

LESSON THIRTEEN – Arianism and the Council of Nicaea

Arianism

- Chaos overtook Alexandria in 318. A riot broke out and people stormed the streets chanting, “There was a time when Christ was not!”
- Another group of Christians stood their ground against this movement, insisting that Christ is the eternal God along with the Father.
- Eventually this conflict spilled into the rest of the empire and threatened to break the unity of the church.
- Arius was a Libyan by birth and was an elder in Alexandria, the home of the theologian Origen.
- Arius came under the influence of Lucian of Antioch, a headmaster at a Christian school, and went to school with Eusebius of Nicomedia.
- Like most in Antioch, Lucian, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Arius erred on the side of overemphasizing the humanity of Christ rather than His divinity.
- They firmly rejected Modalism because that would imply that God the Father was crucified on the cross.
- They also did not want to compromise their church positions so they couldn’t publicly embrace Adoptionism, which was another heresy circulating that Jesus was a human person adopted into divinity.
- Based partly on Origen’s teachings on the Trinity, Arius developed a theory of the nature of God that separated Jesus from the Father.
- Part of Arius’s responsibility as an elder was to direct a school of Biblical interpretation for priests and laypersons who wished to teach.
- Over time Arius began to publicly criticize Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria. Alexander took the field against Arius. Arius then accused Alexander of being sympathetic to Modalism.
- Eventually the Arian movement became so popular that Alexander could no longer fight Arius’s criticisms with sermons and correspondence. He called a synod of bishops to discuss if Arius’s views were orthodox.
- More than 100 bishops from various parts of the eastern Roman Empire listened to Alexander critique Arius’s teachings.
- He accused Arius of bringing back the Adoptionism heresy in a more sophisticated way. It did not matter whether the Logos was created before or after time began, the difference between Arius’s teaching and Adoptionism was slight. Arius denied Christ’s deity.
- The synod decided that Arius’s views were heretical and he was forced to leave the city.
- Arius was not trying to start a crisis; he thought the relationship between God and Jesus was simple and needed to be freed from overcomplication.
- Trinity was not a common term at this time and it had not yet been precisely defined. Trinity was first used by Tertullian and is a word assigned to sum up all the teaching of Scripture on the nature of God.

- Since the age of the apostles Jesus had always been considered divine in at least some sense, but His precise relationship to the Godhead had not yet been articulated. Yet the church still had some sense on what the Trinity was not.
- Arius's own conception of the Trinity can be traced back to Origen. Two streams of thought flowed from Origen's teachings concerning the Son and followers gravitated to one of the two streams.
- In one stream Origen affirmed that the Son is equal to the Father but in the other stream Origen wrote that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father and the implication of that communicated to some that the Son is somehow a lesser being than the Father.
- To grasp Arius's theory, we must look at two common presumptions about God that were derived from the logic of Greek philosophy.
- First, God does not change. That is what is called the immutability of God. Change implies imperfection. For good or bad, if God changes, then He cannot be deemed absolutely perfect because He has either improved or regressed.
- Secondly, the other presumption is that God cannot suffer; He is passionless or what is called the impassibility of God.
- Arius and his followers used these two attributes to advance their argument that the Son is not co-eternal with the Father but is the supreme creation. He acknowledged that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the Logos, but the problem lay with the following:

“If the Logos is divine in the same sense that God the Father is divine, then God’s nature would be changed by the human life of Jesus in time and God would have suffered in Him.”¹

- The implication that God suffered and changes seemed blasphemous, so Arius concluded that only God the Father is without beginning.
- The Son came into existence through the will of the Father. To avoid charges of Adoptionism, Arius taught that the Logos was begotten “timelessly” – that is before Genesis 1:1.
- With this solution it was not God the Father who grew up and eventually suffered on the cross, but only the Logos experienced this on behalf of God and humanity.
- When the Scriptures speak of Jesus as the Son of God, this is merely a title of honor, a title given to Jesus as the one on whom the Father lavished a special grace.
- Arius believed the Father and the Son are two separate beings and that the Biblical model for their relationship is one of eternal subordination: the Father is the one who decides matters and the Son is the one who obeys.
- That the Son would yield to the Father's will was a natural conclusion, since in Arius's model the Son is simply a loyal creature serving His creator.
- Arius explained the sharpness of his division in reasonable terms:

