

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 19

Constantine – Part Two The Council of Nicea

Jesus paused from his activities one day, turned to his disciples, and asked a simple question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” After hearing various responses, Jesus asked a more direct question, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Peter’s answer was a core gospel truth, “You are the Christ [Messiah], the son of the living God” (Mt 16:13-15).

Knowing Jesus as Christ is no small matter. The apostle John saved for us Jesus’ words that underscore the significance of this awareness in John 17. Jesus is about to be crucified. Before he is arrested, he spends time praying out loud, some of which John overhears and preserves for us. In this prayer, Jesus prays that God might be glorified as Jesus, the son, is glorified. Jesus adds, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Now, this may seem simple enough, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Accept it, believe it, and the case is closed! But Paul will remind the Ephesians, when explaining the work and role of Christ and calling them to account for some of their actions, “You, however, did not come to learn Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (Eph 4:20-21).

How have we learned of Christ? What does it mean that he is the Son of God? We may not figure there is much more to the question than our basic, core belief. Sometimes, our basic beliefs may get challenged. It might come at our homes. It might come at a movie theater!

The chances are decent that if you are home enough, one day there will come a knock at your door and when you open the door you will find a missionary or two from the Jehovah’s Witnesses. If you take the time to visit with them, then you will discover several doctrines they follow that are outside of “orthodox” Christianity.¹ One that greatly differs from the historical and orthodox faith concerns Jesus Christ.

¹ “Orthodoxy,” you will recall from earlier lessons, refers to the accepted fundamental beliefs of Christianity. Within Christendom, these are the beliefs that allow one to term themselves a part of the Christian faith. Those who are “orthodox” do not consider those outside “orthodoxy” to be part of the Christian faith.

On the Jehovah's Witnesses official web site,² it says of Jesus, "Christ is God's Son and is inferior to him." For references, it gives a number of passages of scripture, including John 14:28 which reads, "if you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I." Also referenced is Paul's letter 1 Corinthians where Paul states that, "the Head of Christ is God" (11:3). A later passage from Paul to the Corinthians is also referenced where Paul says, "When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (15:28). Is this right? Is God greater than Jesus? Does that mean Jesus is not "God"?

The same website adds that, "Christ was the first of God's creations." The Bible cites for that are Colossians 1:15 ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.") and Revelation 3:14 ("These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.") Is this right? Did God create Jesus?

Let's consider the movie theater. Currently playing in cinemas is a screen adaptation of Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*. In it, Brown writes that, "almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false." In his fictional work, Brown asserts that before the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), "Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless." The *Code* treats as fact, the idea that Christ's divinity, the decision on what collection of writings we should call scripture (the New Testament), and the determination that the scriptures would be deemed infallible all came about by a minor majority vote at a gathering at Nicea, a small town in what is today, Turkey.

If we read that book or watch that movie, we are challenged and questioned, who is Jesus really?

With that introduction, let's continue our study of Constantine and church history. For today, we look at the Council of Nicea. But unlike Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, we will look at the actual historical documents and evidence to understand what the council was *really* about and what *really* happened there!

BACKGROUND

Please remember (or read if you missed class!) last week's introduction to Constantine. We put into context the historical background of Constantine's position as leader/Emperor of the Roman Empire. Previously, the Empire had

² www.watchtower.org/library/jt/index.htm?article=article_03.htm

split into four areas with four different rulers. Constantine consolidated the Empire back into the control of one man, himself! Constantine was then in the difficult situation of trying to rule an empire of many provinces and many different cultures that stretched out over thousands of miles (with no working phones or mass transportation to alert him to problems quickly and to get quick solutions to those problems!). This was not an easy task!

Constantine did, however, have an ally that no previous Roman Emperor had – the Church. While the church had never openly rebelled and fostered discontent with prior emperors, it also had never been in league with the Roman government. In Constantine, however, the church not only had a tolerant emperor, but also one who credited the “Christian God” with his victorious battles that brought the throne under his feet.

As an ally, the church could really help Constantine keep his Empire together. Think about it. In the church was a group of non-rebellious people who gave full support to his reign. These people were spread out over the entire Empire, well over 10 percent of the population at this point in time. These people were already linked together in a structure that had presiding Bishops and leaders that were listened to and honored. These people possessed a good bit of wealth. They had a social conscience, were honorable and honest, and would readily die for something in which they believed.

