

Lesson 10  
The Early Church To  
Early Reformation

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# Class Schedule

- **The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)**
- 1. Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church
- 2. The Church in Jerusalem and the Mission to the Gentiles
- 3. 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Conflicts with the State
- 4. Early Apologists
- 5. Defining the Faith
- 6. Christian Life

# Class Outline

- **The Imperial Church (313 to 476 A.D.)**
- 7. The End of Persecution and Beginnings of the Imperial Church
- 8. The New Order
- 9. Reactions to the New Order
- 10. **The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea**

# The Arian Controversy & the Council of Nicea

## Lesson 10

“And (we believe) in the one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the father as the only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the father.”

– Creed of Nicea

# Introduction

- Early controversies (cir. 40 – 325):
  - Relationship of Jewish & Gentile converts
  - Gnostic speculations
  - Marcion heresy
  - Restoration of the lapsed
- With Constantine, some church leaders decided imperial authority could settle controversies.
- Driven by the desire for unity within the Empire & betting on Christianity to be the cement; the state soon began to use its power to force theological agreement upon Christians.

# Background of the Arian Controversy

- The roots of this controversy began long before Constantine.
- The earliest Christians were considered to be ignorant atheists, for they had no visible god.
- The best pagan philosophers had taught that above the entire cosmos there was a supreme being, some even declared pagan gods were human creations.

# Background of the Arian Controversy

- Some learned Christians appealed to the authority of those whom antiquity considered wise.
- These Christians argued that they believed in the supreme being of the philosophers.
- They had some positive results from this argument, but it was also dangerous.
- Since those philosophers conceived of perfection as immutable, impassable, and fixed, many Christians came to the conclusion that such was the God of Scripture.

# Background of the Arian Controversy

- Two means were found to bring together what the Bible says about God & the classical notion of the supreme being.
- 1. Allegorical (figurative) interpretation of Scriptural passages
- Whenever Scripture says something “unworthy” of God – that is not worthy of the perfection of the supreme being of the philosophers – such words were not taken literally. (i.e. God walking in the garden, or speaking to Adam & Eve)
- This many have intellectually satisfied some minds, but emotionally left much to be desired.
- The whole life of the church was based on the faith that it was possible to have a direct relationship with a personal God, and that the supreme being of the philosopher was in no way personal.



# Background of the Arian Controversy

- 2. The doctrine of Logos (developed by Justin, Clement & others)
- According to this view, although it was true that the supreme being – the Father – is immutable, impassible, & so on, there is also a Logos, Word, or Reason of God, & this is personal, capable of direct relationships with the world & with humans.
- I.e. When God spoke to Moses, what it means is the Logos of God spoke with Moses.
- This view became widespread in the Eastern wing of the church (the wing that spoke Greek rather than Latin)

# The Arian Controversy

- The controversy began in Alexandria, when Lucinius was still ruling the East.
- The bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, clashed over several issues with Arius, the most prestigious & popular presbyter of the city.
- The primary issue at stake was whether the Logos, the Word of God, was coeternal with God.
- Alexander held that the Word existed eternally with the Father; Arius argued that the Word was not coeternal with the Father.

# Arias' View

- Arius claimed that, strictly speaking, the Word was not God, but the first of all creatures.
- It is important to understand that Arius did not deny that the Word existed before the incarnation. On the preexistence of the Word, all were in agreement.
- What Arius said was that, before anything else was made, the Word had been created by God.
- Arius argued that what Alexander proposed was a denial of Christian monotheism, for now there were two Gods.

# Alexander's View

- Alexander argued that the Word was divine, & therefore could not be created, but rather was coeternal with the Father.
- Alexander argued that Arius' position denied the divinity of the Word, & therefore also the divinity of Jesus. From its beginning the church worshiped Jesus Christ, & Arius' proposal would now force it either to cease such worship, or to declare that it was worshiping a creature.

