Protestant reject the authority of all but the first four; and many Free Churches do not accept any church council as authoritative, though they concur generally with Protestants on the major doctrines stated in the first four councils. (Geisler, 705)
- A total of five councils (counting Nicea) convened during The Age of Christian Empire. Please consider the following summary of these meetings:
 - *The First Council of Nicea (325)*—in addition to discussing the Arian Controversy the council also adopted the following Canon laws.
 - Bishops could only be appointed by other bishops (Can. 4)
 - Excommunication is to be done by a bishop (Can. 5)
 - Bishops have jurisdiction over their own geographical areas (Can. 6)
 - *The First Council of Constantinople (381)*—convened by Emperor Theodosius I to unite the church. It reaffirmed the Nicene Creed, proclaimed the deity of the Holy Spirit, and united the Eastern Church (which had been divided over the Arian Controversy).
 - *The Council of Ephesus (431)*—condemned Nestorianism (which affirmed two natures and two persons in Chirst). Since Christ is one person with two natures, the council concluded that Mary was truly the mother of God, i.e., the God-bearer, the one who gave birth to the person (Jesus) who is God and man.

- *The Council of Chalcedon (454)*—called by Emperor Marcian to deal with the Monophysite heresy that merged the two nature of Christ, making a logically incoherent combination of an infinite/finite nature. The presence of Archbishop (bishop over bishops) Leo I represented a new state in the development of the Roman Episcopal hierarchy that would eventually culminate in the infallibility of the Vatican.
- *The Second Council of Constantinople (553)*—organized by Emperor Justinian I this council issued 14 anathemas, the 11th of which included Origen. The council condemned the following heresies: Arinians, Nestorinaions, eutychianism, momonphysitims, and adoptionism. Moreover, the perpetual virginity of Mary was affirmed being called the “ever-virgin Mary, the Mother of God.” (Geisler, 705-707)
- “Many churches in Christendom deny the authority of any council, though they agree with individual statements by them, particularly in the early ones. These churches insist strongly that only the Bible has binding authority, that all creeds and confessions are manmade, and, thus, that no authority is attached to any church council, whether local or so-called universal . . . all othodox Christians, Catholic and non-Catholic, agree with the basic doctrines affirmed in the earlier so-called ecumenical councils, such as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, Christ’s deity, and Christ’s hypostatic union (two natures in one person). The main point of the free-church view is simply that, whatever in them may be true, there is no authority, either divine or ecclesiastical, to the creedal and conciliar pronouncements.” (Geisler, 716)

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