Chapter 10: History Class – Roman Imperial Christianity & the Trinity Doctrine

“Constantine probably wasn’t particularly concerned with the minutiae of Christian religious doctrine, if he even knew or cared what it was in the first place, he just wanted the bishops to stop squabbling like petulant children and causing him more headaches. So, he convened the Council of Nicea calling together the bishops to debate their issues. Of the roughly three hundred who attended, only five came from the Latin churches in the West and the bishop of Rome was not one of them; a point I will come back to shortly.

“Constantine wanted the bishops to settle their disputes once and for all; or, so he hoped. Most bishops were on the side of Arius, the priest whose teachings sparked the council to determine the precise nature of God. Arius, like many others, taught the belief that Jesus, though still God, was subordinate or similar to the Father who had created him. This belief was in direct opposition to the trinitarian camp who believed that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were one and the same. Crucially, however, most of the bishop’s didn’t agree with this new position on Jesus, and due to Constantine’s politically motivated interference in swaying their vote, the arguing continued for generations. Church historians don’t publicize that even though Arius was exiled after the council for his newly branded and officially certified heretical beliefs, he was later pardoned by Constantine and welcomed back, while some of the winning opponents were subsequently disgraced and banished. Most amusingly, the bishop who finally baptized Constantine on his deathbed—Eusebius of Nicomedia—was a supporter of Arian beliefs. What does that tell you about the legitimacy and acceptance of the Trinity doctrine?

“History professor Howard Drake proposed in Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance that Constantine deliberately tried to drive a wedge between the two opposing sides in order to force a consensus. He achieved this goal by offering tax breaks to the moderate bishops, whereby they agreed to compromise and vote with the fully trinitarian side against the Arius faction. This strategy ultimately worked, as only two dissenting bishops voted against what became the Nicene understanding of Jesus being the same as God. So, because a Roman emperor backed the scripturally unsupported doctrine of one particular sect by bribing the bishops with tax incentives, you, my dear Christian classmates, ended up with the Trinity as an orthodox tenet of your faith. I guess money talks, and that saying applied just as much back then as it does today.”

“You have to be making that up,” Linda objected. “Surely, such an important Christian doctrine wasn’t decided over a simple thing like taxes.”

“If you don’t believe me or Professor Drake, would you listen to one of the most respected theologians in Christian history, Gregory of Nazianzus, Archbishop of Constantinople, also known as Gregory the Theologian, a Cappadocian Father, and a Doctor of the Church? During the following years, the issue of the divinity of Jesus stayed pretty much unresolved, while bishops continued teaching whatever doctrine they pleased. In 371, after Emperor Valens split Cappadocia into two provinces, a power struggle emerged between the bishops of the new two dioceses, Anthimus of Tyana on the Arian side and the trinitarian Saint Basil of Caesarea, which highlighted the ongoing doctrinal conflict and the continued use of taxation tactics. Gregory commented on this twice, once in his Orationes, and again in one of his autobiographical poems where he noted, ‘Souls were the pretext, but the real cause was desire for power. I hesitate to say it, but the wretched fact is that it is revenue and taxes that motivate the whole world.’

“Subsequent emperors, including Constantine’s son who held the Arian view, continued insinuating themselves into the ongoing and heated debates over the nature of Jesus, and the constant flip-flopping over which doctrine received official imperial sanction. This was perfectly illustrated by Constantius II at the Council of Milan which he called in 355. The views of Constantius II were recorded by Athanasius of Alexandria in his book, History of the Arians, where he stated, ‘Whatever I will, be that esteemed a Canon; the Bishops of Syria let me thus speak. Either then obey, or go into banishment.’ Despite his efforts to inject his personal views into the doctrinal debates, the councils called by Constantius II, who was written off as a heretic, are not counted among the major general assemblies of the Church.

“Athanasius was an extremely vocal champion of the trinitarian side which won at Nicea; in fact, it was his protests against Arius which sparked the Council in the first place. Recall I just mentioned that Arius was pardoned and some of his opponents were banished. Guess who was one of them? The trinitarian zealotry of Athanasius did not win him any friends, as he was exiled five times by four different emperors for his vigorous opposition to the Arians; including his antagonisms of Constantius II. He is also the earliest source to have listed, in 367, the twenty-seven books which comprise the New Testament canon.

