



Who's Who in Church History

Lesson Three

Athanasius and the Council of Nicea— When Politics Meets Religion

The Church of the Fathers: The Basic Plot

Between the years AD 100 and AD 500 the Christian church changed almost beyond recognition. In AD 100 the church was a small minority, spasmodically persecuted. While the Gospels and epistles were in circulation, they had not yet been gathered together to form a 'New Testament'. While there were brief affirmations of faith like 'Jesus is Lord' there was no formula creed to be recited. The organization of the church was still fluid and varied from region to region, as in New Testament times. Finally, there were no set forms of worship, although particular prayers, like the Lord's Prayer, might be used.

By the year 500 a very different picture had emerged. The great majority of people within the Roman Empire called themselves Christians and Christianity had become the official religion of the state. There were also substantial churches outside the bounds of the empire, as in Ethiopia or in India. The Scriptures consisted of an Old and a New Testament—the later being identical to ours today, with a few lingering local variations. There were two major creeds, which were widely used. There was also a clear understanding of 'orthodoxy' opposed to heresy, especially regarding the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. The ministry of the church everywhere took the threefold form of bishops, presbyters and deacons, through lesser regional differences remained. The worship of the church was entirely liturgical, with fixed set forms of prayer.

Lane, *The Christian Faith*, p.10

"Two Things You Never Let Them See How You Make Them: Hot Dogs and Creeds."

c. 319 Arius in a dispute with Bishop Alexander of Alexandria states "If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not."

This means that as high as the Son is, he is infinitely lower than the Father. "It was a very simple heresy. All Arius said was that if the Father begat the Son, then the Son must have had a birth, and therefore there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. He had come into existence according to the will of the heavenly Father, though Christ as no more than a mere mediator between man and God."

Robert Payne, *Christian History Magazine*, p. 12



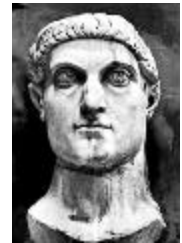
This appealed to Arius' Greek education, which saw God as unique and unknowable, and to those who wanted to see Jesus as a sort of "spiritual super-hero" but not actually God.

321 After a series of personal interviews with Arius and letter from the clergy of Alexandria asking Arius to recant, Bishop Alexander issues an encyclical declaring the teachings of Arius to be anathema. Arius eventually withdraws to Nicomedia (in Asia Minor) where he is protected by the bishop there and continues to write against Alexander.



At this point Athanasius is still a deacon in Alexander's household, but is doing the lion's share of the writing on behalf of Alexander. In the meantime the debate intensifies and begins to turn very nasty. Arius' position also continues to grow in popularity throughout the empire.

324 When Emperor Constantine (who rules both Eastern and Western empires and has largest Roman empire since Octavian did during time of Christ) hears of debate and its potentially damaging consequences to church unity he sends out a strongly worded letter to settle the quarrel. Hosius (Bishop of Cordova) carries the letter to both parties, those supporting Arius near Nicomedia and those who have been influenced by Athanasius and Bishop Alexander near Alexandria, but by this time the quarrel is an all out war.



The letter itself is very interesting:

- *It is hot-tempered, querulous, commanding; it makes clear that the Emperor doesn't know or understand what the quarrel is about theologically he just wants it solved.*

- *Concludes despairingly, "Seeing that our great and gracious God, the preserver of all, has given us the common light of his grace, I entreat you that my endeavors may be brought to a prosperous end, and my people be persuaded to embrace peace and concord. Suffer me to spend my days and nights in quiet, and may I have light and cheerfulness instead of tears and groans."*



The letter, however, fails and Hosius returns a defeated man.

Things are as bad as ever. One contemporary historian noted, "In former times, the church was attacked by enemies and strangers from without. Today those who are natives of the same country, who dwell under one roof and sit down at table together, fight with their tongues as if with spears."

Early June 325 In light of his inability to settle the dispute by decree, Constantine decides to call a council (the first of the "ecumenical councils") to get everyone in one room and hash it out. He summons 1800 bishops to meet him in Nicea in June of 325.