These were people united unlike any others in the Empire, save perhaps Constantine’s own army. But as strong as the church was as an ally, there was a glaring issue that needed addressing. When you put them under a microscope, not all the churches had the same consistent beliefs. In fact, there were some issues that were labeled heresy and unorthodox that threatened the unity and fabric of the church as a united institution.

A main heresy of the day came from the teaching of Arius. Arius was a priest and deacon from Alexandria (see earlier lesson on certain peculiarities of early Alexandrian Christianity) who lived from around 250 to 336. “His learning, grave manners, and ascetical life gained him a large following.”³ Much of what we know about him comes from the writings of Athanasius, a man we will spend time on in a few weeks. We have only three of his letters still today along with fragments from a condensed version of his teaching called the *Thallia*.

From these materials, we can fully ascertain the teaching that got Arius in trouble with the church and threatened the unity of the 4th century church. Arius taught that Jesus was not fully God. Arius believed that Jesus Christ was less than God

³ New Catholic Encyclopedia, Second Edition (Vol. 1, p.685).

and was, in fact, created by God. Arius taught there was a time where Jesus did not exist. God created Jesus out of nothingness, just as God did the world itself. Using much the same verses as the Jehovah's Witnesses do (mentioned in the introduction above), Arius came to the same basic conclusions as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Arius was excommunicated by a meeting of church leaders in Egypt. The Egyptian church leaders explained that Christ was generated "eternally," not from nothing. In other words, Christ has always been. Arius fought back that such a doctrine makes for two Gods as opposed to one, but the church leaders in Egypt refuted Arius's position. Arius then went abroad with his teaching and garnered support from several areas in the Eastern end of the Empire. The East soon divided over these doctrinal issues.

To Constantine, this seemed a foolish controversy that was certainly not worth dividing the church over! In fact, Constantine sent a letter to both sides urging them to quit fighting over a "trifling and foolish verbal difference."⁴ The letter resolved nothing!

Constantine was not the kind of man to leave this alone. Constantine decided to play mediator! Constantine called together all the Bishops of the church from all over the Empire for a meeting to hash this issue out once and for all. Constantine called the meeting for the city of Nicea⁵ in May, 325.

Constantine paid for all the Bishops to attend and provided for them at the two month long meeting. Athanasius, one of the attendees, wrote that 318 Bishops were present (Interestingly, several Bishops came from *outside* the Roman Empire!). Constantine held the sessions both in the principle church and the Imperial Hall itself.

Constantine opened the Council dressed in full, regal dress. He wore gold and precious gems. He entered with all the Bishops standing and took his seat in a chair of gold. He made it apparent that he sat as a Bishop to the Bishops! Once he sat, the other Bishops took their seats.

⁴ Constantine had an official church "advisor," a Spaniard named Hosius from Cordoba. Constantine sent Hosius with this letter to put the controversy to rest. Hosius found out that the issues were no longer as simple as whether Jesus was created out of nothingness or was something more directly God. Also involved, at this point, were personalities and political issues within the church as well.

⁵ Nicea was a town in modern Turkey outside Constantinople.

We are remiss if we do not pause to reflect on the incredible changes that were wrought in the 20 years preceding this. Just 20 years before, these very Bishops had their lives on the line with the Roman Empire seeking their death or at least the renunciation of their faith. Yet in these two short decades, they went from the countries “most wanted list” to the very imperial chambers where the Emperor himself was mediating their disputes!

Constantine addressed the Bishops in Latin, explaining his goal of re-establishing religious peace. Constantine urged the Bishops to stop quarrelling over personal issues and things of minor import.

Over several months, with protracted discussions, and at times even temper tantrums, the council worked through the issues of Arius’s doctrine on Christ (termed, appropriately enough, “Arianism”). Arius himself was not a Bishop and was therefore not a proper attendee of the Council. He was frequently brought in for discussion points, however, and his views were also well represented by at least 28 Bishops who declared themselves “Arians.”

After several months of debate, the Council adopted a position paper on Arianism as well as a few other incidentals dealt with at the Council.⁶ The position, termed the “Nicene Creed” stated:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of the same substance⁷ with the Father, through whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and our salvation descended, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven and cometh to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit. Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was made out of nothing; or who maintain that He is of another

⁶ Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* blows its history here. The Council never adopted what books were to be considered scripture. Most churches addressed the issue of canon over one hundred years earlier. While some churches were still uncertain of the authorship of certain books (especially Hebrews and Revelation), Christendom readily accepted the bulk of the New Testament for quite a long time. This was not a subject for the Council.

