

LESSON FOURTEEN – The Council of Nicaea and Athanasius

The Political Ramifications of the Council of Nicaea

- Nicaea represented more than just a watershed in Christian doctrine. The church's decision about the divinity of Christ turned out to have great importance in the political sphere as well.
- The basic question was: Given the fact that the emperors would now, in some fashion or other, support the church, how was the relationship between imperial power and the church to be understood?
- Although this question is not quite as momentous as the issue of Christ's divinity, it was a question of great contemporary significance and also one that would continue to be of central importance in Christian history for more than a thousand years.
- In the 4th century those opposing Nicaea, both emperors and their supporters, tended to favor direct imperial control of the church.
- As he set about solidifying his own power, and also working his will on the church, emperor Constantius is reputed to have said:

“Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon.”¹

- By contrast, the orthodox party thought it was essential for the church to preserve a certain degree of autonomy over its own affairs.
- In the contest concerning ecclesiastical and imperial power, both defenders and opponents of Nicaea shared several convictions.
- Both agreed that Christ was the head of the church, that God has ordained the emperor to rule over terrestrial affairs and that kingship involved the traditional idea of a lord and vassal.

The specific teachings of Arius became critically important in this dispute at the place where subordination was defined. Arians, who believed that the Son was subordinate to the Father applied the lord-vassal relationship to God (the lord) and Christ (the vassal). Since the Son was subordinate to the Father, so too the kingdom of the Son (the church) must be subordinate to the kingdom of the Father (the empire). Therefore, the authority of the bishops must be subordinate to the authority of the emperor. It was even proper to call the emperor a bishop of bishops since the bishops (as servants of the Son) received their authority derivatively from the emperor (as a servant of God). The orthodox rejected this reasoning at every point. They believed that the Son was consubstantial (equal in being) to the Father, and they applied the lord-vassal relationship to the Trinity and the bishops of the church. Since the Son was consubstantial with the Father, so too the kingdom of the Son (the church) was of equal dignity to the kingdom of the Father (the empire).²

- The authority of the bishops must be coequal to the authority of the empire, with the implication that the bishops were properly the chief authorities in matters concerning the life of faith, while the emperor was supreme in the affairs of the world.

- As a consequence, when the emperor was in the church as a Christian, the emperor was under the authority of the bishops, since in the church the bishops spoke for Christ, who is God.
- Several important conclusions followed the relationship of the church and state once the Nicene position came to prevail.
- Most important, to affirm the consubstantiality of the Son was to affirm a degree of independence of the church from the state and of the state from the church.
- The ancient world did not practice divided sovereignties and especially the Eastern church would continue to vest great authority over both church and state in the emperor. But in the West, and to some extent in the East, acceptance of the Nicene Creed preserved a certain degree of autonomy for the church.
- In the course of the 4th century, Nicene Christology affirmed the principle that prayer, worship, preaching, the reading of Scripture and the sacraments all deserved a sphere of liberty. Because the work of the Son was *homoousios* with the work of the Father, the life of the church had an independence that no instrument of state could transgress.
- This foundation established the basis for later relationships between institutions of state and of church, particularly in the West.

Nicaea and Christendom

- Although the Nicene Creed opened a space between the church and the state, protecting liberty of the church in the face of the empire, it also stood at the heart of a series of developments that brought the church and the state into much closer cooperation than had ever been imagined before.
- Once Constantine began acting on behalf of the church and once his successors began simply to assume that imperial rule had something to do with the church, the church left behind the conditions of its first three centuries.
- Over the course of the 4th century and through the 7th century as the Christian faith spread into northern and western Europe, the actions of rulers initiating, promoting, supporting and often dictating to the church gradually accustomed leaders in both church and state to notions of establishment.
- When rulers publicly acknowledged the centrality of the church to all of life, it was difficult for the church not to respond by assuming that it had a vitally important role to play in this life as well as for the life to come.
- Many advantages came from this adjustment, especially as the church's infrastructure and evangelistic mission benefited from the help of rulers. But the cost was also high. A world in which the emperor could make a critical decision to resolve a great doctrinal crisis was a world in which the emperor's legitimate concerns for worldly order, success, wealth, and stability would become concerns in the church.
- The complexity of Nicene situation makes it difficult to pronounce snap judgments on this great turning point. At the initiation of the emperor, the church reaffirmed the doctrine of divinity of Christ, which proved to be an immensely significant foundation for virtually all Christian life, work and worship in the centuries that followed.