“Further, Constantius II called the Western bishops together in 359 at the Council of Ariminum in northeast Italy, where the Nicene orthodoxy was overturned due to a complete absence of any trinitarian basis ‘according to the scriptures.’ Saint Jerome—who translated the Bible from Greek into Latin, which became the Vulgate, the Vatican’s official version—documented this dramatic turn of events in his Dialogue Against the Lucasarians, writing: ‘The Nicene Faith stood condemned by acclamation. The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian.’ Another of the Church Fathers, Socrates Scholasticus or Socrates of Constantinople, noted the new creed approved at the council in his Church History.

We believe in one only and true God, the Father Almighty, the Creator and Framer of all things: and in one only-begotten Son of God. . . . As for the term substance, which was used by our fathers for the sake of greater simplicity, but not being understood by the people has caused offense on account of the fact that the Scriptures do not contain it, it seemed desirable that it should be wholly abolished, and that in future no mention should be made of substance in reference to God, since the divine Scriptures have nowhere spoken.
concerning the substance of the Father and the Son. But we say that the Son is in all things like the Father, as the Holy Scriptures affirm and teach.

“As more emperors came and went, each having their own wavering opinion, favorable tax status was bestowed or revoked at will for synoptically following the imperial whim of the hour. Ironically, the successor to Constantius II, branded Julian the Apostate, restored paganism and rescinded the imperial benefits that had been granted to the bishops by Constantine. Julian was so-named, contemptuously, because he turned his back in disgust on his Christian upbringing due to all the vicious infighting and senseless destruction that came out of this loving and tolerant religion. Julian, relying on his Christian education, wrote a stinging rebuke of the entire trinitarian spat in Against the Galileans, stating:

But as for the commandment “Thou shalt not worship other gods,” to this surely he adds a terrible libel upon God. . . . Lay aside this nonsense and do not draw down on yourselves such terrible blasphemy. For if it is God’s will that none other should be worshipped, why do you worship this spurious son of his whom he has never yet recognised or considered as his own? This I shall easily prove. You, however, I know not why, foist on him a counterfeit son. . . .

. . . But you are so misguided that you have not even remained faithful to the teachings that were handed down to you by the apostles. And these also have been altered, so as to be worse and more impious, by those who came after. At any rate neither Paul nor Matthew nor Luke nor Mark ventured to call Jesus God.

“Sadly, Julian would be the last of the non-Christian emperors, as later emperors reinvested the bishops with the imperial favor that allowed Christianity to displace paganism and take over the last millennia and a half of Western history. It was not until Emperor Theodosius called the First Council of Constantinople in 381, more than fifty years after the Council of Nicaea, that the Nicene orthodoxy finally received official and continued imperial endorsement. However, bickering and infighting among the bishops continued over their dissenting views.

“Within fifty years, more battle lines would be drawn between opposing camps, this time sparked by an interpretation from the bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius. Nestorius, seeking to find the middle ground between the factions who believed God had been incarnated as a human and those who believed it was impossible for God to be born, advocated for the idea that Jesus had two separate and distinct natures: divine and human. The camp that insisted God was born as a man in Jesus was using the title Theotokos, God-bearer, to refer to Mary. As a compromise, Nestorius put forward the concept of Chistotokos, the messiah-bearer; which, though counter to the trinitarian stance of the Nicene era, was more closely aligned with the earliest Christian ideas of Jesus as the messiah and not as divine. Of course, plausible suggestions and a more accurate description could hardly have been expected to carry the argument. Just as Athanasius had led the charge against Arius at the Council of Nicaea, the next major fight, once again, came out of the bishopric of Alexandria, led by Cyril against his counterpart from Constantinople. Incensed by this heresy, Cyril threw the gauntlet and the bishops started taking sides, as each sought to line up their support.

