Moments of Crisis:
The Council of Nicaea (AD 325)
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Text: Colossians 1:15-20

Who is Jesus Christ?
You may think that the Bible makes it pretty clear. You may think you know exactly who Jesus is. But it might surprise you that it wasn’t always so clear. It might also surprise you that the early Church was divided on this very issue. Who is Jesus Christ?

October is Reformation Month. Usually, I will spend our Sunday mornings together explaining some of the great doctrines of the Church, from people like Martin Luther or John Wesley. I will spend our Sunday evenings with Heroes of the Faith, and this year you will discover a “golden mouthed” preacher, a martyr who talked back, and a man of steel. One year, I spent the mornings talking about moments of crisis in church history – the conversion of the emperor Constantine, the reformation of Francis of Assisi, William Tyndale translating the Bible, John Wesley’s missionary voyage, and Martin Luther’s challenge to the Pope.

This year, I want to go back to several other moments of crisis. Specifically, I want to talk to you about three great councils, gatherings of the early Church that helped to define what we believe and why. These Ecumenical Councils formulated doctrine, established policy, and fought off great heresies. There were more than three, but I want to focus on these: The First Council at Nicaea in AD 325, the Council at Ephesus in AD 431, and the Council at Chalcedon in AD 461. Other things were on the agenda, but the divine nature of Jesus Christ dominated the concerns of the Council at Nicaea.¹ And so our question, who is Jesus Christ?

A bishop, by the name of Paul of Samosata, was teaching that the Son had no substance, but was just the wisdom of God, somewhat akin to the reason of man. There was no virgin birth, no shape, and he was not visible. The Christ was a man inspired by the Holy Spirit.² This is actually an echo of the gnostic heresy. Paul was also quite immoral and was even convicted by civil authorities. The council made quick work of the followers of this Paul, the Paulinists. They simply declared him a heretic and said that his baptism was invalid.

A priest – who is much more important – by the name of Arius, taught that Jesus was not God. He taught that God is supreme, that the Son is a created being ex nihilo - made from nothing - and God’s first creation. Colossians 1:15 refers to Jesus as the firstborn over all creation. So, to Arius, the Son of God had a beginning and only God the Father had no beginning. More than that, though, the Son, being a son, would thus be inferior to the Father. That he was lesser is indicated in his obedience (Hebrews 5:8) and his declaration that “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). Jesus was finite and had the free will even to do evil if he wanted.

Arianism, then, the doctrine of Arius, can be summarized this way: Jesus was not God, but was rather a created being, subordinate, finite, and not eternal. And Arius used Scripture to support his claims.

The result was turmoil in the church. And that posed a problem.

The Emperor, Constantine, had recently managed to unify the Roman Empire. The final blow came when he subjugated his “co-emperor” Licinius. In AD 313, the two of them had signed the Edict of Milan, effectively ending persecution of Christians. Within a couple years, Licinius was no longer in power and Constantine was sole emperor. He was not a man who liked conflict or division and did what he could to resolve it and bring peace. Having achieved peace and unity in the political realm, he was disturbed by the conflict raging in the Church. He, himself, along with his personal bishop, Eusebius, were persuaded to the Arian view. So Constantine called the bishops together to resolve their differences. Over 1800 invitations went out; somewhere between 270 and 318 bishops arrived with their entourage of priests, deacons, and assistants. The emperor paid all their travel expenses and their living expenses while they were in Nicaea for the month-long meeting.

This was a first in several ways: it was the first “ecumenical”, or world-wide, council. Of all the Empire, only Britain was not represented. It was the first time a civil authority had called for a church meeting. It was the first time the church formulated a general creed, or doctrinal statement. And it was the first time a church creed would be enforced by the power of the state.

There were other matters to deal with –

A bishop by the name of Meletius refused to readmit Christians who had faltered under persecution. Having chosen life rather than martyrdom, many had renounced their faith and made the required patriotic sacrifice. Now, Meletius refused to rebaptize and readmit them to the fellowship of the church. The Council denounced Meletius and rescinded his authority. They agreed that “lapsed” believers should be readmitted to the Church.

There was the problem of the date for celebrating Easter. Some followed the Jewish calendar, others, particularly in Rome, reckoned the date differently. The Council decided that the Church should follow the Roman method so that everyone celebrated the same date. They did not set the method, and today the Eastern Orthodox churches still use a different method. So there are still two dates of celebrating Easter and Pentecost.

There was a problem of eunuch priests. Since self-castration was already a capitol crime in
the empire, it was not a difficult decision to ban ordination of priest who self-castrated.

Paul of Samosata had kept younger women in his home. The Council decided that it was unseemly for a priest or bishop to have a single woman in his home who was not related, and restricted female companions to sisters, mothers, or aunts. Clergy were not allowed to charge interest on loans. This was probably also a response to Paul’s means of gaining wealth.

