

## **Lecture 12-As it Was in the Beginning: The Council of Nicea**

*The once bitter battle over professionalism [in the Olympic Games] now seems as archaic and irrelevant as the Christian church's once virulent debate over the Arian heresy.*  
*Sports Illustrated*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*  
*John 1:1*

### **Assigned Reading**

*The Story of Christianity*—chapters 17 & 19

### **Key Terms**

Arius, Arianism, Athanasius, subordinationism, modalism

### **Objectives**

- Recognize the importance of the Council of Nicea, even for today
- Sketch the life of Athanasius and discuss his importance in the debate of Christology
- Distinguish between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*

### **Class Prayer**

*“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
World without end. Amen.”*  
*The “Gloria Patri”*

## **As it Was in the Beginning: The Council of Nicea**

### **I. The Deity of Christ**

#### **A. The belief of the earliest Christians**

“The deity of Christ is professed in the oldest surviving Christian sermon, in the oldest surviving report of the death of a Christian martyr, in the oldest pagan report of a church service, and in the oldest surviving liturgical prayer.”

J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* 1:194

#### **B. The attempt to understand the faith**

1. Subordinationism

2. Monarchianism (modalism)

3. Tertullian's formula: God is one substance existing in three persons (trinity)

### **II. The Challenge of Arianism**

#### **A. Arius (250-336)**

#### **B. Christ was “a third thing” and “there was [a time] when he was not”**

An Arian song: “Arius of Alexandria, I'm the talk of all the town, friend of saints, elect of heaven, filled with learning and renown; If you want the Logos-doctrine, I can serve it steaming hot: God begat him and before he was begotten he was not.”

#### **C. “An incarnation of what is not God in what is not man” (J. C. Wand)**

### **III. The Council of Nicea (325)**

#### **A. The Council**

“‘Nothing could be more mistaken,’ says Professor Sabatier in one of his lapses into sound reason, ‘than to represent the fathers of the councils...as theorists, or even as professional theologians, brought together in conference by speculative zeal alone in order to resolve

metaphysical enigmas. They were men of action, not of speculation; courageous priests and pastors who thought of their work as like that of soldiers in open battle, and who were ready to die as one dies for his country.’”

B. B. Warfield

#### B. The Creed

“We believe in one God, Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of His Father, only begotten, that is **of the ousia** of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten not made, of one substance with the Father (homoousios), by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth, who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was made flesh and was made man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens and comes to judge the living and dead.”

#### IV. Athanasius

A. “The Black Dwarf” (“*Athanasius on the Psalms*”)

B. The three great contributions of Athanasius

- 1.
- 2.
3. Doctrine of the full deity of Christ (On the incarnation of the Word)

C. Athanasius *contra mundum*

1. The aftermath of Nicea: *homoiousios* versus *homoousios*  
Gibbon: “the whole world torn asunder because of a diphthong.”
2. By 360 “the whole world groaned in amazement at finding itself Arian” (Jerome)  
F. F. Bruce: “Athanasius stood for principle at any price; Constantine for concord at any price.” *The Spreading Flame*, p. 309

D. The triumph of Nicene orthodoxy

E. The Nicene Creed Today

“The man Jesus of Nazareth seems to me to have stood in demonstrably but inexplicably intimate relation to the creator of our world,” a relation “unique among all such relations known to me in human history—unique to the point of some degree of identity.”

New York Times, May 18, 1996

#### Questions for Consideration

1. Did the First Ecumenical Council include just the Western Church?
2. Was the council limited to just the Roman Empire?
3. How did Athanasius’ exiles impact his theology?
4. Were heresies spread through songs? Give examples
5. How would you identify Reynolds Price’s Christological view?

#### For Further Study

Read “*Athanasius on the Psalms*” for an example of how this great Christian approached the Scripture. What are some special features about the Psalms that are of great importance to the Christian? Why are the Psalms to be chanted or sung? Do you agree that “the whole of human existence” is expressed in the Psalms?