

CHURCH HISTORY
The Council of Nicea
Early Church History, part 13

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I. INTRODUCTION

- A. As the church grew in numbers, the false church (heretics) grew numerically also. It became increasingly more difficult to control the general thinking of all Christians on the fundamentals of the Christian Faith. Thus, there was a need to gather the major leaders together to settle different theological and practical matters. These gatherings were called "councils."
- B. The first major council was in the first century: the Jerusalem Council. There were four major councils in early Church history which are of great significance: (1) the Council of Nicea; (2) the Council of Constantinople; (3) the Council of Ephesus; and (4) the Council of Chalcedon.

II. HERESIES OPPOSED TO THE TRINITY

- A. The great question which occupied the mind of the early church for three hundred years was the relationship of the Son to the Father. There were a great many professing Christians who were not Trinitarian.
- B. *Monarchianism*: Monarchianism was a heresy that attempted to maintain the unity of God (one God), for the Bible teaches that "the Lord our God is one God." Monarchianism, however, failed to distinguish the Persons in the Godhead, and the deity of Christ became more like a power or influence. This heresy was opposed by Tertullian and Hippolytus in the west, and by Origen in the east. Tertullian was the first to assert clearly the tri-personality of God, and to maintain the substantial unity of the three Persons of the Godhead. Origen, while he opposed Monarchianism, did not have a clear understanding of the Trinity, for he spoke of the second Person of the Trinity as being subordinate in essence to the first Person, and implied that the Holy Spirit was created by the Son.
- C. Monarchianism took on several forms, and became very popular in certain parts of the East.
 - 1. *Dynamic Monarchianism*: This view bordered on Adoptionism, and desired to maintain the humanity of Christ. It claimed that the Christ

came upon the man Jesus at his baptism and after his death, and that the man Jesus was adopted into the distinction of three Persons in one Godhead. Paul of Samosata popularized this view.

2. *Modalistic Monarchianism or Modalism*: This view held that there were three modes of manifestation of the one true God: God in creation was the Father; God in dying was the Son; and God in coming down to indwell is the Spirit. Modalism tried to preserve the divinity of Christ, but this led to patripassianism (the Father dying for the sins of men). This view was popularized by Sabellius.

- D. *Arianism*: The above heresies led to an open denial of the deity of Jesus Christ in the Arianism heresy, which stated that Jesus Christ was the first created being, and everything else was brought into being by him. The Son was eternal, but not coeternal with the Father. Thus, he was more than man, but less than God. Christ was superhuman. He was like God, but not true deity. The Son was said to be inferior to the Father in nature and dignity, although he was the first and noblest of all created beings. Arius (after whom the heresy is named) made statements like, "There was a time when he [Jesus Christ] was not," and "He was created and made." Arianism is in essence the teaching of the present day cult of Jehovah's Witnesses.

III. THE ARIANISM CONTROVERSY

Arius was an elderly presbyter (elder) in the local church of Alexandria. Around A.D. 318 he began to propagate his belief with great zeal and logic. He was a pious man of blameless life and an able preacher. However, Arius was not straightforward in his controversial methods, and cleverly tried to cloud the issues. Alexander, bishop of the church in Alexandria, opposed Arius, standing true for the deity of Jesus Christ. Arius was removed from the church around A.D. 321, but being an able man he was befriended by eminent churchmen like Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and the historian Eusebius of Caesarea. Thus, church discipline was not effective against him. The rift continued to grow between Arius and Alexander, and it looked as though there was no one who could overcome Arius' arguments.

IV. THE COUNCIL OF NICEA (A.D. 325)

- A. This heresy of Arianism was disrupting the whole church, and when all attempts at reconciliation between Alexander and Arius failed, Constantine the Emperor of Rome stepped in to settle the controversy. He called a council at Nicea in A.D. 325 which over 300 bishops attended, along with

many outstanding laymen. Many of these present bore the scars of persecution with maimed limbs and blinded eyes. The Council was presided over by Cordoba, and even Constantine himself attended.

- B. God had his man for the hour, and that was a young man named Athanasius, who was a deacon at the church of Alexandria. Athanasius was a superb theologian with keen logic. He was zealous to maintain the deity of Christ, and he threw himself into the controversy for he clearly saw that the whole Christian Faith was threatened with extinction if Jesus Christ was not God.
- C. The debate raged around the words “homoiousias” and “homoousias.” Arius said that Christ was homoiousias (of like substance) with God, that is, that Christ was like God but not the same nature or substance as God. Athanasius said Christ was homoousias (of the same nature) as God, that is, that Christ was equal in essence with God, of the same substance, and thus that Christ was God. Athanasius held strongly to the eternal generation of the Son, while Arius said that there was a time when the Son had not yet been generated by the Father. Athanasius believed that Christ was coeternal with God; and thus that he was God. Athanasius’s fundamental position was that union with God is necessary unto salvation, and that no creature but one who is himself God can unite a person with God.

V. THE RESULTS OF THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

- A. At first many sought to procure a vague pronouncement which would commit them to neither side. In the end, however, the orthodox party, led by Athanasius, persuaded the Council to declare that Christ was “the Son of God, only begotten of the Father . . . of the substance of the Father . . . very God of very God.” Thus, the first written creed of the church, the Nicene Creed, came into existence.
- B. Arianism was condemned as heretical, and Arius was anathematized and banished with two companions to Illyria. Two years later, however, the strife was renewed in all its bitterness when Constantine received Arius back into favor, banishing Athanasius, then bishop of Alexandria, to Treves for refusing to reinstate Arius. Athanasius was banished no less than five times, exiled to distant regions and then recalled. Each time he returned to Alexandria he was received with delirious joy by his devoted flock. Often it was a case of “Athanasius against the world, and the whole world against Athanasius.” After having known suffering and exile for the greater part of his active life, his last six years (A.D. 367-373) were spent in peace and honor in his diocese of Alexandria.

- C. The Nicene Creed was not immediately accepted by all, but within 50 years it became the accepted creed of the church.

VI. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

- A. The whole Christian Faith was at stake. If Christ was not God, then his death for sin was useless, for only God can forgive sins.
- B. The Christian's salvation was at stake. Christ's work and person are inseparably connected. Man's condition is so utterly hopeless that he cannot save himself. Only God can save him. If Christ is not God, he cannot be our Saviour. Athanasius said, "Jesus, whom I know as my Redeemer, cannot be less than God."
- C. Ever since Nicea, a belief in the deity of Christ has been an essential fundamental of the Faith for all orthodox Christians. It is the belief today of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and of the churches of the Reformation (including the Baptists and Independents).