“For God to implant His substance to some other being, however exalted, would imply that He is divisible and subject to change, which is inconceivable. Moreover, if any other being were to participate in the divine nature in any valid sense, there would result a duality of divine beings, whereas the Godhead is by definition unique.”²

- According to Arius, if the Father and the Son were of the same essence it is difficult to see how in the incarnation the Father would not become passible.
- Arius argued that the Son was created before time. He is not co-eternal with the Father.

As he put it: “Before he was begotten or created or appointed or established, he did not exist; for he was not unbegotten.”³

- In Arius’s model the Son is not of one divine substance with the Father. He is rather of a similar substance with the Father. (Greek: *homoiousios*). On this view, the divine qualities of the Son are derivative, given to the Son by the Father.

As Arius described Jesus, “He is not God truly, but by participation in grace...He too is called God in name only.”⁴

Arianism misunderstood biblical references to Jesus’ being tired (John 4:6) and not knowing the date of His return (Matthew 24:36). It may be difficult to understand how God could be tired or not know something, but these verses speak of Jesus’ human nature. Jesus is fully God, but He is also fully human. The Son of God did not become a human being until a specific point of time we call the Incarnation. Therefore, Jesus’ limitations as a human being have no impact on His divine nature or His eternity.

A second major misinterpretation in Arianism concerns the meaning of *firstborn* as applied to Christ. Romans 8:29 speaks of Christ as “the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (see also Colossians 1:15–20). Arians understand *firstborn* in these verses to mean that the Son of God was “created” as the first act of creation. This is not the case. Jesus Himself proclaimed His self-existence and eternity (John 8:58; 10:30). In Bible times, the firstborn son of a family was held in great honor (Genesis 49:3; Exodus 11:5; 34:19; Numbers 3:40; Psalm 89:27; Jeremiah 31:9). It is in this sense that Jesus is God’s “firstborn.” Jesus is the preeminent Person in God’s plan and the Heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus is the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6)⁵

The Council of Nicaea

- From the very beginning, Christianity has been involved in theological controversies. All these controversies were significant and sometimes bitter.
- In those early centuries the only way to win such a debate was through solid argument and holiness in life.
- The civil authorities paid little attention to the theological controversies of the church and there was no recourse to appeal to the authorities to deal with the theological problem.
- After Constantine that all changed. It was now possible to appeal to the authority of the state to settle a theological question.
- Constantine hoped the church would become the “cement of the empire,” and therefore he had a vested interest in the keeping unity within the church.

- Had it not been for imperial intervention, the issues would probably have been settled through long debate and a consensus would eventually have been reached.
- There were many rulers who did not wish to see prolonged and indecisive controversies in the church and who simply decided on imperial authority who was right and who should be silenced.
- It is in the Arian controversy we see the beginning of this process of the imperial authorities stepping into the theological debates in the church.
- Arius had been removed from all his posts in the church of Alexandria and forced to leave the city.
- Arius did not accept this judgment, but appealed both to the people of Alexandria and a number of prominent bishops throughout the Eastern portion of the empire.
- It was not long before there were more public demonstrations in Alexandria with people marching the streets and chanting Arius's theological refrains.
- Many of the bishops Arius appealed to wrote letters declaring the deposed elder was correct and it was Alexander who was teaching false doctrine.
- Constantine decided he needed to intervene in the matter. His first step was to send Bishop Hosius of Cordoba, his advisor in ecclesiastical matters, to try and reconcile the two parties.
- Constantine took his next step and decided to do something he had been thinking about for a while. He would call a great assembly or council of Christian bishops from all parts of the empire.
- On May 20th, 325, the Christian church entered a new era. On that day, 230 bishops gathered at Nicaea. The Council of Nicaea was the first major ecumenical or universal council of the church. Its main order of business was to decide the meaning of Jesus divinity.
- Constantine believed the best way to keep the empire united was to keep the church united. He inserted himself into the doctrinal debates swirling around Arius for two distinct reasons, which he spelled out in a letter explaining why he called the Council at Nicaea.