- Yet because of the emperor's actions, the sphere of worldly concerns he stood for gradually assumed greater and greater importance in the church.
- This combination of momentous doctrinal declaration and critical alteration in the church's relationship to the world is what makes the Council of Nicaea one of the most decisive events in church history outside of the New Testament.

Athanasius

“The result of the incarnation of the Savior are such and so many, that anyone attempting to enumerate them should be compared to a person looking upon the vastness of the sea and attempting to count its waves.” – Athanasius of Alexandria³

- The time and place of Athanasius's birth are not known, although it is likely that he had rather obscure origins in a small town or village on the shore of the Nile River. Since he spoke Coptic, the language of the original inhabitants of the area who had been successively conquered by the Greeks and the Romans, and his complexion was dark, like that of the Copts, it is very likely he belonged to that group and was a member of the lower class in Egypt.
- During Athanasius's early years he was in close contact with the monks of the desert. Jerome affirms that he gave a cloak to Paul the Hermit; and Athanasius himself, in the *Life of Saint Anthony*, says he used to visit the famous monk and was the old man's hands.
- From the monks Athanasius learned a rigid discipline that he applied to himself, and an austerity that earned him the admiration of friends and even the respect of his enemies.
- His strength was in his close ties to the people among whom he lived, and in living out his faith without the refinements of the Arians or the pomp of so many bishops of other important sees.
- His monastic discipline, his roots among the people, his fiery spirit and his profound and unshakeable conviction made him invincible.
- Before the Arian controversy, Athanasius had written two works, *Against the Gentiles* (meaning pagans) and *On the Incarnation of the Word*, which offered clues as to the nature of his theology. The speculation of Clement or of Origen are not to be found here.
- These works show the deep conviction that the central fact of Christian faith, as well as of all human history, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The presence of God amidst humankind, made human: that is the heart of Christianity as Athanasius understood it.
- What Arius taught was that one who had come to us in Jesus Christ was not truly God, but a lesser being, a creature. Such a notion was unacceptable to Athanasius, as it was also to the monks who had withdrawn to the desert for the love of God Incarnate, and to the faithful who gathered to participate in worship under Athanasius's leadership.
- For Athanasius and many of the faithful, the Arian controversy was not a matter of theological intricacies with little or no relevance. In it, the very core of the Christian message was at stake.

- When Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, was on his deathbed, all took for granted that he would be succeeded by Athanasius. But the young man, whose purpose was to live in peace, offering the sacraments and worshipping with the people, fled to the desert. Several weeks after the death of Alexander, and against his own wishes, Athanasius was made bishop of Alexandria.
- The year was 328, the same year Constantine revoked the sentence banishing Arius. Arianism was gaining ground and the battle lines were being drawn.
- Eusebius of Nicomedia and the other Arian leaders knew that Athanasius was one of their most formidable opponents. They soon began to take steps to assure his downfall.
- Constantine ordered Athanasius to appear before a synod gathered in Tyre, where he was to answer to the charges brought against him.
- In particular, he was accused of killing a man named Arsenius, a bishop of a rival group and having cut off his hand in order to use it in rites of magic.

A chronicler with a flair for the dramatic reports that Athanasius went to Tyre and after hearing the charges, brought into the room a man covered in a cloak. After making sure several of those present knew Arsenius, Athanasius uncovered the face of the hooded man and his accusers were confounded when they realized it was Athanasius's supposed victim. Then someone who had been convinced by the rumors circulating against the bishop of Alexandria suggested that perhaps Athanasius did not kill Arsenius but had just cut off the man's hand. After it was revealed Arsenius did indeed still have two hands, Athanasius is reported to have said, "What kind of monster did you think Arsenius was? One with three hands?" Laughter broke out through the assembly while others were enraged that the Arians had misled them.⁴

