



SESSION 10: COUNCIL OF NICEA, ARIANISM, ANTONY & ATHANASIOS – CONTENT

1. Constantine wanted to create a new center of his consolidated empire to be closer to the Roman armies, to avoid the political establishment in Rome, and to serve as a cultural and trading center with the frontiers of Europe and Asia. He chose the site of an existing city, Byzantium, which had existed since 600 BC. Called ‘New Rome’ the city was built hastily in six years, by moving great works of art and edifices (marble, columns, etc.) from other locations. It was dedicated on May 11, 330, and had seven miles of protective walls (see city map). He never placed himself under Christian teachers or bishops, considering himself the bishop of bishops. He sought the good will of the Christian God while maintaining good relations with observers of ancient religions. He was baptized on his deathbed in 337.
2. In 324, Constantine conquered the Eastern Emperor Licinius, thus consolidating the empire. Why did he attack Licinius? Although Licinius had aligned with Constantine in issuing the Edict of Milan to end persecution of Christians, he soon started an anti-Christian campaign, began killing Eastern bishops, conducted indiscriminate persecutions, and began plotting against Constantine. This is evidenced by his treatment of Priscilla, wife of the deceased Diocletian, and her daughter. Although the two women had apostasized in 303 when Diocletian started his persecutions, they appealed to Diocletian to stop as persecution grew intense. Diocletian refused. Upon his death Licinius was designated as their guardian. Fearing Licinius, they fled to Maximinus. When Licinius defeated Maximinus he had Priscilla (now Saint Alexandra) and her daughter executed.
3. Developments within the Church (~320): Many churches were being built throughout the Empire, and the basilica form became standard. Incense came into routine use, and clerical garments became standard. Processionals and choirs were introduced and relics of saints were routinely venerated. Helena, Constantine’s mother, went to Jerusalem, found the cross, and distributed pieces throughout the Empire.
4. Council of Nicea (325): Bishop Alexander (Alexandria) had condemned Arius and removed him from office. He was banned from cities by Constantine, but appealed to the people and to friendly bishops. Constantine stepped in and called for this council, the first Ecumenical Council. It was attended by over 200 bishops, but only six from the West. Two of those were bishops sent by bishop Sylvester of Rome, who did not attend.

Arius attended and at one point burst into song, “The uncreated God has made the Son. A beginning of things created, and by adoption has God made the Son into an advancement of Himself. Yet the Son’s substance is removed from the Father, and the Son is the teacher of all His mysteries. The members of the Holy Trinity share unequal glories.”

The Council of Nicea concluded that: 1) Christ is Very God of Very God, 2) Christ is of one substance with the father, 3) Christ was begotten, not made, and 4) Christ became human for man’s salvation. It also: 1) passed the first canons, defining Church structure, 2) called for regular,

provincial councils of bishops, and 3) recognized Alexandria, Rome and Antioch as jurisdictions (i.e. patriarchates).

5. In 325 the heresy of Eusebianism or semi-Arianism appeared. Eusebius of Nicomedia (not Eusebius of Caesarea) was its author, and Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Laodicea were its supporters. (Until then they had been close associates of the Cappadocian Fathers.) Called ‘binitarians’, they said that: 1) Christ is similar in essence to the Father but subordinate to Him, 2) the Son was always with the Father, and 3) the Holy Spirit is not a godhead. This was a compromise precipitated by the Council of Nicea, and it was condemned at a council in Constantinople in 360. But Constantine made Eusebius bishop of Constantinople, which precipitated Athanasios’ first exile, to Trier in Germany.
6. In 328 Constantine revoked the banishment of Arius, probably because Arians came to favor imperial control of the Church, saying, “As the Son is subordinate to the Father, so must the Church be subordinate to the Emperor”. The Arians and Romans ascribed to this; all other churches rejected it, saying that when the Emperor is in the Church, as a Christian, he is under the authority of the bishops, thus affirming independence of Church from state.
7. Around 330 the heresy of Encratitism (‘abstainers’) appeared especially among monastic communities. They said: 1) no meat or wine, 2) no marriage, 3) Paul’s epistles are not acknowledged, 4) woman is the work of Satan, and 5) natural secretions from the body are sinful. The Edict of Theodosius (382) pronounced a death sentence upon them.
8. After hearing Matthew 19:21, Antony the Great (251-356) went into the Egyptian desert to find God. He lived alone, battled with demons, and was the father of hermetic monasticism. He visited Athanasios in Alexandria in 338 and wrote seven letters to monastic communities shortly thereafter. He is the prototype of the spiritual guide (geron, starets, or abba). He lived for 105 years, advising monks and others who sought him.
9. Athanasios the Great (295-373) committed himself to Christ at an early age, attended the Council of Nicea with bishop Alexander as his deacon and succeeded him in 328. He was a formidable, unrelenting opponent of Arianism, known as the ‘black dwarf’ by his enemies, as the ‘Defender of the Faith’ and ‘the Father of Orthodoxy’ by the Church, and as *Athanasios contra atundum* (Athanasios against the world) by many. He held that the Church was a sacramental, mystical body over which the Emperor had no control. He promoted cooperation between Church and state, with bishops having authority to decide matters in their synods, and the Emperor with the right and responsibility to maintain peace in the Church and to defend the faith. Without his influence the Church might have developed into an imperial Church subservient to the state. Due to the waffling of Constantine on Arianism, and the changing dominance of his successor sons – some Arians, some not – Athanasios was exiled five times! He was very supportive of the development of monasticism and spent many of those exiles with the desert monks. During one of those periods he wrote a biography of Antony the Great. He also wrote On the Incarnation and many letters. In his Paschal letter of 367 Athanasios listed 27 books as New Testament canon; several synods and councils ratified the list. Thus our New Testament was established.