

## **The Council of Nicea**

We are at lesson 12, “As it was in the Beginning: the Council of Nicea.” I want to begin before we have the prayer by reading a little bit from an article from the magazine, *Sports Illustrated*. This is an article about the Olympics. It says this: “In Los Angeles in 1984 it became evident that the games had a remarkable resilience. The once bitter battle over professionalism now seems as archaic and irrelevant as the Christian church’s once virulent debate over the Arian heresy.” That is *Sports Illustrated*, a very popular magazine in the United States. If you have not found a good reason to take church history, perhaps I should suggest that you study church history to understand *Sports Illustrated*. And actually, to correct *Sports Illustrated*, because the statement that the debate over the Arian heresy is archaic and irrelevant, certainly is not true. In 1977 a book came out called *The Myth of God Incarnate*, published by seven English theologians. Six of these were members of the Church of England in which the old Arian heresy was brought up again and affirmed by these modern Protestant theologians.

The prayer we are going to pray is a very familiar one. Let me just read it and comment about it, and then we will pray it. “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.” Let us be sure we understand what we will pray in a moment. “As it was in the beginning,” what does that “it” refer to? As what was in the beginning? “As it was in the beginning,” what do you think that means? It refers to the doctrine of the Trinity—as the Trinity was in the beginning. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were always there—“in the beginning,” that means “always.” And it ends with the phrase that is curious to us, “world without end.” That does not mean that the world will not end. “World without end” simply means, “forever and ever.” This is the earliest liturgical prayer we have; it comes from the second century. These early Christians were affirming their faith in doctrine of the Trinity, that God existed as Trinity in eternity past and will continue as Trinity forever. Well, with those comments let us pray this prayer, remembering that we join with millions of Christians who have prayed this prayer throughout church history, from the time of the second century. Let us pray.

*“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.”*

As we come into the fourth and fifth centuries we are entering a time of great development in Christian theology. The church councils began, and certain important issues of church doctrine were studied, debated, argued about, fought over, and finally settled in the history of the church. The first of the great councils we will study today. It took place in the year 325 AD, certainly one of the great dates in church history. It is in everyone’s list of the 100 most important dates, and it probably should be among the top 10 or so of the most important dates in church history. This is the time of the Council of Nicea. It was that council and several successive councils that formulated and set forth the doctrine of the Trinity. In the middle of the fifth century in the year 451 AD—another very important date—the Council of Nicea was the definitive statement on the church’s understanding of the two natures of Christ. So between 325 and 451 AD much theological thought took place and some important events happened that help us understand how the church formulated these crucial doctrines. Certainly we have to be clear on the doctrine of who God is, and the church got to work on this in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Today we will talk about the doctrine of the Trinity and particularly the deity of Christ. The earliest Christians held that there was one God. They were monotheists like the Jews. But unlike the Jews, they held that Jesus was God. And apparently they were able to believe both that there was only one God and that Jesus was God without knowing quite how to express that. We know that faith in the deity of Christ

came very, very early. In fact, it dates back to the New Testament and continues right from the time of the New Testament. One scholar has said, “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 surviving pagan report of a church service, and in the oldest surviving liturgical prayer”—the Gloria Patri, which we prayed a few moments ago as we opened the class. So from the very beginning we have good evidence that Christian people believed in the deity of Christ and believed in the doctrine of the Trinity. As another scholar has put it, “Christians lived trinitarianly before the evolution of Nicene orthodoxy.” Before 325 AD, when certain words were used to set forth what the church considered orthodox teaching about the Trinity, long before that people believed in the Trinity and worshiped the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But I think it is true that as we look at the earliest of the church fathers, they appeared more as witnesses to this faith than interpreters striving to understand it. They just accepted it, preached it, and lived it. They did not try to explain it. But eventually, in the history of the church, people wanted to understand it more. I think, as we will see, most people realized it was impossible to understand it in any full and significant sense. But at least the church could make an effort to express the Trinity in words people could agree on.

The earliest efforts to explain it, to understand how Jesus is related to the Father, led in two different directions. One could be called subordinationism. Subordinationism shows God, who is the Father, and somehow closely related to Him but under Him is Christ, and under Him again is the Holy Spirit. You can see from the word “subordinationism” how that concept works itself out. There has to be someone at the top, and that is God. And then subordinate to God the Father is the Son and then the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Son. Well that particular conception of the Trinity preserved the diversity. You certainly have a three-ness there. But you can see immediately that it denies the equality and the unity of the Trinity. And even though some Christians began to think in these terms, others felt that this was quite wrong and went to what we would call the opposite extreme, sometimes called monarchianism, or in one particular form, modalism. Monarchianism said there was one God, but that one God has appeared in different modes of being. When He appears as the Father we call Him the Father. When He appears as the Son that is the name we give the one God. And when He appears as the Holy Spirit we call Him the Holy Spirit. So there is only one God. That certainly preserves the oneness. That is what the word “monarchianism” means—there is just one God. It preserves the equality and the unity of the Trinity. But there is no real diversity here. These are just different names for the same person.

