

The Nicaean Controversy

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In the 4th and 5th centuries a number of Christian teachers and leaders appeared. Eusebius of Caesarea (265-340) wrote Church history. Basil the Great (330-379) was a bishop; as a monk, he composed new regulations for the monasteries. His brother, Gregory of Nyssa, and his friend Gregory Nazianzen were also great theologians.

Chrysostom was a famous preacher and the Patriarch of Constantinople (347-407). Jerome (340-420) founded a monastery in Palestine and translated the Bible into Latin. Cyril (d. 444), the Patriarch of Alexandria, was a passionate, uncompromising fighter for the faith. Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) wrote Bible commentaries. Athanasius, Ambrose, Augustine also belonged to this period.

During this period, the Christian church fought two battles at the same time.

Up to the 4th century Christians continuously had to face loss of property, torture, and the possibility of death. To follow Christ meant complete renunciation of their own lives. One might have called them fanatics; however, at the very least they were heroic and sincerely dedicated people.

But when such persecution ended it became so easy to confess the Christian faith. It even became fashionable. In the past, numerous men and women of high rank had to give up their lives for their faith. Now, however, from the pagan families and pagan culture, new converts flooded into the Church. As a result Church life, which no longer demanded such high ideals, felt the taint of corruption. The Christian ideal and standard became much lower. Christians sought comfort, wealth and high position in the Church.

Resisting such an attitude, two forms of protest appeared. One type of Christian firmly resisted elements of pagan life, following the strict leadership of the patriarchs in the cities. The other group of Christians, in order to maintain the spirit of the martyrs, chose a life of strict self renunciation for Christ, withdrawing to the Egyptian desert.

The first man who sold his possessions and went to the desert was St. Anthony (b. 251). He first lived in an old tomb then moved to the ruins of an ancient castle. Thus he spent 35 years fasting, praying, and meditating, fighting against evil thoughts and temptations. People began to gather around him. Some came out of curiosity, some came to be healed from sickness. He escaped by crossing the Nile River. On the other side, he settled by a small spring, built a hermitage, and lived with wild animals. His fame only spread all the more and people gathered to build other hermitages nearby. Thus did Christian monasteries begin.

This was one type of battle that the Church had to fight -- the struggle against evil and secularization.

Another type of conflict was yet to be waged -- the battle for the truth of the faith. The ancient world had an idea that matter is evil. Some people had trouble becoming Christians and believing that God would come to us in a human body. Hence, they developed the theory that the body of Jesus which they could see and touch was not a real one. Jesus for them was not God's only -- begotten Son; he was one of many spirits sent to help and reach mankind. This idea is called Gnosticism and the Church had to fight against it since the time of Paul and John.

Another heresy started in Alexandria where an important church elder Arius proclaimed that Jesus was not God but was created by God, and was only close to Him. Therefore Jesus Christ and God were not equal; Jesus was not truly God but rather an intermediary between God and man. (Subordinationism gives up in principle the divinity of Christ.) His pious and very logical presentation made many people believe Arius was teaching the truth.

The old Patriarch of Alexandria realized the danger of this theory. Yet he gave Arius considerable opportunity to explain his views and correct his mistake; first in private consultations, next in local meetings of churchmen in the city, finally in large synods of bishops, he gave Arius a chance to express his opinions. Arius was so firm in his teachings and even taught his followers in poems and songs, so there arose considerable controversy between the Arians and their opponents. Controversy spread beyond Egypt. Finally, the Emperor Constantine sent a letter to Alexandrian Christians saying that the problem did not seem to be important so they should not let it get any bigger.

The Spanish bishop Hosius carried the letter to Egypt where he discovered that the problem had become extremely important. Returning, he urged the emperor to have a council of bishops settle the issue. Thus, a council was summoned to meet in the city of Nicaea in May 325 A.D. For the first time in Christian history bishops representing the whole church gathered, numbering 318, from Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, Africa, Spain and Rome. Also present were hermits and Christians who had suffered torture under persecution. Pagan philosophers came out of curiosity.

