**Church History**

**Core Seminar**

**Class 3: Constantine, Controversy, and Councils**

**AD 312-500**

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*“What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.”* II Timothy 1:13-14

The early Christians faced several crises of authority. By the end of the first century, all of the apostles were dead, most of them as martyrs. Various biblical writings circulated, but the Spirit had not yet guided the church to agreement on a uniform canon of Scripture. Nor was there a clear tradition of common doctrine, or creeds or confessions to set the boundaries of orthodoxy. Divergent voices arose within the church, as various leaders emphasized different beliefs and practices. And some leaders introduced new, and often “unhelpful” or even heretical beliefs and practices into the faith. All of this occurred in the midst of political uncertainty. Periodic yet brutal campaigns by the Roman Empire to exterminate the Church suddenly gave way to Constantine’s acceptance and even endorsement of the faith. Which raised many new questions for the church about the relationship between earthly and heavenly authority. Threats from without and turmoil from within threatened the church’s very existence during its first few centuries, while Christians worked out their faith with “fear and trembling.”

This quickly brings us to the question of authority – who or what determines the true faith? Early Christians relied on the same sources we do today: Scripture and creeds. Last week we looked at the process of recognizing the canon. This week we will look at church councils. We will also continue to highlight certain church fathers of particular significance.

### ***THE RISE OF CONSTANTINE***

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In 312, a dramatic political change occurred in Rome that would have profound consequences for the Christian faith. A Roman leader named Constantine prepared for battle against Maxentius, his last rival for the throne. As Constantine himself later recounted the story, he decided to pray to the “Supreme God” for victory. As he was praying, he had a vision of a flaming cross that hovered in the sky emblazoned with the words, “Conquer by this.” Later that night, Christ appeared to him as he slept and showed him the sign of the Chi-Rho – the first two letters of Christ’s name in Greek – “as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.”[[1]](#footnote-1) When Constantine’s army met that of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge outside of Rome, Maxentius’s army was routed, their general executed, and Constantine took possession of the capital vowing to serve this new God whom he believed had won him the battle and the crown.

The next year Constantine issued the Edict of Milan (313), which granted Christians the right to worship, restored to them their properties and churches, and allowed them to be compensated for other losses they had suffered under persecution. He also permitted Christians to serve openly in the Roman government. Much as these measures brought great relief to the church, Constantine’s own faith remained, then and now, a puzzle. He seems to have embraced it as much for political benefit as out of genuine conviction; after all, Rome still operated under the assumption that the emperor was to seek the favor of the gods for Rome’s benefit.

Constantine did not fully understand the doctrines of Christianity, much less its implications. While he did not permit his own image to be worshipped in the temple, he allowed the imperial cult to remain, and continued to practice some pagan rites. He also maintained images of pagan deities on his coinage for more than a decade, most notably his personal favorite, the Sun, which he may have identified with Christ. Theologically he remained confused, flip-flopping between Arianism and orthodoxy, often depending on which side seemed to be more powerful rather than on which side was true. A man with a fierce temper, he had both his wife and his son put to death on charges of adultery (it is unclear if the charges were valid or not). Finally, Constantine refused to be baptized until on his deathbed, perhaps out of a fear of mortal sin or a rather superstitious belief in the power of baptism. After he died in 337, a succession of emperors veered between orthodoxy, Arianism, and paganism, until Theodosius I at the end of the century ordered the destruction of all pagan temples and made Christianity the official state religion of Rome.

Constantine left a mixed legacy for the church. Besides the relief that he granted Christians from persecution, he gave the faith a status and respect that it had never before enjoyed. He also used his power and prestige to help settle church disputes, such as convening the monumental church council at Nicea in AD325. But in his effort to harness the power of Christ in the service of Rome, he laid the foundation for the harmful establishment of “ceasaropapism,” the belief that the secular ruler, by divine mandate, becomes head of the church as well. Constantine even saw himself as the “13th Apostle.” And with the official endorsement of the empire, belief in Christ became more a means to political advancement than a matter of faith and repentance. Christianity became a cultural norm, and the church became confused with the world. Many of the ancient practices of the pagans began to infiltrate Christian worship, leading to unbiblical practices such as the veneration of Mary and the saints. Finally, Christians at times became the persecutors rather than the persecuted. When the pagan cult was outlawed, Roman officials banned pagans from the army, and even sentenced to death people who denied the Trinity (Arians) or repeated baptism (Donatists). Such are some of the dangers of allowing the state rather than God govern the church. [This should caution us as well. Much as we Christians are supremely blessed to live in America, we should not confuse our country or our government with God’s special covenant people.]