⁷ The Greek word here is “*homoousion*” (*ομοουσιων*). It is a composite of two Greek words, *homo* (“one”) and *ousion* (“substance”). This word becomes a center of controversy later on. It is one mere letter different from *homoiousion* which would mean “of like substance” rather than same substance. The exclusion of the “i” made all the difference in the world to the controversy!

hypostasis or another substance, or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, the Catholic Church anathematizes.⁸

This Creed was an effort to put an end to the teachings of Arius concerning Christ. They were officially condemned as heresy for the church and were accursed as such. This decision was signed off on as agreed to by all but two of the Bishops.⁹

Contrary to what Dan Brown alleges in his *Da Vinci Code*, this was not a new and novel attempt to change what real Christians believed and taught. This was the orthodoxy that was the church before the Council. It was always being explored in meaning, as it was at the Council itself, but it was the core teaching that had Arius excommunicated from the Egyptian churches almost ten years earlier.

If we go back in the preceding century to what the Carthaginian leader, Tertullian, wrote of Christ,

All [Father, Son and Holy Spirit] are of One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is to be guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power.¹⁰

The issues were also never as simple as a two-sided coin: choose Arius or choose orthodoxy. In fact, there were many facets of the issue that complicated matters. Some taught that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father were all the same person, merely in different manifestations. This heresy was one that would also be addressed through the Councils and church debates of the period.

After the Council, not all who were sympathetic to some version of Arianism were fully won over, even though they may have signed the Creed. Over the next years and decades, this issue would get more and more debate, ultimately resulting in some rewrites to the Nicene Creed itself.

⁸ Read that “accursed and excommunicated.”

⁹ Those two Bishops that refused to sign were very influential. This controversy was far from over!

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2.

Before we leave the Council of Nicea, it is useful to note it as a first in the history of the Church...or maybe not! The church had previously convened “synods” or meetings of groups of leaders to decide issues. Those meetings, however, were never of basically the entire leadership of the church. Nothing on the scale of Nicea had ever occurred. Unless we go back to the infancy of the church!¹¹

Ultimately, the Nicene Council produced not only the Creed set out above, but also used the time to settle several other controversies as well. These were set out in 20 “canons” or “rules” that accompanied the Creed. The 20 Canons covered issues of Castration and the priesthood, which Bishoprics were over others, military service and the Christian, necessary examinations of the clergy, the inappropriateness of charging usurious interest rates, and other incidentals.

We would best take a moment to weigh the issues of the Son of God with what scripture teaches. Are the Jehovah Witnesses right? Did God create Jesus and is Jesus a lesser being?

Let us look both at the scriptures Arians used (past and present!) as well as a few scriptures the Arians would rather forget!

JOHN 14:28

With its context, this passage reads:

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. DO not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. You heard me say, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe.

¹¹ There was a time when the big issue for the church was whether one had to first become a Jew in order to become a Christian. In other words, must circumcision precede a Christian conversion? The response of the church was to convene a council in Jerusalem of the Apostles and elders (the church leaders of the day) to discuss and resolve this question. We read of this true “first” church Council in Acts 15! Luke reports, “The apostles and elders met” with Paul and Barnabas “to consider this.” Luke adds that “after much discussion” the church put together a letter on the issue, which was then sent out as the resolution.

Now, does Jesus say here, “The Father is greater than I?” Certainly he does. But the Arian/Jehovah’s Witness¹² position on this verse underscores the necessity of taking the Bible in context rather than isolating certain verses to make a theological point.

Jesus is referring here to his incarnate state – Jesus Christ as the incarnated man. Jesus is **NOT** speaking of his essential being as God. While Jesus was incarnate, he was fully God, but not the same as in his pre-incarnate state.

This is the significance of a verse the Arians/Jehovah’s Witnesses never seem to spend much time on: Philippians 2:5-11! There, Paul explains the emptying of Christ:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phl. 2:5-11).