Due to the usual war, weather etc. only about 220-400 of the bishops can actually show up (sources vary on the number). It is a motley collection of east and west including those who remained humble farmers while caring for God's flock, some who had been previously maimed under previous persecutions, learned scholars, cantankerous old men and those who were revered with such high regard for their piety that some expected to see miracles performed. At least two bishops were from beyond the Roman Empire.

There is a central throne in the room on which a copy of the Gospels is placed and then off to one end is another smaller throne for Constantine. The bishops are all gathered for the opening of the council and finally the emperor in all of his splendor shows up.

Constantine is graceful, youthful and powerful at age 51. His hair is long, but his beard trimmed short. He is exceptionally tall, well muscled and carries himself with imperial dignity. He enters the room with all eyes upon him and slowly strides to his seat. Near him are his ecclesiastical advisor, Hosius, and the Bishop of Alexandria, Alexander who had touched off this raging controversy a few years earlier. There is a welcome, a chanted hymn and then Constantine addresses the gathered bishops.

"It is my desire that you should meet together in a general council, and so I offer to the Kin of All my gratitude for this mercy that has come to me above my other mercies—I mean that there has been granted to me the benefit of seeing you assembled together and to know you are resolved to be in common harmony together."

"When I gained my victories over my enemies, I thought nothing remained for me but to give thanks unto God and to rejoice with those who have been delivered by me. But when I learned, contrary to all expectations, that there were divisions among you, then I solemnly considered them, and praying that these discords might also be healed with my assistance, I summoned you here without delay. I rejoice to see you here, yet I should be more pleased to see unity and affection among you. I entreat you, therefore, beloved ministers of God, to remove the causes of dissension among you and to establish peace."

After his speech, which contained veiled warnings that the dispute would be settled "or else", Constantine burns all of the special entreaties and letters he received advocating the various viewpoints represented that had been sent to him beforehand.

With the conference now open, wild and hostile debate immediately breaks out. "It was like a battles in the dark," one historian noted. When order is restored, Arius who had been invited to present his views is summoned.

Arius begins to explain his position and then at one point bursts out into a long, sustained chant, having set his beliefs to music. Arius, who understood what would make something accessible to lay people (such as the emperor), uses masterful public relations skills to make his point:

*The uncreated God has made the Son
A beginning of things created,
And by adoption has God made the Son
Into an advancement of himself.
Yet the Son's substance is*

*Removed from the substance of the Father:
The Son is not equal to the Father,
Nor does he share the same substance.
God is the all-wise Father,
And the Son is the teacher of his mysteries.
The members of the Holy Trinity
Share unequal glories.*

The anti-Arian bishops are so dismayed they shut their eyes and put their hands over their ears. The method of Arius' response makes no sense to them. But every time they attack his position or state with exquisite logic their own position, Arius repulses their attack by simply chanting one of his little ditties. It is as if the two sides come from different worlds.

With no meaningful progress taking place, finally Hosius (probably; it may have been Athanasius, but more likely Hosius) hits on a stroke of genius: a creed!

("Let's make a creed. That will solve things. There is some poetry, some theology, some fixed terms and room for interpretation. A creed that we can all sign our names to is just the thing.")

A delegation of 18 bishops, who were all Arians, volunteers to write the first draft. Although couched in scriptural language, the creed is so Arianly offensive that bedlam again breaks loose as soon as it is read.



The elderly Bishop of Caesera, Eusebius, suggests that as a working text they should instead use a simple creed he had been taught as a child.

It wasn't a perfect expression of faith (what human work of theology could be he asks) but it was simple, beautiful and would give them some place to start.

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible
and invisible,
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light
from Light, Life from Life, the only begotten Son, The Firstborn of
every Creature, begotten of the Father before all worlds, through
whom also all things were made.
Who for our salvation was made flesh and lived among men, and
suffered and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the Father,
and shall come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead.
And in the one Holy Ghost.
Believing each of them to be and to have existed, the Father, only the
Father, and the Son, only the Son, and the Holy Ghost, only the Holy
Ghost...*

At this point the emperor steps in and says this creed sounds good to him, and the Arians seeing nothing in it that would have specifically destroyed their views agree to use it as a rough draft.

This time the rewrites were mostly done by Bishop Alexander's party (i.e. Athanasius) in consultation with the emperor's ecclesiastical advisor Hosius.