We see the church struggling with this, and we can sympathize with them. We have the whole inheritance of church history helping us formulate the way we express the Trinity, but people were at this time just beginning to try to put it together in some sort of way; it is no wonder they struggled with it. Tertullian, who is important for so many things, was also very important in this discussion because prior to the Council of Nicea he was almost certainly the theologian who did the most to create ways of thinking and expressing (through his own words) this concept. We think Tertullian actually invented the word “trinity.” He also came up with the words “substance” and “person.” The Greeks would have other words, and that created some trouble between the East and the West because it was hard to know exactly how to translate the words. How the Greek word “*ousia*” related to the Latin word “*substantia*” was a difficulty as the theologians on both sides of the linguistic divide wrestled with the topic of doctrine of the Trinity. Well, any word would be a problem. And these words were certainly problems. “Substance” could be misused; “person” could be misused as well. But the church began to take hold of these words and put its own meaning into them. So we really need to know the theological meaning of “substance,” not just what it says to us in English but how the church meant for it to be understood. So Tertullian is an important landmark and help on the way. But the real concentration on this document came with the challenge of Arianism. A debate took place in the city of Alexandria, a very important Christian center with many Christians in the early third century. The debate was on how to express the doctrine of Christ.

Who really is Christ? This question began to be focused on in a very heated debate. The bishop was an older man whose name was Alexander. He began in his teachings to say things like this: “Always God, always the Son.” That certainly implied the equality and eternity of God and Christ. Or Bishop Alexander would say, “At the same time the Father, at the same time the Son.” So he used expressions that pointed to full equality.

But there was a very brilliant and perhaps ambitious younger man, a presbyter in Alexandria whose name was Arius. And he very much objected to that because he felt that “there is only one God. If you start talking like this, you will end up with two gods.” So Arius began to say things like this in his sermons and writings: “If God and Christ were equal then Christ should be called God’s brother, not God’s Son.” People puzzled about that. They were hearing now something different from this presbyter than they were hearing from the bishop. And Arius also created the very famous saying, “There was a time when He was not.” “There was a time when the Son did not exist.” So in his view, Christ became what we could call a third thing. He is neither God nor is He man, but something in between. There is God and there is the Son and there is the rest of creation. So rather than having two things you have a *tertium quid*, a third thing—neither god nor man. The Arian Christ, as J. C. Wan puts it, “was an incarnation of what is not God in what is not man.”

This was a rather popular view, though, because in the Greek world at that time, particularly in Alexandria where all the Gnostic influence was, people believed in all kinds of half-gods. The Gnostics had a whole series of descending deities between the true god and matter. So the idea of a half-god, a demigod, something between god and man, was very popular and understandable. Pretty soon this debate became very intense. The debate was conducted, according to one historian, with the violence of a political convention. Some of the church fathers like Gregory of Nissa talk about how people got into this. This was the most heated issue of the day. Gregory said, “Everyone entered into it. Men who met to transact business neglected their bargaining to talk theology. If one said to the baker, ‘How much is that loaf of bread?’ the baker would answer, ‘The Son is subordinate to the Father.’ If one sent a servant on an errand he would reply, ‘The Son arose out of nothing.’” Arius helped to contribute to the intensity of the debate because he put his views forth in verse and set them to popular tunes that were sung around the town, in the bars and elsewhere. They were sung and whistled in the streets, and pretty soon the songs were punctuated by fights. Fists and clubs were used to win this theological debate. One of Arius’ songs went like this: “Arius of Alexandria, I am 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.” Arius was not particularly humble about it all. Well, that came to be a rather popular song.

This situation could not continue. It was the occasion for the church to call what we know as the first ecumenical council. “Ecumenical” of course simply means “the whole church.” There were representatives from all over the Christian world. They came to the town of Nicea in Asia Minor. Constantine was the emperor, and he was very concerned about this theological problem. He decided he had to do something about it, like presidents and leaders today are concerned about worldwide financial troubles so that people are trying to figure out what to do. Well, the big issue at that time was not financial but theological. Constantine called the council, which was attended, according to tradition, by 318 church fathers. That probably is not an accurate number. We think it really comes from Genesis 14:14 and the fact that Abraham had 318 servants. So for some reason the council was supposed to have 318 members, but several hundred people were there and maybe more. Out of the council came the Nicene Creed. Despite the situation and the worldliness and all the things that were mixed up in this council, these people, according to Sabatier, were “courageous priests and pastors.” They were really concerned about the truth, and they attempted to get at the heart of the matter so that they might express

in some clear words what the church believed about the deity of Christ. The Nicene Creed is very famous in church history, adopted by all parts of the Christian church. It really sets forth in expanded language that Jesus Christ is truly and fully God. If you summarized the Nicene Creed in just a few words, that would be it, that Jesus Christ is truly and fully God.