At Nicaea a slender man with pale face, weak vision and curly hair, wearing a sleeveless hermit's robe, gave his speech with an impressive voice and fascinating logic. This was Arius. There was another man with brown hair, a young deacon of fluent speech, sitting beside the bishop of Alexandria. He was his secretary and had been brought by him to the council. Though he was young, his name was well-known because he had already written two books. His name was Athanasius.

In the front of the assembly room was a throne and on the throne was a Bible. In the front corner of the hall was a gold plated chair in which Emperor Constantine sat. He wore a purple robe decorated with jewels. In his opening speech he begged the entire council to carry on its meeting in peace and harmony. Nevertheless, discussion soon became enflamed and debate lasted long.

The bishop of Alexandria and his followers made the first speeches, appealing to the Bible and Apostles' Creed. Arius immediately arose and presented his case using exactly the same passages but giving them a different meaning. Thus, both parties had to find a word which expressed their doctrine clearly and unmistakably. What Athanasius wanted to say was that Christ was God, the Son and the Father were of the same nature, they shared the same substance; so his followers used the Greek word *homoousion* (of same substance: consubstantial). Arians replaced that with the word *homoiousion* (of like nature).

Finally the council settled the issue. Bishop Alexander and Athanasius won. Arius and his followers were banished temporarily. Books referring to Arian views were all burned. Athanasius received much praise from most of the bishops and aroused hatred from his enemies.

A year later he became Patriarch of Alexandria and for a time could exhort his followers, write books and live in peace. After that his life became a long adventure and struggle for faith.

Emperor Constantine and his successors gradually changed their mind and began to favor Arius, while severely persecuting Athanasius. Athanasius was sent into exile five times by the hostile emperors who were influenced by false accusations and plots against him. Sometimes he had to seek the protection and sympathy of the bishop of Rome.

Once he was even banished to the city of Treves in West Germany. Many times he sought refuge with monks in the Egyptian desert. Moving from one hermitage to another, he depended upon monks he had befriended when he held power.

Arius and his supporters took church power and Athanasius very sorrowfully sent secret letters to his friends, encouraging them not to give up their faith. Once when he was conducting a worship service in a church, soldiers surrounded the building, broke up the meeting, burned the altar and holy veil and massacred some of the worshippers.

The bishop barely escaped and got on a small boat. His foes chased after him and asked a sailor where

Athanasius was: "He's not far away from here!" Thus, the soldiers turned in the opposite direction.

But the most painful thing for Athanasius was to see friends leaving him and accepting the Arian creed -- not because they believed it but because of persecution. While his faith was not changed at all, soon he was left alone. The words "Athanasius contra mundum" are still used to describe a hero who has a long struggle against the whole world.

Forty years later he became the bishop of Alexandria. At last he could come back to his own city, administer the churches of Egypt, designate his successor and die in peace. Thus at the last minute he saw his victory. But the greatest triumph came after his death when in the sixth century his beliefs were put in the form of an official creed and named after him.

Arius also was a man who stood firm for what he believed and lived long enough to see his ideas accepted by many church leaders. Before Athanasius came to power, Arius had been condemned by the Patriarch of Alexandria and excommunicated for heresy but Bishop Alexander was unable to keep Arius from preaching in his church. Arius had powerful friends like Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, a close advisor to the emperor, and Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, the famous church historian, as well as many of the best biblical scholars in Antioch, a center for scriptural studies. Synods in Asia Minor and Palestine voted to support Arius against his bishop.

Constantine had told Bishop Alexander that he should not be bothered about Arius' views because they involved only secondary matters. At the Council of Nicaea, however, Arius was condemned, banished from Egypt and sent to Asia Minor in exile. In 327 A. D. at a second council in Nicaea, Arius presented a confession of his faith without any of the controversial phrases and he was readmitted to the church. Constantine politely requested Bishop Alexander to restore Arius' old position in Egypt. Alexander died before the order was carried out and his successor Athanasius used every method to keep from obeying the emperor.