- Free from the accusations made before the Synod of Tyre, Athanasius decided to go on to Constantinople in order to present his case before the emperor.
- Eusebius of Nicomedia had a great deal of influence at court, and Athanasius found it impossible to gain access to the emperor.
- He then took bolder steps. One day when Constantine was out for a ride, the tiny bishop of Alexandria simply jumped in front of the emperor's horse, grabbed its bridle and would not let go until he had been granted an audience.
- Constantine listened to Eusebius of Nicomedia when he told him that Athanasius boasted he could stop the shipments of wheat from Egypt to Rome. On the basis of Eusebius's accusation, Constantine sent Athanasius away from Alexandria, banishing him to the city of Trier in the West.
- Shortly after Constantine died, his sons decided that all exiled bishops could return to their sees.
- There was an Arian party in Alexandria, and these people now claimed that Athanasius, who had been away, was not the legitimate bishop.
- The rival claimant, a certain Gregory, had the support of the government. Since Athanasius was not willing to give him the church buildings, Gregory decided to take them by force, and the result was a series of disorders of such magnitude that Athanasius decided in order to avoid further violence, it was best for him to leave the city.

- Athanasius's exile in Rome was fruitful. Both the Arians and the Nicenes had requested support from Julius, the bishop of Rome. Athanasius was able to present the Nicene position in person, and he soon gained the support of the Roman clergy, who took up the Nicene cause against the Arians.
- Eventually a Synod gathered in the ancient capital declared that Athanasius was the legitimate bishop of Alexandria and that Gregory was a usurper.
- After the death of Constantine II, Constans became the sole emperor in the West and he then asked Constantius, who ruled in the East, to permit Athanasius to return to Alexandria.
- Gregory's mismanagement in Alexandria had been such that the people received Athanasius as a hero. With such a show of support, Athanasius was free from the attacks of his enemies for approximately 10 years.
- During that time, he strengthened ties with other defenders of orthodoxy and wrote a number of treatises against Arianism.
- Emperor Constantius, however, was a committed Arian and felt the need to rid himself of this champion of the Nicene faith. As long as Constans was alive, Constantius would endure the presence of Athanasius, who counted on the support of the Western emperor.
- Finally in 353, Constantius, who now ruled the entire empire, felt secure enough to promote his pro-Arian policy.
- Through threats and use of force, an increasing number of bishops accepted Arianism. It is said that when Constantius ordered a synod to condemn Athanasius, he was told it was not possible since the canons of the church did not permit condemnation without a hearing.

The emperor responded, "My will also is a canon of the church." On that ominous threat, many bishops signed the condemnation of Athanasius, those who refused were banished.⁵

- If the chroniclers of the time are to be believed, Constantius feared the power Athanasius enjoyed in Alexandria and for that reason sought to remove him from that city without actually banishing him.
- Athanasius received a letter granting him an audience with the emperor that he had not requested.
- When the legions were in place and any revolt could be crushed, the governor ordered Athanasius, in the name of the emperor, to leave the city. Athanasius responded by producing the old imperial order in which he was given permission to return.
- Shortly after this Athanasius was celebrating communion in one of the churches, when the governor ordered the building be surrounded and suddenly a burst into the room with a group of armed soldiers.
- Chaos erupted and Athanasius ordered the congregation to sing Psalm 136, with its refrain, "For His mercy endureth forever." The soldiers pushed their way through the crowd, while some sang, others tried to flee in panic.
- The clergy who were present formed a tight circle around Athanasius who refused to flee until his flock was safe. But he fainted and somehow his clergy was able to carry him away to safety.