“My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled 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].”⁶

- The results of the council's deliberations were decisive in every way. Its affirmation of Christ's full divinity set a course for Christian orthodoxy that has been maintained to the present.
- The council's canons or rulings on administrative and procedural matters established precedent for the exercise of power in the church.
- The way the church defined the relationship of the Father and the Son, also had immediate relevance for church-state relations in Constantine's "new" Roman Empire.
- In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius of Caesarea, who was present, describes the scene:

“There were gathered the most distinguished ministers of God, from the many churches in Europe, Libya (Africa), and Asia. A single house of prayer, as if enlarged by God, sheltered Syrians and Cilicians, Phoenicians, and Arabs, delegates from Palestine and Egypt, Thebans and Libyans, together with those from Mesopotamia. There was also a Persian bishop, and a Scythian was not lacking. Pontus, Galatia, Pamphylia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Phrygia sent their most outstanding bishops, jointly with those from the remotest areas of Thrace, Macedonia, Achaia and Epirus. Even from Spain, there was a man of great fame (Hosius of Cordoba) who sat as a member of the great assembly. The bishop of the Imperial City (Rome) could not attend due to his advanced age; but he was represented by his presbyters. Constantine is the first ruler of all time to have gathered such a garland in the bond of peace, and to have presented it to his Savior as an offering of gratitude for the victories he had won over all his enemies.”⁷

- In this elated atmosphere, the bishops discussed the many legislative matters that had to be resolved with the end of persecution.
- They approved standard procedures for the readmission of the lapsed and for the election and ordination of presbyters and bishops, and for establishing the order of precedence of the various episcopal sees. They also decreed that bishops, presbyters and deacons could not move from one city to another.
- The most difficult issue that the council had to face was the Arian controversy. On this score, there were several different groups whose positions and concerns had to be taken into account.
- There was, first of all, a small number of convinced Arians, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia (this bishop, who played a central role throughout the early years of the controversy, is not to be confused with Eusebius of Caesarea, who was also present at the council).
- Since Arius was not a bishop, he was not allowed to sit in the council, and it was Eusebius of Nicomedia who spoke for him and for the position he represented.
- This small group was convinced that what Arius taught was so clearly correct that all that was needed was a clear exposition of the logic of the argument, and the assembly would vindicate Arius and rebuke Alexander for having condemned his teachings.
- In direct opposition to the Arian party, there was another small group of bishops who were convinced that Arianism threatened the very core of the Christian faith, and that therefore it was necessary to condemn it in no uncertain terms.
- The leader of this group was not Alexander of Alexandria. Among his followers was a young man who, being only a deacon, could not sit in the council, but who would eventually become famous as the champion of Nicene orthodoxy: Athanasius of Alexandria.
- Most of the bishops from the Latin-speaking West had only a secondary interest in the debate, which appeared to them as a controversy among Eastern followers of Origen. For them, it was sufficient to declare that in God there were, as Tertullian had said long before, “three persons and one substance.”
- Another small group, numbering no more than three or four held positions approaching Patripassianism or modalism, that is, that the Father and the Son are the same and that

therefore the Father suffered the passion. These bishops agreed that Arianism was wrong, but their own doctrines were also rejected later in the controversy, as the church began to clarify what it meant by Trinitarian doctrine.