When Constantine celebrated the 30th anniversary of his reign he convened a council at Jerusalem to take part in the dedication of his newly-built Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The bishops voted to reinstate Arius and soon afterward the emperor banished Athanasius to exile in Treves, Germany. Realizing the troubled conditions in Egypt, Arius stayed in Constantinople where he died suddenly (perhaps of poison) in 336 A.D.

Arianism did not die with Arius. Friends of Arius for a time controlled the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople. Emperor Constantius, Constantine's son and successor, was opposed to Athanasius and favored Arianism. Even the Pope at Rome (Liberius) was banished for supporting Athanasius. When they were driven out of the Roman Empire, Arian missionaries spread their ideas among the German tribes which overran Western Europe, Spain and North Africa. Only the fact that the French were Nicaeans under Charlemagne kept all of Western Europe from going Arian. During the Reformation Arian ideas reappeared and took root in Poland and Hungary. In the 18th century many leading people were Arian -- Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Sir Isaac Newton, for example. In the 19th century leading Arians (now called Unitarians) included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. From the time of Arius himself the church has not been able to silence completely those who believe Jesus is not God, not equal to God, not the same substance as God but subordinate to Him.

Unification theology is the most recent reassertion of what the Bible clearly states and Arius bravely taught: Jesus Christ is less than God, God's Son and His servant. Athanasius was right to emphasize the importance of Jesus Christ because he was the Messiah, the central figure in God's dispensation of restoration in the New Testament age. Arius, however, was right to insist that this did not make Jesus a second god, an equal of God or the same as God.

The Council of Nicaea had been convened to decide faith and order, the first of many such councils. Since the whole church was represented it is called an "ecumenical" or "general" council. There are three Christian creeds which are generally accepted.

The Apostles' Creed, the oldest and shortest, comes from a baptismal confession of faith used by the early church in Rome and is supposed to express what the 12 apostles of Jesus taught. The second is the Nicene Creed which contains the definition of Christ agreed upon by the bishops in 325 A.D. The third Athanasian Creed does not come from the patriarch of Alexandria himself but what the church in the 6th century said Athanasius believed.

What then is the real difference between Arius and Athanasius? Arius believed it was important to assert the supremacy and superiority of God. God the Father was higher than the Son and was his Creator. The Son was a secondary being, created by God the Father sometime prior to the creation of the universe. The Son was superior to man because he was created before man, was the firstborn of creation, the only begotten Son, the instrument which God used to create the world and the mediator between God and man.

Athanasius attacked Arius on two points. First, Arius' view of Christ did not make him fully divine. He was only a creature, was not of the same substance as God, was not His equal but was only His servant. Hence, even if a believer became one with Christ he was still not one with God.

Secondly, Athanasius criticized Arius' doctrine of Christ for not making the Son truly human. Christ was neither really God nor really man but only a bridge from one to the other. If Christ were not truly God he could not save us; if he were not really man but only a creature between God and humanity, he could not understand us, sympathize with our predicament, share our troubles or carry our sins. Athanasius said Christ must be completely, thoroughly human in order to redeem us. For him, Arius' Christ was not truly human as well as not truly divine.

Unification theology is the most recent reassertion of what the Bible clearly states: Jesus Christ is less than God, God's Son and His servant. Athanasius was right to emphasize the importance of Jesus Christ because he was the Messiah, the central figure in God's dispensation of restoration in the New Testament age. But we cannot agree with Athanasius that Christ was fully God, of the same substance as God and equal to God.

Arius was right to insist that the New Testament does not make Jesus a second god, an equal of God or the same as God.

Unification theology, however, disagrees with Arius' belief that Jesus Christ was created prior to the world or that he is superior to man because he is literally the firstborn of creation. Since Jesus was an historical figure whose birth took place at a specific date he could not have existed prior to the existence of the world. The opening verses of John's Gospel that the Word was from the beginning with God and was God should not be taken too literally.

As Unification theology teaches, the Word was God's eternal plan for creating man; it -- not the historical Jesus -- existed before the creation.