And, since kneeling in prayer was the posture of penance, kneeling was prohibited on celebration days – Sundays and from Easter to Pentecost. The normal prayer posture was to stand. In all, the Council decided on twenty *canons*, or church laws dealing with various issues.

Constantine is often accused of taking control and mandating certain changes. The charges are not true. Constantine was the host and opened the Council. But he allowed all the bishops to enter ahead of him, and seated them before himself. He paid all their expenses and provided the meeting place, but attended only as an observer and referee. He did not have a voice in the debates and did not vote.

Among the things the Council did not do – they did not discuss or determine the canon of Scripture. That had pretty much already been done. And Constantine did not commission any Bibles until six years after the Council, and then only for the church at Constantinople.

They did not set Sunday as the day of worship. Four years earlier, in 321, the emperor had set aside Sunday as an Empire-wide rest day in honor of the sun. The declaration had nothing to do with the Church. And, in point of fact, the Church had been gathering on Sunday since Pentecost to celebrate those First Day events - the Resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

Nicene Christianity did not become the state religion until 380, over forty years after Constantine’s death.

And when the Council ultimately decided against Arius, Constantine accepted the Council’s decision, along with his bishop, Eusebius.

The Council concluded by celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Constantine’s rule, and heard a speech exhorting them to harmony and peace and expressing his pleasure that they had resolved their differences.

Which, in fact, they had not. Constantine’s son, Constantius, and grandson, Valens, were ardent Arians. Pagan powers maintained their influence. Arians and Meletians regained their rights. Athanasius - you’ll meet him in a moment - was exiled, and Arius readmitted to the Church. So, the accord the Council at Nicaea reached was short-lived. But it was a vital first step.

So, what did they decide about Jesus? How did they answer Arius?

The debate centered largely around a single letter, the letter “I”. Because the words used to describe Jesus differed by only that much. *Homoiousian*, that the Son was “like” the Father, and *homoousian*, that the Son was the same as the Father. One problem, though, was that the word *homoousian*, “of the same substance”, had been rejected at the Council of Antioch nearly sixty years
earlier. It had been used by the Gnostics in the sense that we might talk about DNA - that a son has the same substance, the same nature, the same DNA as his father. The Gnostics had used it of “emanations”, claiming that God can only create beings of the same nature as himself, leading to a claim of human divinity. The word is a good one, though, and the Nicene Council adopted it for their own purposes.

The anti-Arian party was argued by another priest, a young man named Athanasius. He was 27 at the time, and was present only because he was the personal secretary of Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. As such, he was allowed to be in the room with the Council, and spoke on behalf of the bishop. Bishop Nicholas of Myra, St. Nicholas, was there, too, by the way. There is an apocryphal story that Nicholas became so incensed during the debate that he slapped Arius in the face. In fact, Arius was not even present. Only bishops were engaged in the debate. But Athanasius, as personal secretary of Bishop Alexander, was present and did speak eloquently in opposition to the Arian view.

The Father is eternally the Father, which means that the Son is eternally the Son, uncreated, eternal, begotten, not created, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. The Scripture speaks also to that. Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). For that statement, the Jews were prepared to stone him to death, “because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (John 10:33). John had begun his gospel, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1). Athanasius argued that the Son was eternal, just as the Father, and that he is fully God, just as the Father is fully God, and that the Son is equal to the Father in every respect.

That the Word became flesh (John 1:14) is an act of divine submission (Philippians 2:6-11), and not an indication of inferiority. For indeed, the Apostle Paul, reciting that great hymn, declared, that Jesus was in very nature God (Philippians 2:6).

The Council wrote out their decision in a statement of faith, which we know today as the Nicene Creed. In the end, only two bishops supported the Arian view. True to his word, Constantine exiled those who refused to accept the Council’s decision and the Creed. Arius and the two bishops were excommunicated and Arius’ writings were ordered to be burned. At the end of the Creed is an anathema, or curse, for those who do not agree with the Creed.

After the confessions of the Scripture, the first definitive creed of the Church is the Nicene Creed. Some may argue for the Apostles’ Creed, but it’s actual origin and date is unknown – from sometime between the Second and Ninth Centuries. This, then, is the Church’s first attempt to define their doctrine of Christ, and it is the confession of the Church. It would be adapted to meet additional challenges. At the Council of Constantinople in 381, it was rewritten to include an expanded statement regarding the Holy Spirit. But this creed laid the groundwork for our understanding of who Jesus is.

I would like for us to close today by reciting the original Nicene Creed together (minus the anathema).

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,
the only begotten of the Father,
that is, of the substance of the Father,
God of God, light of light,
true God of true God, begotten not made,
of the same substance with the Father,
through whom all things were made
both in heaven and on earth;
who for us men and our salvation descended,
was incarnate, and was made man,
suffered and rose again the third day,
ascended into heaven
and cometh to judge the living and the dead.
And in the Holy Ghost.
Amen.