

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (6)

The Imperial Church (AD313-476) – Councils

A. Introduction

1. The Imperial Church was the period of church history between these two significant events: The Edict of Milan in AD313 and the Fall of Rome in AD476.

The Edict of Milan, after Constantine became Emperor of the western part of the Roman Empire, granted religious freedom to Christians.

The Fall of Rome, led to a dramatic increase in the power and influence that the Pope in Rome had.

2. During this period of church history, three big changes took place in the church, the effects of which are still seen in the church today.

Formalism – the church was shaped by the world around them; the services began to reflect the pomp of the civil ceremonies.

Nominalism – suddenly everyone in the Roman Empire was now a Christian; the church was now a mixed community of believers and unbelievers.

Hierarchicalism – the structure of the church emulated Roman organisation; the church was now under state control with the Emperor as the head of the church.

3. With the influence of the world, the presence of unbelievers and the power of the state, the danger was that the apostles' teaching about what to believe and how to live would be lost.

As the Christians during the time of the Imperial Church responded to these changes, a number of positive developments took place in the church, in the areas of training of church leaders, Bible translation, preaching and in the education of children.

But that wasn't all.

A right understanding of the Bible's teaching about Jesus and His saving work came into view through a number of controversies.

4. By the time the early church period of church history had ended, a creed had been agreed, on by the majority of church leaders, that summed up what Christians believe.

"Do you believe in God the Father, Ruler of all? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, God's Son, who was born by the Holy Spirit through the virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and rose again on the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, sat at the Father's right hand, and will come again to judge the living and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?" (Apostolike Paradosis)

Yet by the start of the Imperial Church it became clear that this creed was not detailed enough, as two types of controversies occurred.

B. Controversy about the Person of Christ

1. A dispute began in the church in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

A presbyter in Alexandria named Arius, in 318, had started teaching that the Father alone was God.

Since there was only one God, and since the Father was clearly God, it therefore followed that the Son could not be God – so He must be a created being – the first and greatest of all God had created.

Arius was strongly opposed by his bishop Alexander, who insisted that the Son was fully and truly God, like the Father was.

Alexander assembled a council of Egyptian bishops in 320, which ruled that Arius was a false teacher.

Arius did not give up and tried to get support from other bishops in the East.

2. Constantine wanted unity in the church.

His advisor, Hosius of Cordoba recommended that he called the bishops together to settle this controversy.

3. The Council of Nicaea (325).

Somewhere between 250 and 318 bishops, from all over the Eastern part of the Empire and few from the West were invited to attend the first ecumenical council (one representing the whole church) in Nicaea in 325.

Constantine had an active role in the debates and discussions of the council.

Only a small number of bishops actually supported Arius' view – the majority did not understand his teaching.

In the end, the council rejected Arianism as heresy.

A statement (that became known as the Nicene Creed) was drafted and agreed on by the bishops, which affirmed that the Son had the same nature and being as the Father.

The creed ends with a series of anathemas, which declared those who believed the teachings of Arius as being outside of the church.

The Nicene Creed: *"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. But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable,' they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church."*

Only Arius, and two his supporters, Secundus and Theonus, refused to sign the creed, and were excommunicated and exiled by Constantine. The order was also given that all of Arius' writings be confiscated and burned.

One other significant decision was made at the Council of Nicaea, and that was to set a date when Easter would be celebrated.

"At the council we also considered the issue of our holiest day, Easter, and it was determined by common consent that everyone, everywhere should celebrate it on one and the same day."
(Constantine)

So with this council, a precedent was set for the Emperor to call a council to decide other doctrinal and practical church matters.

4. The Council of Constantinople (381).

But the Nicene Creed and the excommunication of Arius and his supporters did not end the battle against this false teaching in the Eastern Church.

It wasn't long after the Council of Nicaea that Constantine, increasingly influenced by Arius' supporters and wanting unity, tried to reconcile Arius and his supporters to the rest of the church.

Athanasius who replaced Alexander, as bishop of Alexandria, refused to receive any Arians back into fellowship. This would lead to him being exiled (the first of five under four different Emperors).

After Constantine, who by the end of his life was sympathetic to Arianism, died, his son Constantius became Emperor (first over the Eastern side of the Empire, then the whole Empire) and he favoured Arianism.

Between 359-360 he called several councils that resulted in a new creed, which made allowance for Arianism.

The creed include these words: *"But since the term ousia [substance or essence], which was used by the fathers in a very simple and intelligible sense, but not being understood by the people, has been a cause of offense, we have thought proper to reject it, as it is not contained even in the sacred writings; and that no mention of it should be made in future, inasmuch as the holy Scriptures have nowhere mentioned the substance of the Father and of the Son. Nor ought the "subsistence" of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit to be even named. But we affirm that the Son is like the Father, in such a manner as the sacred Scriptures declare and teach."*

He then forced the church in the East (and the West) to accept it. This led Jerome to say: *"The whole world woke up one morning, lamenting and marvelling to find itself Arian."*

Athanasius continued to fight against Arianism, writing books and tracts defending the truths captured in the Nicene Creed, and was joined in the fight by the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

The Cappadocian Fathers worked hard to bring those who were not Arian but who were confused by what the Nicene Creed affirmed (thinking it was saying that the Father and the Son were the same person) to the orthodox position, using the formula *"one substance (ousia) in three persons."*

In 381 Emperor Theodosius I called what would be the second ecumenical council at Constantinople to try and bring unity to the church on the issue of Arianism again.

