

“Church History: Heroes, Heretics & Holy Wars”

Sunday School Notes

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CLASS 4 – Church Councils

Martin Luther (16th century) summarized the four principal councils of the 4th and 5th centuries:
“The first, in Nicea, defended the divinity of Christ against Arius;
The second, in Constantinople, defended the divinity of the Holy Spirit against Macedonius;
The third, in Ephesus, defended the one person of Christ against Nestorius;
The fourth, in Chalcedon, defended the two natures in Christ against Eutyches.”

Arius (AD 256-336) was a priest from Alexandria, Egypt. Taught that God is one person, so obviously there can't be a Trinity. Jesus had been created and was less than the Father. He was the greatest created creature and he was tasked to create the world, but he was not God; not of the same substance of God. The Holy Spirit was even less than Jesus. Obviously this knocks the legs out from under Christianity. He also taught that God is ultimately unknowable, even to Jesus. I don't think he was trying to destroy Biblical teaching, he thought he was being faithful to the Bible by preserving the oneness of God, and keeping Jesus as the Son of God.

2 bishops of Alexandria opposed him: Alexander, then his successor, Athanasius. Alexander held a council of local bishops in 320 and condemned Arius' views. Athanasius was the one who taught the one God, three persons view. He also answered Arius' idea that Jesus being begotten indicated being created by saying that begotten does not mean created. Arius was exiled to Palestine, but started setting his views to music, and they became very popular.

325 – First Council of Nicea

Now that Constantine had defeated all his rivals, he wanted peace in the Empire. He wanted the church to get along too, and to find a theology it could agree on. So he called the Council of Nicea to reconcile Arius and Alexander, and invited 318 bishops. 17 bishops supported Arius at the beginning of the Council, but by the end only 2 supported him. Their decisions were strong and orthodox and still stand! Council of Nicea and Athanasius held that Jesus was same substance as Father- homo-ousios.

They agreed that Arius' condemnation was just and condemned anyone who said that there was a time when the Son did not exist. They issued what became known as the Nicene Creed (that gets expanded in 381 at the Council of Constantinople):

“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 [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost.”

One story that may or may not be true from Nicea is that St. Nicholas of Myra was in attendance at the Council, and at one point when Arius started singing his heretical songs Nicholas walked up and punched him in the mouth.

Despite what Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* says, Nicea did not take up the question of what books should be included in the canon.

381 – First Council of Constantinople

Emperor Theodosius was a retired soldier, called this council to revisit Arianism, that hadn't really died. Gregory of Nazianzus, who opposed Arianism, presided over the council. Reaffirmed the Nicene Creed, overruled all the smaller councils that had happened after Nicea, extended "homo-ousios" to the Holy Spirit as well.

Apollinarius had fought against Arianism, but slipped into error when he said the divine *Logos* replaced the human soul. He was condemned.

431 – Council of Ephesus

Eutyches, the head of a monastery near Constantinople taught Monophysitism- Christ's humanity is lost in his divinity "as a drop of honey, which falls into the sea, dissolves in it." Flavian, archbishop of Constantinople, accused him of heresy and banished him from the area. The Council of Ephesus said that Eutyches was not a heretic.

Nestorius separated the divine and human natures and basically said they were separate and distinct. He had become controversial for denying that Mary was the *theotokos*, the bearer of God. He said that Mary gave birth to human Jesus, but not god Jesus. Cyril of Alexandria rebuked him for making Jesus essentially schizophrenic; multiple personalities that don't relate at all. Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorianism.

Leo I called this the "robber synod" because they refused to consider Leo's writings.

451 – Council of Chalcedon:

Roman Emperor Marcian summoned ecumenical council of 520 bishops in Chalcedon, which is very close to Constantinople – he hoped it would "end disputations and settle the true faith more clearly and for all time." Earlier councils had already answered the fact that Jesus was God, but now they had to defend Jesus' humanity, and how was He both human & divine at the same time?

So there's all this confusion as to how the humanity & godliness in Jesus co-existed.

Chalcedonian Formula:

Jesus is... "perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity..."

The same substance with the Father as regards his divinity... the same substance with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin...

Two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation."

First Council in which the Pope had a major role. Also the last one that East and West would regard as official.

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