Let me just comment on this section of the creed referring to Jesus: “begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father.” “Substance” there is the Greek word *homoousios*. What that means is to say that Christ is *homoousios* with the Father, of one substance with the Father, or one essence with the Father—however that word is to be translated into English. Of course, that is a non-Scriptural word. We do not find that word in the Bible, describing for us the relationship between the Father and the Son. But these church fathers thought it was necessary to create a non-Scriptural word to control people’s understanding of Scriptural language. In other words, the church fathers believed that *homoousios*, even though it is not found in the Bible, taught what was in the Bible.

It was important to have one word like this that the Arians could not misinterpret. If you said Christ was *homoousios* with the Father, you could not be an Arian. The Arians really could not accept that. They had various ways of pointing to their Bible texts and misunderstanding what others were saying. But *homoousios* was the word that was chosen to separate the Arians, who did not believe in the full and complete deity of Christ, from everyone else. The Arians had constantly said, of course, that if the Son is begotten, that means He came into existence at some point. So there was a time when He was not. But the Nicene fathers looked at it this way in this famous statement, which does not really explain the mystery, rather it simply states it: “Christ was begotten, not made.” We know He was begotten because that is what the Bible says, but He was not made because the Bible says He was not made. Thus the church began to express its faith this way. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, the Son, was begotten but not made. When we say that the second person was begotten we do not mean that there was a time when He was not. Now, what does that mean, then? I am not sure that theologians have ever really explained what that means. Gregory of Naziansas, who lived just a little after this time, put it this way, “The begetting of God must be honored by silence. It is a great thing for you to learn that He was begotten. But the manner of His generation we will not admit that even angels can conceive, much less you.” You accept it. Christ was begotten not made. There is no real way to probe further into that mystery, according to the church fathers of this time.

Now I want to talk about Athanasius. I both need to and want to talk about Athanasius because he was a great hero of the early church. He was a young man, a very small man with dark skin. People called him the “black dwarf.” He lived in Alexandria. He was just 25 years old at the time of the Council of Nicea, so he did not play a major role there except behind the scenes as assistant to the bishop. Later he became bishop of Alexandria himself when the bishop died in 328 AD. It was Athanasius who saw this controversy through from beginning to end. The Council of Nicea did not end the controversy. There was much debate after that; it looked like the Arians were still going to win. Athanasius stood for Nicene orthodoxy during this whole period. This meant that he was exiled in Egypt from his church and home on five different occasions when his opponents seemed to be winning the battle and he had to flee for his life.

There is a famous story that on one of these occasions he was on a boat in the Nile River, trying to get away. Enemies came up in a boat and, not recognizing him, asked, “Where is Athanasius?” Athanasius himself replied, “Not far away,” which was true. Of course they did not understand what he really meant so they took off up the river to try to catch him. The expression, Athanasius *contra mundum*, became almost a proverb in church history from this time on, meaning “Athanasius against the world.” The whole world might go the other way but he was going against the world.

The name of Athanasius has come up before in these lessons. Let me sum up briefly Athanasius' three great contributions to the early church. They are three important ones. The first is the closing of the canon of Scripture. He was the first to give the list of the books that we have in our New Testament and only those books. The second is the promotion of monasticism. That has some bad parts as we have already said, but also some good parts. Athanasius wrote *The Life of Antony*, the famous Egyptian monk. That book was an influence in the conversion of Augustine. Most important of all is his third contribution, the doctrine of the full deity of Christ. His little book *On the Incarnation of the Word* is certainly one of the great books in church history and one of the great books on this topic. It is inspiring and helpful to read it, even today. So in the aftermath of Nicea we have Athanasius *contra mundum*.

After Nicea a compromise was suggested. That is, the church settled on another word: *homoiousios*, which means "of similar substance." You can see how the Arians would like that better than *homoousios*, which is "of the same substance." Thus the debate now was raging between those who held to *homoiousios* and those who held to *homoousios*. Some who held to *homoiousios* were fairly orthodox. They felt that it could have an orthodox meaning. But Athanasius said no, it was too slippery. To say Christ the Son is similar to the Father is not to say Christ the Son is equal to the Father. Athanasius insisted the church not abandon *homoousios*. The skeptical historian Gibbon made a lot of fun of this. After all, the only difference here is a diphthong. So Gibbon said, "Imagine the whole world torn apart because of a diphthong, people fighting over one letter." To him it was stupid. But of course, as Warfield put it, "The whole doctrine of the Trinity in unity and of the proper deity of Christ resides in that *iota*." One letter can be extremely important because what that one letter said is that "Jesus is fully God." If you took it out it would say, "Jesus is something like God."