# The Arian Controversy

- These were the issues debated in the course of the controversy, quite possibly at the heart of the matter was also the question of how it is that Christ saves.
- For Alexander, Christ has achieved our salvation because in Him God has entered human history & opened the way of our return to God. Alexander felt that Christ's role as Savior was imperiled by Arius' view.
- For Arius Jesus had opened the way for salvation by His obedience to God, & such obedience would be meaningless if He Himself was divine, and not a creature.

# The Reaction of the State

- Alexander as bishop, condemned Arius' teaching & removed him from all posts in the church of Alexandria.
- Arius appealed to both the people of Alexandria & to prominent bishops throughout the Eastern portion of the Empire.
- This local disagreement threatened to divide the entire Eastern church.
- Constantine sent arbitrators to the parties, but found the divide intractable.
- Constantine decided to call a great assembly of bishops to his palace in Nicea, within easy reach of Constantinople, to resolve the controversy.

# The Council of Nicea

- In 325 bishops gathered in Nicea for what is known as the 1<sup>st</sup> universal council of church leadership.
- About 250 to 300 attended, heavily weighted to the eastern bishops, though there were some from the west. Constantine paid their travel expenses.
- Several who attended the great assembly had recently been imprisoned, tortured, or exiled. Some bore the physical marks for their faithfulness.
- For the 1<sup>st</sup> time in history these Christians saw the universality of the church.

# The Work of the Council

- The bishops resolved many legislative matters that had to be resolved with the end of persecution.
- The bishops approved standard procedures for the readmission of the lapsed, & for the election & ordination of presbyters & bishops.
- But the most difficult issue was the Arian controversy.



# The Arian Controversy

- The bishops of the eastern churches quickly chose sides.
- The western bishops had only a secondary interest in the debate, which appeared to them as a controversy among eastern churches. For them it was sufficient to declare that in God there were “three persons and one substance.”
- After heated debate, it was decided to agree on a creed that would express the faith of the church in such a way that Arianism was clearly excluded.

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 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 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 for that which is not, or that the Son of God is a different substance or essence, or that He is created, or mutable, these *the Catholic church anathematizes (denounces)*.

# Nicaean Creed

- It is obvious their main concern was to reject any notion that the Son or Word – Logos – was a creature, or a being less divine than the Father.
- It also denounced anyone who stated otherwise

# The Reaction

- Very few refused to sign the creed.
- The assembly declared those who did not heretical, & deposed them.
- Constantine added his own sentence to that of the bishops. He banished the deposed bishops from their cities. He probably intended to avoid further unrest.
- This addition of a civil sentence to an ecclesiastical one had serious consequences, for it established a precedent for the intervention of secular authority on behalf of what we considered orthodox doctrine.
- In the end the controversy continued, with both parties being banned and unbanned by political intrigue between the bishops and the successors of Constantine.

# The End of the Constantine Era

“The world goes to ruin. Yes! But in spite of it, and to our shame, our sins still live & even prosper. The great city, the capital of Rome, has been devoured by a great fire, & all over the earth Romans wander in exile. Churches which once were revered are now but dust & ashes.”

- Jerome

# The End of the Constantine Era

- For centuries the Legions had been able to hold back the Germanic peoples at the Rhine & the Danube.
- In 378 the Goths reached the walls of Constantinople. They then turned west where the Empire was more vulnerable. The Western Empire was falling apart.
- In 410 Rome was sacked by the Goths.
- The last western Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed in 476. His short reign was just over one year.
- When the floodgates opened a series of endless waves crossed the frontier and sacked towns & cities. They finally settled in areas that once was the Empire of Rome.

# The End of the Constantine Era

- The imperial church, continued existing for another 1,000 yr. in the Byzantine Empire.
- It would be centuries before western Europe experienced the political unity & relative peace that it had know under Roman rule.
- It would take centuries to rebuild what was destroyed in terms of infrastructure, art, literature & the knowledge of the physical world.
- **In many ways the western church filled the demise left behind.**
- The church provided continuity with the past.
- **The church became the guardian of civilization & of order.**
- Centuries later, when the empire was resurrected in the west, this was accomplished through the actions of the church.
- It was the Pope who crowned its first Emperor.

