

LESSON FIFTEEN – The Great Cappadocians and the Council of Constantinople

Review of the Significance of the Council of Nicaea

1. Nicaea was the first ecumenical or universal council, although it was not referred to as that for another dozen years. Such general assemblies of church leaders became *the way* to deal with dramatic problems that affected the church universal.
2. Nicaea was an assembly conscious of its uniqueness, because it was very different in extent from previous councils. It was unprecedented for Rome to send legates to an Eastern council and although the number of Western bishops was small, their presence gave a consciousness of a truly universal representation.
3. Nicaea served as a symbol of imperial involvement in church affairs. It was different from previous councils because of the personal presence of a formidable new factor, the emperor Constantine. The aura of authority that came from Nicaea resulted from those who bore the marks of persecution now being assembled by the emperor with great publicity and signs of favor.
4. The age of persecution was over and the age of Christendom – Christianity as a religion favored by government – had begun. In many ways, Nicaea was a victory celebration for the church. The banishment of Arius, however, was a reminder that there was a price to pay for imperial involvement, and many in later ages would question the spiritual effects of the political victory. Nonetheless, the alliance of church and state was set on a course that would prevail for most Christians for twelve to fourteen centuries and in many places still prevails.
5. Nicaea marked a crucial development in doctrinal history. By adopting a creed backed up by anathemas, it made creeds into something more than confessions of faith. Instead of being summaries of catechetical instruction to be confessed at baptism, as they had been, creeds in the 4th century became formulations of councils. At Nicaea it was not catechumens who needed a creed, but bishops.
6. The use of nonbiblical language in the Nicene Creed was not so great in significance as many then and since have thought. The problem was safeguarding a biblical thought. Any time sermons are preached or theological treatises are written, words and expressions not in the Bible are used in order to communicate and clarify the biblical message. Although confessions of faith are customarily more privileged forms of discourse, they need not be more restrictive in their terminology. The question is whether the language is true to the meaning and intent of Scripture.
7. What was new at Nicaea was putting a nonbiblical term in a creed, enforced by anathemas. Instead of being only a confession of faith, the creed of Nicaea became a test of fellowship. The precedent of Nicaea was capable of considerable extension: the First Creed of Sirmium in 351 contains 27 anathemas.¹

The Great Cappadocians

- The region of Cappadocia was in Eastern Anatolia, lands that now belong to Turkey. There lived three church leaders known as the Great Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea, the theologian known as “The Great;” his brother Gregory of Nyssa, famous for his works on mystical contemplation; and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, a poet and orator, whose many hymns have become traditional in the Greek-speaking church.
- But before turning our attention to them, we are going to cover someone else just as worthy, although often forgotten by historians who tend to ignore the work of women.

Macrina

- The family in which Macrina, Basil and Gregory were raised had deep Christian roots reaching back at least two generations.
- Macrina was 12 when her parents decided to make arrangements for her marriage. They settled on a young relative who was planning to become a lawyer, and Macrina agreed to the marriage.
- Everything was ready when the groom died, quite unexpectedly. Thereafter, Macrina refused to accept any other suitor, and eventually vowed herself to celibacy and to a life of contemplation.
- Two or three years after Macrina’s engagement, Basil had been born. He was a sickly child whose survival was in doubt for a time. The elder Basil, who had always wanted a son, gave this one the best education available.
- Young Basil studied first at Caesarea, the main city in Cappadocia; then in Antioch and Constantinople; and finally in Athens. It was in the ancient Greek city that he met Gregory, who would eventually become bishop of Nazianzus.
- After such studies, Basil returned to Caesarea, puffed up with his own wisdom. His studies, as well as his family’s prestige, guaranteed him a place of importance in Caesarean society.
- It was then that Macrina intervened. She bluntly told her brother that he had become vain, acting as if he were the best inhabitant of the city and that he would do well in quoting fewer pagan authors and following more of the advice of Christian ones.
- Tragic news arrived. Their brother Naucratus, who was living in retirement in the country, had died unexpectedly. Basil was shaken. He and Naucratus had been very close.
- The blow was such that Basil changed his life entirely. He resigned his teaching position and all other honors and he asked Macrina to teach him the secrets of religious life. A short time later their father had also died and it was now Macrina who offered her bereaved family strength and consolation.
- Macrina sought to console her family by leading their thoughts to the joy of religious life. True happiness is not found in the glories of the world, but in service to God. That service is best rendered when one breaks all ties with the world.
- Dress and food must be as simple as possible and one should devote oneself entirely to prayer.