***FOURTH-CENTURY FATHERS***

Besides Constantine, three other 4th century leaders merit our attention.

**Ambrose, bishop of Milan**, was a well-educated, refined man of Rome who attained great influence with the Roman government. At one point, he successfully squelched an effort by the Roman empress Justina to bring Arian worship into the church, and later in his life became a close personal advisor of Emperor Theodosius. Christianity had come far in three centuries, from martyrdom at the Emperors’ hand to a seat at their tables. After the Arian bishop of Milan died, a spontaneous outpouring of support from the people elected Ambrose to the bishopric of Milan. This early example of potent congregationalism succeeded in completing the overthrow of Arianism in the West. Yet Ambrose left perhaps his greatest legacy by serving as a mentor to Augustine.

The leading biblical scholar of the late 4th and early 5th centuries was **Jerome**, who lived at Antioch. Cantankerous and combative, Jerome fervently denounced heretics and fellow believers alike. In 374, Jerome went to Rome to serve as secretary for Pope Damasus. During his time there, Damasus commissioned him to make a new translation of the biblical texts into Latin. When Damasus died, Jerome moved to Bethlehem and completed the *Vulgate*, which became the standard translation used by the Roman Catholic Church. Jerome also wrote commentaries on most of the Bible, and was a renowned exegete and teacher. He regarded a Christianized Rome as the culmination of divine agency in human history. When Rome fell, his faith was deeply shaken, and he asked “How can the mother of nations become their tomb?”

The most influential and important of the Fathers was **Augustine of Hippo**. Indeed, while the most trenchant Christian mind of his day, the subtle, prophetic, and profound Augustine may also be the greatest thinker the church has known in any day. Theology, political philosophy, and ethics have all been inescapably shaped by his thought. Born in 354 in a small town in what is now Algeria, he spent his young adult years living a sinful and licentious life, even to the point of fathering an illegitimate son by his concubine. Years of philosophical questioning and spiritual searching eventually led him to an overwhelming conviction of his own sin. This culminated in a dramatic conversion, which he described in the *Confessions*, a great classic of Christian devotion:

*Now when deep reflection had drawn up out of the secret depths of my soul all my misery and had heaped it up before the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by a mighty rain of tears…And, not indeed in these words, but in this effect, I cried out to thee: ‘And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities.”…I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or girl I know not which – coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, ‘Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.’…So I quickly returned to the bench…, for there I had put down the apostle’s book when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: ‘Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.’ I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Reviewing his own early rebellion and struggles to discover not just meaning in life but the meaning of life, Augustine came to understand that “our hearts are restless, and do not rest until they find their rest in Thee.”

He had studied under Ambrose, from whom he learned the philosophical truth of the faith. After assuming pastoral duties as Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, Augustine immersed himself in the theological and philosophical contentions of the day. This was no mere intellectual indulgence for him. Rather, as a pastor, he saw the consequences of false teachings and errors in the daily lives of those under his care. For example, in a misguided effort to create a completely pure church on earth, a group called the Donatists taught that any ordination of a minister or any administration of baptism or the Lord’s Supper that was not performed by an indisputably pure and genuine bishop was invalid. This made the legitimacy of ordination and the sacraments dependent not on God but on man. And it provoked many severe crises of faith for devoted Christians frightened that their baptism might not be valid because they could not be completely sure of the virtue of the minister who baptized them. Against Donatism, Augustine taught that it was the Lord God who created and controlled ordination and the sacraments, and that they were valid if they were performed as prescribed by God, in His name and for genuine believers.