Constantine, having come to reject Arian view, which he had previously been warm on, suggests that Christ be defined as *homoousios* (of the same essence, or being) with the Father.

June 19, 325 On June 19th, the new creed was unveiled by Hosius, and read:

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, begotten of the Father, that is from the substance of the Father. He is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father. By him all things were made, things in heaven and on earth. For us men and for our salvation he came down, was made flesh and became man. He suffered, rose again on the third day and ascended into the heavens. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But the holy catholic and apostolic church anathematizes [curses] those who say: 'There was once when he was not' and 'He was not, before he was begotten' and 'He was made out of nothing' and those who assert that he is from some being or substance other than the Father or that he is mutable or liable to change.

Tony Lane offers the following helpful observations about the creed's language:

At this stage there was a basic pattern for creeds in the Eastern Church, though the precise wording varied from church to church. The Creed of Nicea seems to be one of these creeds, with a number of anti-Arian phrases added:

- *Arius interpreted the traditional phrase 'begotten of the Father' to mean that Jesus Christ was created by the Father out of nothing. Nicea excludes this interpretation by the explanatory clause 'that is, from the substance of the Father'.*
- *Arius held, with Origen, that only the Father is 'true God'. Nicea responds by calling Jesus Christ 'true God from true God'.*
- *Jesus Christ is 'begotten, not made'—he is the Son of God, not a creature. The distinction between a child or offspring (from the being of the Father) and a creature (made out of nothing) is at the heart of the controversy. It may be compared to the distinction between having a child of one's own and making a robot.*
- *Jesus Christ is 'of one substance with the Father'. The Greek word *homoousios* (of one substance) was the most controversial word in the creed. There were qualms about the use of a non-scriptural term, but it was necessary because the Arians could twist all scriptural phrases. For example, Jesus is 'begotten' by God—but so are the dewdrops (Job 38:28)! The word *homoousios* had the added advantage that the Arians had already declared it to be unacceptable. The non-scriptural term was used to safeguard the scriptural truth of the deity of Christ.*
- *At the end of the creed a number of Arian statements are anathematized or condemned. These amount chiefly to the Arian claim that the Son had a beginning and was created out of nothing.*

Lane, *The Christian Faith*, p.28-29

The creed in this form is a bit tortured. It is brusque and blunt. It has very little poetry or nobility. A number of phrases have been left out from the original creed suggested by Eusebius ("the Word of God," the Firstborn of every creature," "begotten of the father before all worlds"). All of these things indicate that the creed was intended to be a clear, uncompromising rejection of Arian beliefs, with no room for alternative interpretations. It would not be until the later reworking of the creed at Constantinople in 381 that it would take the form that we are familiar with today.

July 25, 325 A final closing banquet is held for the bishops by Constantine.



He joked and mingled with them; final speeches were made, prayers offered, hymns sung. In a gesture of respect and affect Constantine even gently touched several of the bishops who had been maimed in previous persecutions of the church by Roman imperial power. He then dismissed them, but as they left they went out through a line of imperial bodyguards with their swords bared. The message was clear—the council is over and so is the dispute.

If only wishing made it so (even for an emperor).

325-381 The orthodox victory was not a clean or complete one. Over the next decades different emperors were more open to Arius' teaching and local disagreements, which were often very bitter, still remained.

54 years later Gregory Nazianzus was summoned to Constantinople only to find that there was but a single small congregation in the great city that had not embraced Arian doctrine. Athanasius himself was exiled on seven different occasions over the next decades.

It was not until Theodosius became emperor (381) and formally called another council in Constantinople that Nicene theology finally prevailed.

And We Should Care About This Why?

The fourth-century debate about the person of Jesus Christ can seem remote to us today, especially because of the unfamiliar terms used. [The technical language that was debated was whether Christ was homo-*ousios* (i.e. of the *same* substance as the Father) or homoi-*ousios* (i.e. of a *like* substance to the Father).] At times it can appear like an obscure philosophical argument. But the point at issue is fundamental and central to the Christian faith. Is Jesus Christ merely a (super-) creature sent by God, or is he the revelation of God himself? Does 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only son' (John 3:16) in fact only mean that he sent one of his creatures? The deity of Jesus Christ is the foundation of all true Christian faith. Without it, there is no true revelation of God in Jesus. Without it, the Christian doctrine of salvation is undermined. Arius raised one of the most important issues in the history of theology and the early Fathers were right to state the deity of Jesus Christ clearly in opposition to him.

