

Part 1: The Ancient Church (100-500)

Week 4: The Councils of the Church

The First Ecumenical Council: Nicea (325)

1. Called in response to the rise of Arianism, which caused great upheaval in the Empire
2. Arius (250-336) was a presbyter in Egypt, under bishop Alexander of Alexandria. He was a powerful preacher and reports said he was tall and looked as if he had been fasting and praying for a long time and was popular with many women.
3. His teaching caused concern with Alexander, who heard that Arius was undermining the true deity of Christ.
4. Arius' followers wrote short, rhyming songs to express their theology. One said, "There was when he was not" (Dr. Godfrey calls these the first "praise songs"). To this the orthodox Christians responded, "There was not when he was not."
5. This controversy was at the heart of Christianity: who is Jesus? A number of solutions have been offered in the history of the Church:
 - a. Adoptionism – The man Jesus was especially favored by God and therefore received the Christ at his baptism.
 - b. Docetism - Jesus only "appeared" to be a man as he was really God.
 - c. Tritheism -- there are three Gods: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - d. Modalism (also known as "Sabellianism" after the heretic Sabellius) – there is one God who has revealed himself successively in history in three different ways, or, modes: Father, Son, and Holy Spirits also called Sabellianism. This is also called Patripassionism since this means that the Father died on the cross.
 - e. Subordinationism - the Son is somehow lower, or, an inferior God to the Father.
6. Arius was excommunication from the church at Alexandria. This shocked his friends, such as Eusebius of Nicomedia, who declared that Arius was orthodox and urged Alexander to reinstate him; which Alexander rejected.
7. The tension in Alexandria grew, leading to riots in the streets. This caused the Emperor, Constantine the Great, to intervene. He sent an ambassador, Hosius, a bishop from Spain, to investigate.
8. Hosius sided with Alexander. This led Arius to take the matter to court in Antioch (where he was trained) as a way to rally support.
9. The continuing controversy led Constantine to believe that an ecumenical council was needed. In May, 325, about 220 bishops gathered in Nicea. Only 7 of the delegates were from Greek-speaking churches. They gathered in the great hall and Constantine gave a speech calling for orthodoxy and harmony.
10. The debate centered around the Greek word *homoousios* ("of the same substance") – that the Son was of the same substance as the Father, and were thereby co-equal and co-eternal. This appealed greatly to the Western delegates and also to Alexander's young deacon Athanasius. Some Eastern bishops were concerned that using that term would be giving in to the West, since the word was already used by some in the West. Constantine liked the word and said that everyone had to sign the creed or be exiled. When they were signing the creed, a few bishops the added an *iota* (the Greek letter "i") and made the word *homoiousios*, which meant, "of a similar substance."
11. Thus Arius and some of his supporters were banished by the church. This caused a sharp Arian reaction. A pagan observer, Amianus, said that during the next thirty-five years the "highways were covered with pagan bishops."
12. In 328 bishop Alexander had died and Athanasius had become bishop in his place. In the mean time, Constantine was influenced by Eusebius of Nicodemia, who said that Arius' intentions were good. Constantine then decided to readmit Arius into the church. The problem was that excommunication could only be lifted by the same

bishop who executed it, who at this time was Athanasius, a staunch defender of orthodoxy and opponent of Arius. The result? Constantine banished Athanasius to Gaul (France) in 335. Later in 336 a grand ceremony for the reinstatement of Arius was scheduled, but the night before he died.

The Second Ecumenical Council: Constantinople (381)

1. Rejected the teachings of the Macedonians, who denied the deity of the Holy Spirit, by adding the large section on the Holy Spirit to the Nicene Creed.

The Third Ecumenical Council: Ephesus (431)

1. The controversy over who Jesus was, was not over once the Nicene Creed was written. The next issue that confronted the Church was how did Christ’s divine nature relate to His human nature?
2. This controversy began with Apollinarius, a bishop in Syria, who was a champion of Nicene orthodoxy. He said that humans are made up of three parts: body, soul (which he called the *anima animans* – a living soul, which all animals have), and spirit (which he called the *anima rationalis* – a rational soul, which differentiates humans from animals). In Jesus, the eternal Word (Greek, *logos*, took the place of the *anima rationalis*:

Apollinarius

Spirit (Logos)	<u><i>anima rationalis</i></u>
Soul	<u><i>anima animans</i></u>
Body	