Augustine’s most fierce and famous dispute was against Pelagianism. The British monk Pelagius, whose followers spread his teachings throughout North Africa, denied original sin and taught that humans are born basically good and through enough effort can attain perfection. It followed that since we are not true sinners, we do not need a true Savior, and so Christ did not die as a perfect substitute in our place, but merely set a good moral example that we should follow. [Though this heresy is ancient, it persists to this day. Modern examples of Pelagian doctrinal errors might include some varieties of liberal Protestantism, “health and wealth” teachings, Mormonism, Christian Science, et al.] In responding to the Pelagian heresy, Augustine relied first on Scripture and second on his own experience as a wretched sinner in rebellion against God who had been saved only by grace. He contended that not only was every human being born sinful as a son or daughter of Adam, but that we invariably choose to sin, and through our own effort we could do nothing to save ourselves. Rather, only through God’s initiative in graciously choosing to give us the gift of faith in Christ could we repent of our sins and trust in Christ for our salvation.

Augustine’s greatest masterpiece is *The City of God*. Writing in the immediate aftermath of Rome’s invasion by barbarian hordes (410), he responded to pagan critics who blamed Christianity for Rome’s fall and to Christians like Jerome whose faith had been shaken by their beloved city’s demise. Augustine made clear that Christians inhabit two “cities”: the city of man, which is our temporal residence on earth and which is based on love of self, and the City of God, which is our eternal home and which is based on love of God. In this life we inhabit both cities, and must be good citizens of both, but must never confuse the two – which some Christians had done in identifying Rome as the perfect city. After all, God’s kingdom was not bound to any earthly kingdom, and just as Christians could not achieve their own salvation, neither could they create an eternal paradise on earth, for their – and our – final home is in heaven.

***FOUR QUESTIONS, AND FOUR COUNCILS***

One way the church affirmed its faith from the very beginning was through creeds. As we saw last week, the early Christians recited simple creeds before being baptized, to affirm their common faith and to guard against error. The earliest and most eminent is the Apostle’s Creed, a version of which we find as early as 110 AD from the pen of Ignatius of Antioch.

Other challenges soon arose, however, and the Church held four councils during the fourth and fifth centuries, to resolve pressing theological matters as well as settle contentious political disputes. We can summarize each council as an attempt to each of four questions, all centered on the nature of Jesus Christ. **First**, Is Christ divine? **Second**, Is Christ human? **Third**, if yes to both, how are the two elements combined? And **fourth**, what language or terms do we use to describe Him?

*Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.)*

The Council of Nicaea in 325 addressed this first question. The controversy began around 318 when the city of Alexandria erupted in dispute. One of the elders, Arius, under the influence of Platonic thought and desiring to maintain the absolute supremacy of God the Father, proposed that Jesus had been created, had not existed eternally, and could therefore not be divine like the Father. The bishop over the city, Alexander, and his archdeacon Athanasius vehemently opposed this false teaching and defended the Trinity and the Incarnation from serious error. In 321, a synod called at Alexandria deposed Arius and condemned his doctrine, but this just exacerbated instead of ending the struggle. A spellbinding orator and charismatic personality, Arius then succeeded in winning to his side several of the leading church members, and the situation grew steadily worse. After writing to the disputants in an effort to quell this “theological trifle,” Constantine finally realized the enormity of the issue and exercised his authority as head of the church to call an empire-wide council at Nicaea, in Northwest Asia Minor, to decide the issue. Constantine himself was sympathetic to Arianism, and was more concerned to preserve cultural and political unity than theological orthodoxy. Alexander and Athanasius vigorously and persuasively defended God the Son as being of the same “substance” as God the Father, and succeeded in persuading almost the entire council along with the emperor. Arius himself was deposed and excommunicated, and the council adopted a creed that stands today as an orthodox statement of Christian belief.

Athanasius based his defense of orthodoxy on three grounds. First, the truth of Scripture, many passages of which taught the full divinity of Christ. Second, the logic of salvation, by which for Christ to atone for our sins and mediate between God and man, He had to be fully divine. Third, the experience and support of many common Christians. Ordinary believers had been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and had prayed to Christ for years. Many of them supported Athanasius, for these new teachings of Arius struck them as muddle-headed and wrong. Here again, we see an early example of congregationalism, as the lay people resisted heresy promoted by their leaders. In praising Athanasius, C.S. Lewis made a trenchant observation: “He stood up for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions…which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