- From that moment Athanasius seemed to have become a ghost. He was sought everywhere but the authorities could not find him. He had taken refuge in the desert, with the monks, who were ever his faithful allies.
- For five years Athanasius lived among the monks in the desert. During those five years, the Nicene cause suffered several setbacks. The imperial policy favored the Arians.
- The high point for Arianism came when a council gathered in Sirmium openly rejected the decisions of Nicaea. This is what orthodox leaders called the “Blasphemy of Sirmium.”
- Unexpectedly, Constantius died and was succeeded by his cousin Julian. Since the new emperor had no interest in supporting either side of the controversy, he simply canceled all orders of exile against all bishops. He was hoping that the two parties would weaken each other while he moved toward his goal of restoring paganism.
- One of the consequences of this action was that Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria, where he undertook a much-needed campaign of theological diplomacy.
- During the course of the controversy, Arianism had become increasingly technical and abstract.
- The reason why Athanasius opposed Arianism and the core of his arguments against it, had little to do with such speculation. His concern was rather with the core Christian tenet that Jesus is the Savior of humankind, the restorer of that which had fallen.
- While it is possible that in its early stages Arianism was also concerned primarily with the doctrine of salvation, it soon moved on the field on to the field of speculative argument.
- Athanasius argued that the corruption of humanity as the result of sin was such that a new creation was require, a radical reformation and restoration of what had been destroyed by sin. The work of salvation is no lesser than a work of creation. Therefore, the one responsible for our re-creation can be no lesser than one responsible for our creation.
- Athanasius was willing to move beyond doctrinal and verbal formula and see clarification and accord on the real issues at stake.

He had come to the conclusion that many opposed the Nicene Creed because they feared the assertion that the Son was of the same substance as the Father could be understood to mean that there is no distinction between the Father and the Son. Because of this some preferred not to say “of the same substance,” but rather “of a similar substance.” The two Greek words were *homoousios* (of the same substance) and *homoiousios* (of similar substance). The Council of Nicaea had declared the Son to be *homoousios* with the Father. But now many were saying that they would rather affirm that the Son was *homoiousios* with the Father.⁶

- At an earlier time, Athanasius had insisted on the Nicene formula, declaring that those who said “of similar substance” were as heretical as the Arians.
- But now the elderly bishop of Alexandria was ready to see the legitimate concern of those Christians, who, while refusing Arianism, were not ready to give up the distinction between the Father and the Son.

Through a series of negotiations, Athanasius convinced many of these Christians that the formula of Nicaea could be interpreted in such a way as to respond to the concerns of those who would rather say, “of a similar substance.” Finally, in a synod gathered in Alexandria in 362, Athanasius and his followers declared that it was acceptable to refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as “of one substance” as long as this was not understood as obliterating the distinction among the three, and that it was also legitimate to speak of “three substances” as long as this was not understood as of there were three gods.⁷

- On the basis of this understanding most of church rallied its support of the Council of Nicaea, whose doctrine was eventually ratified at the Second Ecumenical Council, gathered in Constantinople in 381.
- Although Julian the Apostate did not wish to persecute Christians, the news that arrived from Alexandria disturbed him. If imperial policy were to succeed in Alexandria, it was necessary to exile its bishop once again.
- It soon became clear to Athanasius that Julian wanted to remove him not only from Alexandria but from Egypt altogether. Athanasius knew that he could not remain in the city where there was no place to hide and went to live once again among the monks.
- Julian’s reign did not last long and he was succeeded by Jovian who was an admirer of Athanasius. Once again, the bishop of Alexandria returned from exile, although he was soon called to Antioch to counsel the emperor.
- When he finally returned to Alexandria, it seemed his long chain of exiles was over, but Jovian died a few months later and was succeeded by Valens, a staunch defender of Arianism. Fearing the emperor would take measures against the orthodox in Alexandria if he remained in the city, Athanasius resolved to leave once again.
- It soon became evident that Valens was not eager to tangle with the bishop who had bested Constantius and Julian. Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria and remained there until his death in 373.
- Although Athanasius never saw the final victory in the cause to which he devoted his life, his writings clearly show that he was convinced that in the end Arianism would be defeated. As he approached old age, he saw emerge around himself a new generation of theologians devoted to the same cause. Most remarkable among these were the Great Cappadocians.

¹ Turning Points, Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Noll, Mark A., Komline, David, Komline, Han-Luen Kantzer, page 41

² Turning Points, Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Noll, Mark A., Komline, David, Komline, Han-Luen Kantzer, page 41

³ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 199

⁴ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 201-202

⁵ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 203

⁶ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 205

⁷ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 206