Paul writes of Jesus as God in his very nature. Jesus then “emptied himself” (New American Standard), or as the N.I.V. puts it, “made himself nothing.” In this emptied state, there was a difference, a certain subordination. This is Jesus’ reference to the Father being “greater.” The Father was still in fullness and in very nature God without the emptying that Christ took on in the incarnation. It was to this glory that Christ returned; SO, that every knee in heaven and earth should bow to God!

Now here, we might ask our Arian/Jehovah’s Witness neighbors, does the knee of Father God bow to Christ? Of course not! Yet, Paul says **every** knee in heaven. So, this passage only makes sense if Christ is God in substance. Certainly, every knee would then mean every knee but God’s!

¹² While I use the phrase “Arian/Jehovah’s Witnesses” repeatedly in this section, it is not to say that Jehovah’s Witness are an accurate reflection of the teachings of Arius in the 4th century. There are significant differences. Jehovah’s Witnesses have multiple heresies that exceed that of the divinity of Christ when compared to orthodox Christianity. I merely use the phrase here out of convenience because on the issue of the divinity of Christ. Both groups use the same basic passages of scripture.

This is especially true when you consider that Paul borrowed words here from the prophet Isaiah 45:23. That passage is Father God Almighty speaking saying, “By myself I swear, uttering my just decree and my unalterable word: To me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear...” Paul is clearly putting Jesus in the position of being fully God.

This brings us to the writings of Paul used by Arians/Jehovah’s Witnesses.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:3

Here, we have Paul explaining the propriety in worship of women and men praying with heads covered or uncovered. In the process, Paul asserts that the “head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”

Paul is certainly not thinking of the eternal generation of Christ from God in the sense that God made Christ. In the parallel sense, Paul would be meaning that man made woman! Paul is speaking in a sense of sourcing of the incarnational work of Christ. In that sense, man is the source of woman, Eve coming from the essence of Adam (or at least rib!). God is the essence of the incarnational Jesus Christ. Jesus was not just man, the child of Mary. He was also God, the incarnate Word.

A similar mistake is often made looking at John 3:16 where Jesus refers to himself as the “only begotten Son.” We think of this term in an English sense of generating offspring (begetting) a child. That is **not** what the term means in the Greek! The word used is *monogenes* (μονογενης). It means “one and only” or “unique.” It is the same word used in John 1:14 (“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the **one and only** Son....”).

Interestingly, the Arians of the 4th century were Greek speakers. They surely knew the meaning of the Greek word! A review of the writings of the day shows such! The Arians did not use these passages from John (3:16 or 1:14) to support their position that Christ was created. In fact, the passages were used against the Arians!

When Alexander and the churches in Egypt excommunicated Arius, Alexander sent out a letter setting forth the excommunication and its reasons. In the letter (Chapter 3), we read Alexander using this John language against Arius! Alexander wrote,

Now when Arius and his fellows made these assertions, and shamelessly avowed them, we being assembled with the Bishops of Egypt and Libya...anathematized both them and their followers...For who ever heard such assertions before? Or whom that hears them now is not astonished and does not stop his ears lest they should be defiled with such language? Who that has heard the words of John, "In the beginning was the Word," will not denounce the saying of these men, that "there was a time when He was not?" Or whom that has heard in the Gospel, "the Only-begotten [one and only] Son," and "by Him were all things made," will not detest their declaration that He is "one of the things that were made." For how can He be one of those things that were made by Himself? Or how can He be the Only begotten [one and only], when, according to them, He is counted as one among the rest, since He is Himself a creature and a work?

1 CORINTHIANS 15:28

In this passage, Paul states that "When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all."

As in the other passage, Paul is speaking of the work of the Son, Jesus Christ, not the essence of his being. The work or function of God the Son is a subordinate work to that of the Father, but the essence of both is still fully God. Hence, we see Paul adding that in Christ's subordinate work being fulfilled, we will see God as all in all.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Church History is relevant today! In fact, Dan Brown should attend! He would learn, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow!" (Heb. 13:8).
2. Just because we cannot know God fully, does not mean we cannot understand him truly.
3. In Jesus, God emptied Himself that we might be saved! (Phil. 2:5-11). This is not only salvation good news, but also an example of humility for us to model! ("If anyone serves me, he must follow me. Where I am, there my servant also will be." Lk 12:26). How many of us seek to become more in the eyes of others, when we should be happily seeking to serve others!