As one Christian scholar has noted, “Arius’s appeal to what he considered the logic of monotheism illustrates a recurring tendency throughout Christian history to subject the facts of divine revelation to current conceptions of ‘the reasonable’.”[[4]](#footnote-4) [Arianism persists in various forms even today; Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, hold to this false teaching.] We must always remember that our faith is grounded finally on the revelation of God in the person of Christ and in the Word of the Bible – not in whatever may seem “reasonable” to us at any given time. Just about every Christian belief has been denounced as “unreasonable” at different times and places in history – whether the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the inspiration of the Bible, the divine creation of the world, the equality of all human beings, or ones quite unpopular and “unreasonable” today, including the existence of hell, the exclusivity of Christ for salvation, the omniscience and sovereignty of God, biblical sexual morality…

*Council of Constantinople (381)*

After Constantine’s death, the Nicene consensus began to unravel. Nicaea may have affirmed Christ as fully God, but soon new groups of heretical theologians began to make new mischief. One cabal, led by Apollinaris and known (as you might guess) as the Apollinarians, denied that Christ had a human soul, thus pressing the second big question of Christ’s humanity. Meanwhile, another group known as the Pneumatomachians, or Fighters Against the Spirit, denied the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Besides their heresy, their ridiculous name also limited their ability to attract more followers – people probably didn’t want to join a group they couldn’t pronounce. Nevertheless, the Council of Constantinople in 381 rejected both of these heresies, and affirmed the full divinity of all three persons of the Trinity as well as the full humanity of Christ. This Council also slightly modified the Nicene Creed to give us the version we still confess together today. As one Christian scholar has observed, “The turning point in Christian history represented by the Nicene Creed was the Church’s critical choice for the wisdom of God in preference to human wisdom.”[[5]](#footnote-5) And human wisdom, as we read in I Corinthians, is really no wisdom at all, but just “foolishness to God.”

Constaninople also marked the final death of Arianism. Though it had been formally rejected at Nicaea, Arianism had not been fully expunged from the church. Athanasius, for example, found himself exiled no fewer than five times after Nicaea as the imperial office seesawed from Christian to non-Christian to Arian and back to Christian. Many Arian theologians were re-appointed to their posts, some of them even becoming top advisors to Constantine. In some ways, the Arian dispute touched also on the relationship of church and state. Arian emperors and their followers usually favored direct government control over the church. Just as God ruled over the Son, they reasoned, so should the Empire rule over the Church. Orthodox Christians tended to reject this model as they rejected Arianism. The Church needed to have some autonomy, particularly in spiritual matters. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan whom we looked at earlier, gave a powerful illustration of this when he refused communion to Emperor Theodosius, until Theodosius confessed and repented a particular sin. [also illustrate with President Eisenhower and Rev. Elson, baptism and membership? If anyone here plans on running for president, I hope that no matter how powerful you become, you always belong to a local church, and submit to its authority]

*Council of Ephesus (431); or, A Tale of Two Cities*

With Jesus’ full divinity and full humanity established, many thought that lasting peace could finally come to the church. It proved to be an empty hope. If Jesus was both God and man, our third question arose: how are these two elements related to each other? This question proved especially vexing in the Eastern Church, both because the West was more focused on fending off the barbarian invasions, and because the West did not share the East’s predilection for rarefied philosophical speculation. The questions, though technical, were of vital importance. Two schools of thought emerged in the East, centered in two different cities, and divided as much by intellectual disagreement as by political rivalry. One group, centered in Antioch, emphasized the human nature of Jesus, and held that his two natures were distinct and only loosely connected within the person of Christ. Another group, situated in Alexandria, emphasized Jesus’s divinity to such an extent that they diminished his human nature.

In 428, a man named Nestorius became Bishop of Constantinople. Raised under the Antioch teaching, he argued further that neither of the two natures of Christ shared in the properties of the other. He could not bring himself to believe that the divine had either been born or crucified, railing against the idea that the eternal God could be three days old, and saying at one point that “God is not a baby.” Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, accused Nestorius of heresy and a bitter exchange of letters ensued. Cyril wanted to maintain a strict unity of Christ’s nature, rather than creating a duality as Nestorius had. He wrote that if Nestorius were right and the two natures of Christ were strictly separated, then it was only the human nature that had suffered and died, and mere humanity could never accomplish redemption. The emperor in 431 called the bishops of the empire to assemble in Ephesus to decide the question. Cyril and his Alexandrian supporters arrived in the city first, convened the council before Nestorius’s supporters had even arrived, and promptly excommunicated Nestorius. One good turn deserves another, so when John, the Bishop of Antioch, arrived with Nestorius’s supporters, they convened their own council across town, declared themselves the true council, and excommunicated Cyril. In return, Cyril’s council fired off yet another round of excommunications, this time targeting Bishop John and the Antiochenes. Fed up with this squabbling, Emperor Theodosius II intervened. He had both Cyril and John arrested and declared the various excommunications void. Theologically, the emperor sided more with the Alexandrians. He banished Nestorius into exile in a monastery, and saw to it that the Council of Ephesus affirmed the dynamic interchange of the two elements in the person of Christ.