# The End of the Constantine Era

- The Latin speaking church became increasingly powerful as it filled the vacuum left by a crumbling empire.
- The Byzantine Empire would zealously guard its prerogative over the church for another millennium.



CONCILIUM  
NICAENVM-I



# Bonus Notes

The Late Constantine Era (361 – 476)  
and  
Christianity Beyond the Empire's Borders

# The Late Constantine Era (361 – 476) & Christianity Beyond the Empire's Borders

## Bonus Notes

“God ordered all things to be produced so that there would be common food for all, and so that the earth would be the common inheritance of all. Thus, nature has produced a common right, but greed has made it the right of a few.”

- Ambrose of Milan

# Important Events of the Late Constantine Era

- 361 – Emperor Julian the Apostate – attempted to restore paganism, & impede the progress of Christianity through various laws, but without physical persecution of the faithful. His actions were unpopular with the masses.
- 381 – the 2<sup>nd</sup> universal council of bishops in Constantinople reaffirmed the doctrine of Nicea regarding the divinity of the Son. Added the same thoughts about the Holy Spirit. It was this council that definitively proclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity. The Latin West & the Greek East came to agree on a common formula: “one essence in three persons.”
- 405 - Jerome translates the Hebrew Bible directly into Latin – “Vulgate.” Previous Latin Bibles were translated from the Septuagint (Hebrew to Greek). The Vulgate became the standard Bible of the Latin speaking church.

# Beyond the Empire

- While Christianity was developing in the Roman Empire it was also taking root in the lands beyond the reach of Roman rule.
- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century on the **eastern edge of the Roman Empire & beyond** Syriac (akin to Aramaic) was the language most commonly used for trade & international communication. It was **during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century that both the OT & NT appeared in the Syriac language.**
- From a very early date Christianity spread eastward along the Syriac trade routes.
- Long before Rome accepted Christianity **the city of Edessa (in eastern Turkey)**, ruled by Abgarus IX (**179 - 216**), appears to have become the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian State.
- The next State to embrace Christianity was **Armenia (cir. 303)**. These rulers became Christians before Constantine, and had the **Bible translated into Armenian.**
- **Ethiopian Church** originated from Egypt during the **4<sup>th</sup> century.**

# Beyond the Empire

- Christianity had crossed the border into **Mesopotamia & Persia** at an early date. Probable taken there by Syriac speaking merchants & other travelers.
- **The earliest church building** that archeologist have found was built in Dura-Eurpos, in **modern day Syria**, & dates from the **3<sup>rd</sup> century**.
- **Arabia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century** had teachers, bishops & other travelers visiting from Alexandria.
- Arabia became a point of conflict among 3 different versions of Christianity (Roman, Persian & Ethiopian). By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this was the confusing picture of Christianity that Muhammad came to know.

# Beyond the Empire

- It is difficult to ascertain exactly when Christianity arrived in **India**, because in some ancient texts Arabia is referred to as India. Documents clearly show that Christianity was firmly planted in India by the **5<sup>th</sup> Century**.
- In the west the most notable expansion of Christianity was in **Ireland**. Christianity had gained a strong foothold there before the downfall of the Western Roman Empire (**cir. 350 to 400**).
- Missionaries spread the gospel among the Goths, **Germanic tribes**, to the north of Constantinople while Constantine was still Emperor (**324 – 337**).
- One Christian, Ulfila (Little Wolf), himself ½ Goth, developed an alphabet for the language of the Goths, and translated the Bible into it.
- By the time the Western Roman Empire came to an end there was already Christians as far east as India, as far south as Ethiopia, and as far north as Ireland. These churches, though often forgotten today, would continue to play an important role in the history of Christianity.