- Macrina, her mother and several other women withdrew to Annesi while Basil following the desires of his sister, left for Egypt in order to learn more about the monastic life. Since Basil eventually became the great teacher of monasticism in the Greek-speaking church and since it was Macrina who awakened his interest in it, it could be said that she was the founder of Greek monasticism.
- Macrina spent the rest of her life in monastic retreat in Annesi. Years later, shortly after Basil's death, their brother Gregory of Nyssa visited her.
- Her fame was such that she was known simply as "the Teacher." Gregory left a record of his visit in his dialogue with her, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, the main arguments and assertions of which may well have been Macrina's.
- She let him shed his tears and express his pain, and then consoled him, reminding him of the hope of resurrection. Finally, she died in peace. Gregory closed her eyes, led the funeral service, and went out to continue the work that his sister and brother had entrusted to him.

Basil the Great

- Years earlier, Basil had returned from Egypt, Palestine and other lands where he had gone to study the monastic life, and had settled near Annesi.
- He and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus founded a community for men similar to one Macrina had created for women. Since all the legislation in the Greek church regarding monastic life is based on the teachings of Basil, he is usually regarded as the father of Eastern monasticism.
- But Basil had lived as a monk for little more than 6 years when he was obtained as a presbyter against his will.
- He soon had conflicts with the bishop of Caesarea, and rather than creating greater difficulties decided to return to his monastic community. He remained there until Valens became emperor. Since the new emperor was Arian, the bishop of Caesarea decided to set aside differences with Basil and call on the monk to assist him in the struggle against Arianism.
- When Basil arrived at Caesarea, conditions were very difficult. Bad weather had destroyed the crops and the rich were hoarding food.
- Basil preached against such practices and sold all his properties to feed the poor. If all would take only what they needed, and give the rest to others, there would be neither rich or poor.

"If one who takes the clothing off another is called a thief, why give any other name to one who can clothe the naked and refuses to do so? The bread that you withhold belongs to the poor; the cape that you hide in your chest belongs to the naked; the shoes rotting in your house belongs to those who must go unshod."²

- Basil joined these claims with action. On the outskirts of Caesarea, he created what his friend Gregory of Nazianzus would call "a new city." There the hungry were fed, the ill cared for and the unemployed given employment.

- When the bishop of Caesarea died, the election of his successor became a focal point for the struggle between the orthodox and the Arians.
- Basil's prestige was such that he seemed to be the most likely candidate. The Arian party found only one point at which Basil was vulnerable: his questionable health. The orthodox responded that they were electing a bishop, not a gladiator. Eventually Basil was elected.
- The new bishop of Caesarea knew that his election would lead to conflicts with the emperor, who was Arian. Soon Valens announced his intention to Caesarea.
- Many imperial officers arrived at Caesarea in order to prepare for Valen's visit. The emperor ordered them to subdue the new bishop through a combination of promises and threats. But Basil was not easy to subdue. Finally, in a heated encounter, the praetorian prefect lost his patience and threatened Basil with confiscating his goods, and with exile, torture and even death. Basil responded:

“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 torture you should know that my body is already dead in Christ. And would be a great boon to me, leading me sooner to God.” Taken aback, the prefect said that no one had ever spoken to him thus. Basil answered, “Perhaps that is because you never met a true bishop.”³

- After these events, Basil was able to devote his time to his tasks as a bishop. He was particularly interested in organizing and spreading the monastic life, and in advancing the Nicene cause.