- In truth, the vast majority of those present did not belong to any of the groups. It seems that at the beginning of the sessions these bishops hoped to achieve a compromise that would make it possible to move onto other matters.
- According to the reports of those present, what changed matters was the exposition that Eusebius of Nicomedia made of his own views, which were also those of Arius.
- The assertion that the Word or Son was no more than a creature, no matter how high a creature, provoked angry reactions from many of the bishops: “You lie!” “Blasphemy!” “Heresy!” was shouted.
- The mood of the majority had now changed. Earlier they hoped to deal with the issues at stake through negotiations and compromise, without condemning any doctrine. Now they were convinced that they had to reject Arianism in the clearest way possible.
- At first the assembly sought to do this through a series of passages of Scripture but it soon became evident that by limiting itself to Biblical texts the council would find it difficult to express its rejection of Arianism in unmistakable terms.
- It was then decided to agree on a creed that would express the faith of the church in such a way that Arianism was clearly excluded.
- Eusebius of Caesarea, for reasons that scholars still debate, proposed the creed of his own church. Constantine suggested the word *homoousios*.
- Eventually the assembly agreed on a formula that was based on the creed of Caesarea, but with a number of additions that clearly rejected Arianism:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance (*hypostasis*) or essence (*ousia*), or that He is created, or mutable, these the Catholic church anathematizes.⁸

- When one reads the formula as approved by the bishops at Nicaea, it is clear that their main concern was to reject any notion that the Son or Word was a creature, or a being less divine than the Father. This may be seen, first of all, in affirmations such as: “God of God, light of light, true God of true God.” It is also the reason why the creed declares that the Son is “begotten, not made.” Note that the Creed began by declaring that the Father is

“maker of all things visible and invisible.” Thus, in declaring that the Son is “begotten, not made,” He is being excluded from those things “visible and invisible” made by the Father.

- Furthermore, in the last paragraph, those are condemned who declare the Son “came from that which is not” that is, out nothing, like the rest of creation. Also, in the text of the creed itself, we are told that the Son was begotten “from the substance of the Father.”
- The key word, however and the one that was subject to much controversy, is *homoousios* meaning of the same substance.
- This was intended to convey that the Son is just as divine as the Father. But it also provides the main reason for subsequent resistance to the Nicene Creed, for it seemed to imply that there is no distinction between the Father and the Son, thus leaving the door open for Modalism.
- The bishops gathered at Nicaea hoped that the creed on which they agreed would put an end to the Arian controversy and proceeded to sign it. Very few, Eusebius of Nicomedia among them, refused to sign.
- The assembly declared those who did not sign, heretical and deposed them. But Constantine added his own sentence to that of the bishops: he banished them from their cities.
- In spite of what the bishops had hoped, the Council of Nicaea did not end the controversy. Eusebius of Nicomedia was an able politician.
- His strategy was to court the approval of Constantine, who soon allowed him to return to Nicomedia.
- Arius himself was recalled from exile and Constantine ordered the bishop of Constantinople to restore him to communion. The bishop was debating whether to obey the emperor or his conscience when Arius died.
- Alexander of Alexandria died in 328, and was succeeded by Athanasius, who had been present at the Council of Nicaea as a deacon and who would now become champion of the Nicene cause.
- Constantine was succeeded by his three sons, Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius. Constantine II ruled over Gaul, Great Britain, Spain and Morocco. Constantius’s territory included most of the East and Constans was allotted a strip of land between his two brothers, including Italy and North Africa.
- At first the new situation favored the Nicene party, for the eldest of Constantine’s three sons took their side, and recalled Athanasius and the others from exile.
- But war soon broke out between Constantine II and Constans, and this provided the opportunity for Constantius who ruled the East, to follow his pro-Arian inclinations. Once again, Athanasius was exiled, only to return when, after the death of Constantine II, Constans ruled the united West.
- Eventually Constantius became the sole emperor. Once again, the Nicene leaders had to leave their cities and imperial pressure was such that eventually even the elderly Hosius of Cordoba and Liberius, the bishop of Rome, signed Arian confessions of faith.
- Such was the situation when the unexpected death of Constantius changed the course of events.

¹ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., page 90

² Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., page 90-91

³ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., page 91

⁴ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., Zondervan 2014

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/arianism.html>

⁶ Turning Points, Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Noll, Mark A., Komline, David, Komline, Han-Luen Kantzer, Baker Academic 2022, page 31

⁷ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., pages 186-187

⁸ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., HarperCollins 2010, page 189