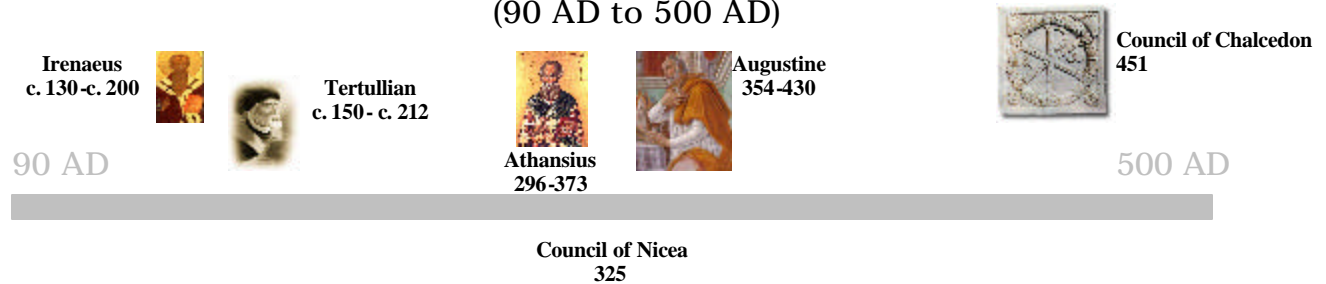
Lane, *The Christian Faith*, p.29-30

“And Now, Hailing from Greater Cappadocia, Starting at Power Bishop It’s...”

There are several large movements within church history that will help us keep our bearings.

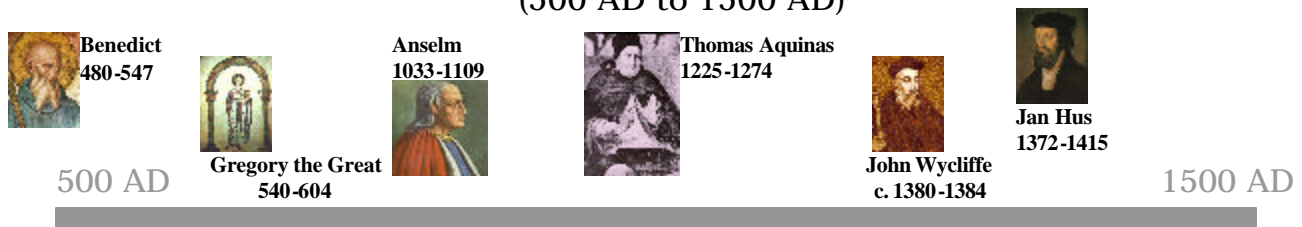
The Church of the Fathers

(90 AD to 500 AD)



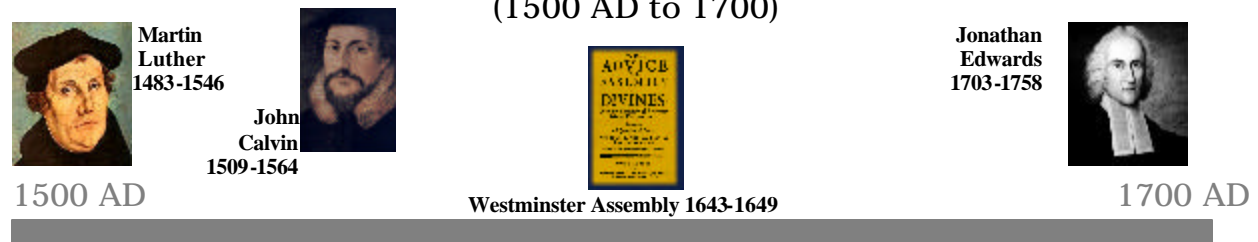
The Medieval Church*

(500 AD to 1500 AD)



Reformation and Reaction

(1500 AD to 1700)



* The “Medieval Church” for our purposes really refers to the church in Western Europe. In 1054 the tensions between church in the East (eastern Europe and the Middle East) and the church in the West came to a head prompting the “Great Schism.” Even though there remained a vibrant and growing church in the East, our tradition comes from these Western churches and so we focus on them.