Gregory of Nyssa

- Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, was of a completely different temperament. While Basil was tempestuous, inflexible and at times arrogant, Gregory preferred silence, solitude and anonymity.
- Whereas Basil and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus fervently took upon monastic life, Gregory of Nyssa married a young woman with whom he seemed to have been very happy.
- Years later, after his wife died, and he had taken the monastic life, he wrote a treatise titled *On Virginity*, which featured arguments characteristic of him.
- For him, the monastic life was a way to avoid the pains and struggles of active life. He became known for his mystical life and for the writings in which he described that life and gave directives for those wishing to follow it.
- Gregory's brother Basil forced him to become bishop of Nyssa, which was little more than a village.
- Emperor Valens and the Arians continued using all their power against the orthodox party. Such strife was too much for Gregory, who went into hiding. But despite this, after the death of both Valens and Basil, Gregory became one of the main leaders of the Nicene party.
- Although he was a quiet and humble person, his writings show the inner fire of his spirit. His careful explications of Nicene doctrine contributed to its triumph in Constantinople.

- After the great council, Emperor Theodosius took him as his main advisor in theological matters and Gregory was forced to travel throughout the empire and even to Arabia and Mesopotamia.
- Finally, being assured that the Nicene cause was firmly established, Gregory returned to the monastic life, hoping the world would leave him alone.

Gregory of Nazianzus

- The other great Cappadocian theologian was Gregory of Nazianzus, whom Basil had met when they were fellow students. Gregory was the son of the bishop of Nazianzus, also called Gregory and his wife, Nona – for at that time bishops were often married.
- Gregory spent most of his youth in study. After some time in Caesarea, he went to Athens, where he remained some 14 years, and where he met both Basil and Julian the Apostate.
- He was 30 when he returned to his home country and joined Basil in the monastic life.
- Back in Nazianzus, Gregory was ordained as presbyter, although he did not wish it. He fled to Basil's monastic community, where he stayed for some time, but eventually returned to his pastoral duties in Nazianzus.
- At that point he delivered a famous sermon on the duties of a pastor. He began:

“I have been overcome and I confess my defeat,” and declared that his reluctance to serve as a pastor was due in part to his interest in the contemplative life, and in part to his fear that he would be unequal to the task, for “it is difficult to practice obedience; but it is even more difficult to practice leadership.”⁴

- From then on, Gregory became more involved in the controversies of the time. When Basil made him bishop of a small hamlet, Gregory felt that his friend had imposed on him and their friendship was sorely strained.
- It was a sad time for Gregory, marked by the deaths of his brother, sister and parents. Alone and bereaved, Gregory left the church that had been entrusted to him, to have time for quiet meditation. He was in his retreat when the news reached him that Basil had passed.
- Eventually Gregory felt compelled to take a leading role in the struggle against Arianism, in which Basil had sought his help.
- In 379 he appeared in Constantinople. At that time Arianism enjoyed the total support of the state and in the entire city there was not a single orthodox church. Gregory celebrated orthodox services in the home of a relative.
- When he ventured in the streets, the mob pelted him. Repeatedly the Arian monks broke into his service and profaned the altar. But Gregory stood firm, strengthening his small congregation with hymns he composed, some of which have become classics of Greek hymnody.
- Finally, the tide changed. Late in the year 380, Emperor Theodosius made his triumphal entrance into Constantinople.
- He was an orthodox general who soon expelled all Arians from the high positions they have used to further their cause. A few days later, the new emperor asked Gregory to visit

the cathedral of Hagia Sophia with him. It was an overcast day, broken only by a ray of sunshine that hit Gregory.

- Some of those present believed this to be a sign from heaven and began shouting, “Gregory, bishop, Gregory, bishop!” Since this fit his policy, Theodosius gave his approval. Gregory, who did not wish to become bishop, was finally convinced. The obscure from Nazianzus was now the patriarch of Constantinople.
- A few months later, the emperor called a council that gathered in Constantinople and over which Gregory resided, as bishop of the city.
- When one of his opponents pointed out that he was already bishop of another place and that therefore he could not be bishop of Constantinople, Gregory promptly resigned from the position he never wanted.
- Nectarius, the civil governor of Constantinople, was elected bishop in his stead and occupied that position with relative distinction until he was succeeded by John Chrysostom.
- Gregory returned to his homeland, where he spent his time composing hymns and devoting himself to his pastoral duties. He lived away from all civil and ecclesiastical pomp until he died when he was around 60 years old.