3. The church realized that Jesus does not remain fully human in this analysis. He becomes a *tertium quid*, a “third thing.” Jesus, then, would not derive His thoughts from the human nature but from the divine! Apollinarius’ theology allows the divinity of Christ to swallow-up His humanity. Later, those who held this were known as the Monophysites (“one nature”).
4. This controversy continued with Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople. He was known as an eloquent preacher, zealous for orthodoxy, an honest, ascetic bishop, but who also was vain and lacked good judgment.
5. His trouble began with the phrase *theotokos* (Greek, “bearer of God”). Calling Mary the “God-bearer,” or, “mother of God,” arose in the context of Arianism. It was not a title of honor for Mary, but was used to make a statement about the child she bore. The focus was not that Christ received his divine nature from Mary, but that the child in Mary’s womb was fully divine, that Jesus is God.
6. Nestorius thought that this term would lead to confusion so he called Mary *christotokos*, “bearer of Christ.” Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 88, says, “What Nestorius meant to accomplish here is apparent. He meant to establish that Mary did not give birth to the divine Logos, but to the man Jesus who was united with the deity. Unfortunately, in his discussions of this theme Nestorius made use of provocative phraseology. He argued, for instance, that a woman could not carry the deity for nine months in her womb, or that the deity could hardly be wrapped in diapers. Nor could it have been suffered, died and found itself buried.”
7. This led to the question, “Was Nestorius incorrectly relating the divine and human natures of Christ?” He was charged with teaching that Jesus was two persons, one divine and one human, almost as if Jesus was schizophrenic, by his chief opponent,

Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria (by this time Alexandria's influence was dwindling, while Constantinople's was growing; thus Cyril was eager for political reasons, as well, to seek to show Constantinople's bishop was a heretic).

8. Cyril was the better theologian, but was known as an "unlovable defender of the truth." He wrote to the Emperor, Emperor's assistant, and to Celestine, Bishop of Rome to get support against Nestorius.
9. In 430 Celestine demanded Nestorius to recant his theology, which he didn't. Thus another ecumenical council met in 431 in Ephesus. The placement of this council was also a political move as Nestorius wouldn't get much sympathy there. In Ephesus there was an intense devotion to the virgin Mary and Nestorius had been labeled publicly as an attacker of the virgin Mary. The crowds marched through the city charging Nestorius with heresy (it is interesting to note that Ephesus was an ancient Roman city dedicated to the earth Mother and that it had a tendency for devotion to female goddesses).
10. When the 160 delegates had arrived Nestorius was excommunicated. A few days later, John, Bishop of Antioch, arrived with 40 bishops to support Nestorius. After hearing what had happened he opened his own council and excommunicated Cyril.
11. The conclusion of the Council of Ephesus was that Christ was affirmed to be one Person, with two full and complete natures. The title *theotokos* was also deemed to be an appropriate title for Mary.
12. Nestorius died in 439 and his followers were exiled from the Empire. Because of this there were able to do missionary work outside the Empire. They were successful as they were not seen as bringing a Roman religion. Remarkably, they had sent missionaries to India and China by the 9th century!

The Fourth Ecumenical Council: Chalcedon (451)

1. Again, things were still not settled. Ephesus had condemned Nestorianism and its teaching that Christ was divided into two Persons. The opposite extreme, though, had begun to arise. As said above, this view was known as Monophysite theology, said that Christ was one Person with one nature.
2. This teaching was espoused by Eutyches, who said that the humanity of Jesus absorbed the divinity of Christ, thus, all that remained was the divine nature. Therefore, because the humanity of Christ was deified (it became divine), the flesh of Christ was not *homoousian* with our flesh! Christ does not have the human substance like ours!
3. In the midst of another period of theological confusion among the people of God, both sides appealed to Leo, Bishop of Rome (known in history as Leo the Great), who with Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople, said that the decision of Ephesus should be maintained.
4. The Emperor, though, called a council that met in Ephesus in 449. This council is known as "The Robbers' Council." Dioscorus presided and proceed to excommunicate Leo and Flavian.
5. In 450 the Emperor died and the new Emperor called for a council to meet in 451 in Nicea, as a way to show the continuity of this council with the first great ecumenical council. But he moved the council to Chalcedon as he wanted to keep it under his direct supervision. About 500-600 bishops were present along with the entire Roman senate!
6. The result was the great Definition of Chalcedon, which declared that Jesus is consubstantial with His Father according to His divine nature and consubstantial with us according to His human nature, and that these two natures are not confused or changed (against Eutyches and the Monophysites), without division or separation (against Nestorius), and that He has a human body and rational soul (against Apollinarius).

The Fifth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople (553)

Affirmed the first four councils, especially Chalcedon, which was being attacked by heretics.

The Sixth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople (680-681)

Condemned monothelism (belief which said Christ had only one will) and affirmed that Christ had two wills, a divine and a human will which worked in harmony.