The Arians had the support of the government, who felt the Arian solution was the better one. Now after the time of Constantine there was the problem of church and state coming too close together because the state could tell the church what to say and do. Because of that support the Arians seemed to be winning. Jerome, who was now in his monastery in Palestine, wrote the famous sentence, "The whole world groaned in amazement at finding itself Arian." Well, that was not quite true. Athanasius was still alive and fighting for Christian orthodoxy along with others. By the time of Athanasius' death in 373 AD the tide had turned again. Arianism was on the decline and was again condemned at the second ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople, in 381 AD. Although, strangely in the history we will study later, very active missionaries had already gone out to evangelize the barbarians up in the north, what we call Europe. These missionaries went out during the heyday of the Arian movement, so they were Arians. The Arian theology declined and passed away within the Roman Empire, but these newly evangelized barbarians outside the Roman Empire were Arians. And in the next century they poured into the empire and brought Arianism back. Thus the fight had to resume. But during the lifetime of Athanasius, at least within the empire, Nicene orthodoxy became the teaching of the church. Arianism began to die out except among the barbarians in the north. It came back in when they invaded and then began to die out again. But it is not altogether gone, of course. We can find Arianism even in the modern world in cults like Jehovah's Witnesses and, unfortunately, among liberal Protestant theologians like the people who wrote *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

It has been asked, was the ecumenical council just the Western church? No, it was Eastern and Western. At this time we really cannot speak of an Eastern Orthodox Church yet. Fairly soon after there came tensions that began to pull the East and the West apart, but the break really did not come until the 11th century. Another question is was the council limited to the Roman Empire? It was pretty much so, though we think there were representatives from the church further east in Asia. At least a few came. We know there were representative from as far west as Spain. So it covered the Roman Empire and a few

people beyond. It really was a church council and not a Roman Empire church council. But it was largely people from the Roman Empire.

It has also been asked, how did Athanasius' exiles in Egypt impact his theology and views? He really stayed the same all the way through it. You see a man who is convinced—his opponents would say stubborn. But he was convinced, and it really did not matter what happened to him. He was chased out of town, but he still held to *homoousios*. When he came back he started preaching it again. Wherever he was he stayed the same. I think he is a real hero of the Christian faith because without Athanasius what would have happened—looking at it from the standpoint of history and not God's sovereignty for a moment—was the emperors would have compromised; they were for compromise. I do not think the emperors cared which way it was solved as long as it was solved. The issue created many problems for them. But Athanasius would not compromise.

Another question is how did Constantine react to the settlement of the Council of Nicea? He seems to have accepted it. But he almost immediately changed his mind because the opponents of Nicea got to him and seemed to have more influence. Constantine was not a great theologian by any means. So I guess it may have seemed simpler to him to say, "You have God, and you have this Son of God." But to have one God where the Father and the Son are both God, he could not understand that. We cannot either, but he just felt maybe the *homoousios* solution was the sensible one. He waffled on it some, but generally he was against Athanasius on the other side of the issue.

It has been asked, what was the term "Patripassionism?" This was a term created by Tertullian as a kind of nickname for modalism or monarchianism. Patripassionism means "Father suffered." If you just have one God who appeared in different guises, then when Christ was on the cross it was the Father who suffered there. The opponents of this view often pointed to the baptism of Jesus where you have the voice of God, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, and the Son. There were three, not one, and right at the same time.

It has also been asked whether it is correct to translate *monogeneis* in John as "only Son" rather than "only begotten Son." I think that is correct. The term there means that Jesus is the only Son God has; there is no other. But we still have the Old Testament references in the Psalms that say, "This have I begotten you." So the begotten language, even though it may not have come from both John and Psalms, is definitely there in Psalms. And in Psalms it does not have the same meaning as the Greek word *monogeneis*. So this is a biblical idea, particularly in the Old Testament language. What this really served to do in the history of the church is to say that "The Father is not the Son." That is really all you are saying when you say that the Son is begotten of the Son. You are saying, "They are not the same. The Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. They are equal but not the same." It is a word to imply the distinction. We need words to emphasize the unity and equality in the Trinity, but we also need words to explain the distinction without leading us to go too far and view it as different. So I do not try to understand "begotten" in any way except as teaching us that there is distinction in the Trinity. The word the church will adopt for the Holy Spirit is "proceeding," "proceeding from the Father." What that word means is that the Holy Spirit is not the Father. The Western Church adds, "and from the Son," and the Eastern Church gets very upset about that. When we get to the division between the East and the West we will see that the "and the Son" addition to the Nicene Creed and Constantinople Creed was one of the sticking points, and still is between the East and the West.

"The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).