The Council of Constantinople

- The Council of Constantinople, called by the emperor Theodosius in 381, was not immediately considered ecumenical.
- The council affirmed that its creed was the same as Nicaea’s, but the creed that has been handed down as approved by this council is fuller than the creed adopted at Nicaea and omits its anathemas. This creed, recited in many churches as the “Nicene Creed;” is more accurately, the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.”
- A problem occurs because the text of the creed is quoted in the work of Epiphanius dated before the council.
- The council’s creed reaffirmed that the Son was consubstantial (*homoousio*) with the Father and confirmed the divinity of the Holy spirit. Among other decisions was a canon that gave to the bishop of Constantinople the prerogative of honor after that of the bishop of Rome, “because Constantinople is the New Rome,” a decision that foreshadowed later controversy between Rome and Constantinople over the basis of their prerogatives.
- Theodosius’s edicts after the council made the pro-Nicene version of the Christian faith the official religion of the empire.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,

and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sits on the right hand of the Father and comes again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-Giver, that proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spoke through the prophets;

In one holy catholic and apostolic church;

We acknowledge one baptism unto remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come.⁵

- Why did the Nicene-Orthodox win the doctrinal debates? Why did Christians pick out certain councils as authoritative and not others? It was a matter of reception- by whom and how.
- Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, considered the small synod assembled in Alexandria in 362 as Athanasius's finest achievement.
- Nicaea is a pattern of the problem of the authority of councils. Its supporters succeeded because the majority decided this was the right way to express the *consensus fidelium*, agreement of the faithful.
- They also had the correct understanding of the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the Scriptures present.

Organization of the Church

- The 4th century saw an increasing institutionalizing and intellectualizing of the church.
- The Trinitarian debates were marked by a large number of church councils, many of which were called for specific purposes and did not fit the regular pattern of councils that came to prevail.
- Synods of bishops had been meeting since the latter part of the 2nd century to deal with common problems or settle disputes.
- Before the 4th century the bishop of a city and his presbyters would have been together often, but with the growth of the church the bishop was expected to call together his clergy several times a year.
- During the 3rd century councils on a regional level became a common feature of organized church life.
- The Council of Nicaea required bishops of a province to come together twice a year under the presidency of the bishop of the metropolitan or mother church. Rome for Italy, Carthage for North Africa, Alexandria for Egypt, and Antioch for Syria.
- Nicaea was the first council to be recognized as ecumenical, representing the universal church.
- When councils dealt with matters of faith, their statements were known as "symbols" or "dogmas." Decisions in regard to organizational, disciplinary, or procedural matters were known as "canons."

- The 4th century saw greater refinement in the differentiation of clergy beyond the three-fold ministry of the 2nd century.
- The bishop became more of an administrator and the local pastoral care and liturgical leadership passed to the presbyters.
- Rural areas near a city were served by a presbyter, a deacon, or a “rural bishop” – a functionary known mainly in the East in the 4th century, who was dependent on the city bishop and limited in his right to ordain.
- The ranking of bishops was determined by two factors: the mission methods of the early church, by which the gospel spread from cities on major trade routes to surrounding regions, and the meeting of synods for dealing with common problems.
- The influence of Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine made celibacy virtually obligatory in the West on all clerics in major orders. Increasingly in the 4th and 5th centuries bishops were chosen from among the monks, in both East and West.
- The privileges granted by the state from the 4th century on tended to make the clergy even more a class apart, a feature enhanced by drawing bishops from the higher social classes.
- From the 4th and 5th centuries the clergy began to wear special clothes, at first in the liturgy only.
- Celibacy and distinctive attire were part of an increasing “monasticizing” of the clergy, at least in ideal.

¹ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 196-197

²The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 212

³ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 213

⁴ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 215

⁵ <https://thepocketscroll.wordpress.com/classic-christian-texts/the-constantinopolitan-creed-of-ad-381/>