



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 14 – Doctrinal Controversy and the Nicene Creed

The earliest controversies among Christians were settled by the Christians themselves based on God's Word given to them in the Scriptures. But when Constantine became emperor, he took it upon himself to interfere in the resolution of controversies for the good of his empire. The power of the state, however, should not be used to force people to accept any kind of creed. Christ wants His Christians to use only the power of the Word of God itself. Constantine mistakenly tried to resolve the Donatist controversy in northern Africa using political power, but the Donatists continued to thrive despite his interference.

The major controversy that arose during Constantine's reign and continued beyond it was the Arian controversy. It is named after Arius, a leader who introduced and promoted a false teaching concerning the person of Jesus Christ. Some early Christians made the mistake of basing some of their concepts about the true God and Jesus Christ on Greek philosophy rather than entirely from Holy Scripture. They began to think that the God of Scripture and the supreme God of Greek philosophy were identical. Since Greek philosophy knew nothing about Jesus Christ as God's Son, the question arose as to what the true relationship between God and Jesus Christ was.

Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, taught that Jesus, the Son of God, was true God, co-eternal with God the Father. But Arius, one of the pastors in his bishopric, disagreed and said that there was a time when there was no Son of God. He claimed that Jesus was *not* eternal God, but the first creature God made. Arius claimed that Alexander was teaching that there were two gods, Father and Son, whereas it is clearly taught in Scripture that there is only one God. Alexander responded to this by saying that Arius was denying the full deity of Jesus Christ, whom Christians had worshiped as God from the beginning and were still worshiping as God. Alexander as bishop condemned Arius' teachings and removed him from his teaching position in the church. Both Arius and Alexander tried to drum up support for their positions among the other clergy and lay people.

The emperor Constantine believed that unity in his empire was threatened by this controversy. He first sent his own adviser, Bishop Hosius of Cordova in Spain, to try to bring the two parties together. When this failed, Constantine decided to arrange for a grand meeting of all the bishops in his entire empire to resolve this debate. Constantine sent the invitations and paid all the expenses for this gathering. It met in 325 AD in the city of Nicea, not far from Constantinople.

There had never been a gathering like this, for before this time Christianity had been an illegal religion, and no one would have been able to assemble Christian leaders from all parts of the empire. Over 300 bishops were present for this gathering, and they came from across the empire – from Spain in the West to Mesopotamia in the East. Many problems were discussed and resolved at this meeting, including the procedures for the readmission of the lapsed and for the election of bishops and pastors. But the main issue was the teaching of Arius.

Since Arius was only a priest/pastor and not a bishop, he could not speak for himself. But there was one bishop, Eusebius of Nicomedia, who defended Arius and wanted the gathered bishops to rebuke Alexander for having condemned the views of Arius. Bishop Alexander defended his condemnation with the help of his deacon Athanasius. Athanasius later became the chief spokesman for Alexander's position. Another group of bishops supported the view that the Father and the Son were the same person, and that indeed it was the Father Himself who suffered on the cross.

Most of the bishops were undecided at first, and they hoped to work out some sort of compromise. Their spokesman was the historian Eusebius of Caesarea. But when they heard from the Arians that Jesus was only a creature, they objected strenuously and began to work on a statement of their faith that excluded the views of Arius. They wrote the wording the first two articles of the Nicene Creed on the Father and the Son, as well as a clear condemnation of Arianism in these words: "Those who say that that there was (a time) when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance or essence, or that He is created, or mutable, these the catholic church anathematizes (or condemns)" (Gonzales: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 165).

The unusual thing about this council was that it was presided over by the unbaptized emperor Constantine. In fact, it was Constantine who suggested that the key word *homoousios* (Greek meaning "of the same substance") be used to describe the Son in relation to the Father. In other words, Jesus was not declared to be something *different* from God, or only as something like God, but as true God: God of God and Very God of Very God. This creed was signed by almost all the bishops – only Eusebius of Nicomedia and a few others refused to sign it. Those who refused were deposed. Constantine added his own punishment: he banished the resisting bishops from their home cities.

The adoption of this creed did not end the controversy, however. Eusebius of Nicomedia talked Constantine into restoring Arius and him to full fellowship in the church, and the bishops who help to the truth and accepted the creed had to decide whether to obey the emperor or the Word of God, which clearly condemned the teaching of Arius.

The leaders of the opposing sides, Arius and Alexander, both died soon after the Council of Nicea came to an end. Athanasius became the new bishop of Alexandria and he continued to be the champion of orthodoxy against Arianism.

In the years that followed, the church took an uncertain course. It favored orthodoxy when the emperors favored orthodoxy and favored Arianism when the emperors favored Arianism. In other words, the church allowed itself to be influenced more by the emperors and their politics than by the plain Word of God. Athanasius was in the middle of this continuing struggle, and we shall return to this topic when we study the life of Athanasius in lesson 16.

Questions:

1. Why did Constantine involve himself in controversies among Christians?
2. Why was this a dangerous precedent?
3. What was the false teaching of Arius concerning the Son of God?
4. What was the true teaching of Bishop Alexander?
5. In what way was the false teaching of Arius so dangerous for Christians?
6. How did Constantine attempt to resolve this controversy?
7. What was so special about the Council of Nicea?
8. Which bishop defended the false teaching of Arius?
9. Who was the leader of those who wanted to find some kind of compromise?
10. In what words was Arius' teaching condemned by the council?
11. What Greek word was used to describe the relationship between Father and Son?
12. Why did the adopted creed not resolve the controversy?
13. How did politics affect the doctrinal controversy concerning Arianism?
14. What is the only way in which doctrinal controversies should be resolved?