*Council of Chalcedon (451)*

The messy resolution at Ephesus was really little resolution at all. Though Ephesus affirmed the two natures of Christ, the difficult fourth question of how to describe their relation remained. Just a few years later, the controversy flared again. In 446, a monk in Constantinople named Eutyches began to argue that before Christ’s incarnation He had two natures, but after His incarnation, these two unions were thoroughly blended, the human nature being dissolved into the divine much as a drop of wine is dissolved into the sea. The nature of Jesus, therefore, was neither perfectly divine nor perfectly human. Emperor Theodosius learned of this latest controversy in the East, and called a council in 449 to settle the question. Dioscorus, the Bishop of Alexandria who supported Eutyches, paid the Emperor large amounts of gold and shrewdly maneuvered his supporters to guarantee that their views would prevail at the council. They would not even listen to a letter sent by Leo, Bishop of Rome in the West, defending the orthodox view of Christ’s two natures. Instead, the corrupt Dioscorus declared the orthodox view to be “heretical” and banished anyone who held it from leadership in the church. An infuriated Bishop Leo dismissed this council as a “robber’s synod.” Chaos, division, and heresy seriously threatened the Church.

In one of those bizarre yet providential turns of history, a clumsy horse helped solve the debate. The next year, the horse that Emperor Theodosius was riding stumbled, and the Emperor fell and broke his neck. The new emperor who succeeded Theodosius affirmed the orthodox view of Christ, and immediately called for a new council at Chalcedon, across the river from Constantinople, in 451. This time, Leo’s position was accepted. His described his views in the *Tome* of Leo, which declared Christ to be a single person, *“perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man . . . in two natures, inconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparately.”* Moreover, Leo connected this doctrine with Christ’s saving work. Christ came *“so that death might be conquered and so that the devil, who once exercised death’s sovereignty, might by its power be destroyed, for we would not be able to overcome the author of sin and of death unless he whom sin could not stain nor death could not hold took on our nature and made it his own.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Chalcedon affirmed an orthodox Christology, but it was almost as important for what it did *not* say. Chalcedon laid down the fences guarding the orthodox doctrine of Christ as one person who is fully God and fully Man, yet it resisted the temptation to define precisely what cannot be precisely defined. The Apostle Paul several times describes the Gospel as a “mystery,” and at its core is the mystery of how God became Man. One reason so many of these early church figures fell into error was that they tried to go beyond what Scripture has revealed in how we can describe Christ. The Lord used the Council at Chalcedon to reject these various errors, to affirm a biblical view of Christ, and to establish barriers preventing us from speculating beyond that biblical view.

Yet Chalcedon revealed a growing divide in the Church. Much as the East came to accept the Chalcedonian theology, the East also came to resent the West’s, particularly Rome’s assertion of supreme authority at Chalcedon. Though the official split between East and West would not happen for another 600 years, the effective split had already begun.

***CONCLUSION***

In our second class we saw how the church survived persecution, and asked whether it could survive acceptance? Acceptance brought a new set of challenges, of course, but it also brought new opportunities. As the faith continued to grow, the church also clarified what it did and did not believe. These were not just esoteric theological disputes, for in many of these cases, questions about Christ’s nature impinged directly on matters of the Trinity and salvation. Here again we see our Lord faithfully preserving his church, amidst all sorts of challenges and from all sorts of errors. And here also we see the supreme importance of the Bible, the final authority governing our church and our lives, God’s word to His people then – and now.

1. Downey, *Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity*, p.139. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine, *Confessions* (Penguin edition), 177-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quoted in Noll, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Noll, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted in Noll, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)