

Epochs of Early Church History

I. Constantine

A. Early Life

1. Constantine's birth was ca. 273, and he died in 337.
2. Constantine's father was Constantius I Chlorus, who, under Diocletian (245-313; emperor, 284-305), was named one of the Caesar' who assisted Maximian in ruling the Western Roman Empire. After Diocletian and Maximian retired (305), Constantius and Galerius became the Augusti (Constantius in the West and Galerius in the East)
3. Upon the death of his father, Constantius (July 25, 306), and after the retirement of Galerius (Dec. 26, 308), a civil war erupted in which different men were vying for the control of the Empire.

B. His Rise to Emperor

1. Constantine, through a series of events, by ca. 310 claimed to be the sole emperor, but his claim was contested by two other surviving contestants for the throne, Licinius in the East and Maxentius in the West.
2. Constantine's first foe to conquer was Maxentius, and he met and defeated him at the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312.
 - a. Sometime before this encounter it is believed that Constantine became a Christian.
 - b. There are two accounts of how his conversion came about:
 - (1) The first is that he received instructions in a dream to paint the Christian symbol on the shields of his troops.
 - (2) The other account is that during the conflict with Maxentius, the Christian sign appeared in the sky with these words, "In this sign, conquer."
 - c. Regardless how it occurred, it did occur, and Constantine became committed to Christ and the Christian cause.
3. After his defeat of Maxentius in 312, Constantine became the sole leader in the West, and that left Licinius in the East, who, after defeating Maximinus in 313, became the sole leader in the East.
4. After Constantine's victory over Maxentius, he subsequently

issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which extended toleration to the Christians, as well as restoring any personal and corporate property that had been confiscated during the persecution of Diocletian (303-305).

5. The ultimate showdown came between Constantine and Licinius in the summer of 324, in which Constantine won successive victories, leading to the eventual capture and execution of Licinius in the Spring of 325.
6. Constantine was now the sole Roman Emperor, something that had not occurred since 286.

C. His Role as Spiritual Leader

1. From a spiritual perspective, Constantine was very upset about the divisions in the Christian Church as his desire was to have unity and peace now that he was the sole Emperor.
2. Consequently, when the debate arose with Arius over whether or not Jesus was a “created being,” or whether He was eternally God, Constantine was prompted to call a church council on May 25, 325, at Nicea to hopefully resolve this issue.

II. The Church Councils

A. The Council of Nicea - 325 AD

1. The conflict over the person of Jesus, was He a created being, or was He eternally God, came to the forefront with the teaching of Arius (250-336).
2. His teachings may be summed up as follows:
 - a. The Word who assumed flesh in Jesus Christ was not the true God.
 - b. He had an entirely different nature that was neither eternal, nor omnipotent.
 - c. To call Jesus God meant that He exhibited divine qualities, but He was a lesser being, or half-God, not the eternal and changeless Creator.
 - d. He was the first and greatest created Being, but a created being nonetheless.
 - e. Thus, there was a time when He had no existence, and He was capable of change and alternating between good and evil.
3. His teachings were resolutely opposed by Athanasius (296-373), and on July 25, 325, the Council, prompted by Constantine to come to a decision, voted to reject Arius’ teaching in favor of what became known as the 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, 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; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

- 4. The central area of emphasis in this Creed is the phrase “one substance,” thus emphasizing the fact that Jesus and the Father are of the very same substance and co-equal and co-eternal.**

B. The Council of Constantinople – 381 AD

- 1. One of the important issues that this Council confronted was the teaching of Apollinarius (296-373).**
- 2. Apollinarius taught that the human nature contained both body and soul.**
- 3. At the incarnation, the Logos displaced the animating and rational soul in the body of Jesus.**
- 4. This in turn created a unity of nature between the Logos and the body.**
- 5. Thus, humanity became the sphere of salvation, not the instrument, and what you have is the Logos encased in a body of flesh.**
- 6. Thus, what you have is the emphasis on the deity of Christ, but a body that only represented the human nature of Christ.**
- 7. The argument arose that if this is so, then how can man be fully redeemed from sin if Jesus only appeared to have a human nature (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15-16)?**

8. Thus, Apollinarius' teaching was rejected in favor of the truth that Christ was fully human.
- C. The Council of Ephesus – 431**
1. This Council dealt with the teachings of Nestorius (d. 451), who rejected the reference to Mary as the “God-bearer, Mother of God.”
 2. While Nestorius did not deny the deity of Christ, he so emphasized the integrity of Christ's humanity that he claimed the union between the human and divine natures was one of a moral “conjunction,” versus an essential “union.”
 3. He in turn refused to attribute to the divine nature the human actions and sufferings of Jesus the man.
 4. In essence, he believed that the two natures self-subsisted and were not capable of physically uniting in the person of a God-man.
 5. The Council concluded, however, over against Nestorius' teaching, that Christ was indeed a unified person, and that the union was not simply a moral “conjunction,” but rather an essential “union” of the two natures.
- D. The Council of Chalcedon – 451 AD**
1. In this Council, the teachings of Eutyches (378-454) were confronted.
 2. Eutyches, in wanting to emphasize the divine nature of Christ as being the dominant one, combined the two natures so intrinsically that the human nature was virtually fully absorbed in the divine.
 3. He likened this union to a drop of honey falling into the sea and being completely dissolved in the ocean water as the human nature of Christ being completely absorbed into the divine.
 4. Thus, the human nature of Jesus is virtually lost and non-existent in the divine.
 5. This teaching, similar to Apollinarius' teaching, placed in question the whole teaching of Christ's redemption.
 6. Thus, the following statement was issued to substantiate the fact that Christ was both fully God and fully man:

We all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, . . . acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change,

without division, or without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and coming together to form one person.

E. Conclusion

Thus the Church affirmed the following things:

- 1. Against Arius, the Church affirmed that Jesus was truly God, eternally God, not created.**
- 2. Against Apollinarius, the Church affirmed that Jesus was fully human and a man with a nature like ours.**
- 3. Against Nestorius, the Church affirmed that Jesus was one, undivided person.**
- 4. Against Eutyches, the Church affirmed that Jesus was fully God and fully man, and that his deity and humanity both remained intact.**