The council not only brought an end to Arianism, the resulting creed (The Nicene Creed), also affirmed that the Holy Spirit was fully God too. We now had a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity.

The new Nicene Creed: *"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (aeons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen."*

The council also declared the teachings of Apollinarius as heresy. He taught that Jesus is God and had a human body but no human mind.

Questions about how Jesus could be both God and man at the same time would now dominate the next ecumenical councils.

5. The Council of Ephesus (431)

In 431 Emperor Theodosius II called the third ecumenical council because a great deal of controversy had been generated in the church by some of the teachings of Nestorius, who had been the bishop of Constantinople since 428.

At the time, the title Theotokos ('God bearer') had been given to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Nestorius rejected this title preferring to use Christotokos ('Christ bearer').

Nestorius' critics, including Cyril of Alexandria, accused him of teaching that Mary gave birth to the human person Jesus, but not to the divine Son who joined Himself to Jesus, thereby denying the reality of the incarnation.

The council ruled against Nestorius who was declared a heretic, and affirmed that Jesus was one person who is fully God and fully man, and that Mary was to be called Theotokos.

6. The Council of Chalcedon (451)

In 449 a second council of Ephesus was called because of the excommunication of a presbyter at Constantinople named Eutyches.

At the first council of Ephesus, he had vehemently opposed the teachings of Nestorius. But his teaching about Jesus turned out to be no better.

He taught that Christ had two natures before the incarnation – one human and one divine – but at the incarnation those two natures became one.

At this council in Ephesus, Dioscorus of Alexandria forced the bishops present to reinstate Eutyches, and it was those who had excommunicated him who were kicked out of the church.

When this news of this reached Rome, Pope Leo was not impressed, and termed it 'a robber council'.

After Theodosius II died, Marcion who was an orthodox Christian became Emperor of the eastern part of the Empire.

He called the council of Chalcedon in 451 to clear up the mess the church was in after the second council of Ephesus.

At Chalcedon, the 350 to 500 bishops who were present, reaffirmed the creeds of the previous ecumenical councils, and developed a creed which restated what Christians believe making clear that those who teach Arianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism were false teachers.

Chalcedonian Definition: "Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all unanimously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is to us One and the same Son, the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, the Self-same co-essential with us according to the Manhood; like us in all things, sin apart; before the ages begotten of the Father as to the Godhead, but in the last days, the Self-same, for us and for our salvation (born) of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to the Manhood; One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; even as from the beginning the prophets have taught concerning Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself hath taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers hath handed down to us."

9. All these controversies about the person of Christ and the councils called to resolve them left the church with two rich statements:

That there is one God who exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God.

That Christ is fully God and fully man in one person (sometimes called 'the hypostatic union').

C. Controversy about the Work of Christ

1. While all these controversies about the person of Christ were taking place in the church in the East, a controversy about the work of Christ was taking place in the church in the West.

In 410 when the city of Rome fell to Alaric and his Goths, a British born monk made his way to North Africa called Pelagius.

Pelagius taught that all human beings were born into the world as sinless as Adam was before the Fall.

He said that Adam's sin had not corrupted humanity, but had set a bad example, which most of humanity has followed.

This meant, according to Pelagius, that people were free either to sin or not to sin. It was even possible to live a sinless life.

Therefore people did not need to be saved by Jesus through His death on the cross, but could get to heaven by living a good life here on earth.

Humans could earn salvation by their own efforts.

2. Pelagius was opposed by Augustine, the bishop of Hippo.

Augustine said that in Adam all have sinned, and that sinners were unable to do the good works that could achieve salvation.

People were free but only to sin.

This meant that left to themselves, they are unable to choose to put their trust in Christ.

But God has chosen to save some, giving them the faith they need to trust in Christ and His death in their place that has taken the punishment their sins deserve.

3. Pelagius' teaching was first condemned as heresy by a synod in Carthage in 412, and finally by the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431.

But that wasn't the end of Pelagianism.

An adapted form known as semi-Pelagianism, which put simply, taught that the beginning of faith in Christ is not God's action but our decision came about, and sadly has not gone away.

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. We must fight against false teaching – it hasn't gone away.

"I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." (Jude 1:3)

This means that we need to keep believing the truth ourselves.

This means that we make a stand and speak out against those who teach what is contrary to the Bible.

2. We don't need to fear false teaching extinguishing orthodox Christianity.

God has always preserved a remnant of those who believe the truth as found in Scripture.

In spite of emperors who believed false teaching and tried to force it upon the church, the truth was not lost from the church during the time of the Imperial Church but made clearer to the church.

3. We should be thankful for those Christians who have gone before us, defending the faith against false teachers, and who have provided for us clear summaries about what the Bible teaches and what Christians must believe.