“Oxford professor, Peter Frankopan, described this situation in The Silk Roads: ‘The problem, as they saw it, lay in the sloppy translation into Greek of the Syriac term describing the incarnation – although the argument was as much about jostling for power between two leading lights in the church hierarchy, and the kudos that came from having one’s doctrinal positions accepted and adopted.’ So, yet again, another emperor needed to call a council to deal with these prickly drama queens and their never-ending cat-fights. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Ephesian formulation of a single substance was declared, in which Jesus had both human and divine natures, but was only of one being. This council also officially bestowed the title of God-bearer on Mary, which played a key role in the origins of Mariology I mentioned earlier. Professor Frankopan continued, ‘Outflanked and outmanoeuvred by Cyril, Nestorius was deposed, a move that destabilized the church as bishops hastily changed their theological positions one way and then another. Decisions made at one council could be challenged at another, as rival factions lobbied fiercely in the background.’

“Continuing the pattern of bribery I noted from Constantine and Gregory of Nazianzus, can anyone take a guess what I’m about to say?” Jeff asked.

Foreseeing another challenge to the purity of her beliefs about to blow up in her face, Linda stated sullenly, “Just rip the bandage off, and get it over with.”

“When playing the game of bishop’s thrones, they played to win. Nestorius accused Cyril of spreading malicious lies and using bribes to win supporters; a pattern of behavior confirmed by Cyril’s own hand. One of Cyril’s most infamous letters listed, in exquisite detail, how much he paid out, and to whom, ‘in order that he would help us in the cause about those matters which were written to him.’ While scholars are not entirely sure from when this letter dates exactly, it is thought it relates to his post-Council efforts at reinstatement, as one of the recipients of his generosity was the emperor’s sister. After the Council, he found himself deposed just like Athanasius after Nicaea, and he bought his way back.

“Continuing on, it seems the intervening years and many post-Nicene councils didn’t do much to put this issue to rest, as the bishops continued to argue over the precise Christological nature of Jesus, and another council needed to be held. The next, at Chalcedon in 451, where those who argued for what ultimately became the Western Christian orthodoxy still held today, argued with stubborn Nestorian holdouts to accept the trinitarian view of the divine nature of Jesus. In order to address the ongoing dissent against the Ephesian formula, this council produced yet another creed, stating that Jesus had

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two complete natures: simultaneously human and divine. These two later councils finally solidified the new, improved, confused, and paradoxical divine/human trinitarian orthodoxy.

“There are two interesting points about the Council of Chalcedon. The first relates to the ongoing political interventions of the emperors to influence the trinitarian formulae at the various councils. Oxford University Professor of the History of the Church—and with a title like that he knows what he’s talking about—Diarmaid MacCulloch, hosted a brilliant and comprehensive six-part BBC documentary in 2009 called, A History of Christianity. In the first episode, The First Christianity, Professor MacCulloch wryly commented on the situation:

Emperors longed for unity. Inconveniently for them, Christians repeatedly valued truth rather more. A hundred years later, in 428, a clever but tactless scholar was appointed the new bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius. Bishop Nestorius wasted little time in plunging the Church into a fresh quarrel about the nature of Jesus. It would end the unity of the Church once and for all, and in the process, consolidate Eastern Christianity as a distinct and formidable force. . . .

. . . At first, Cyril seemed to have the upper hand. He had Nestorius hounded out of Constantinople and banished to a remote Egyptian prison. But Nestorius’s supporters remained, and so, once again, a Roman emperor was left fearing that his state would fracture. He had to call yet more councils. Eventually in 451, the bishops of the empire gathered just across the straits from Constantinople for another landmark council in Church history. The Council of Chalcedon met to define the future of Christian faith. The Council . . . tried to do what all emperors want: to sign up everyone to a middle-of-the-road settlement. When you do that, it always helps to have a few troops around. So, the council decreed a compromise.

In essence, it backed Nestorius’s oil and water emphasis, that whilst here on Earth, Christ, the divine and human being, was ‘recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change.’ But in a nod to Cyril’s followers, it straight away added ‘without division, without separation.’ And that compromise is how the Churches which descend from the emperor’s Christianity—the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—have understood the mystery of Jesus ever since. . . .

. . . The losers at the Council of Chalcedon refused to fall into line; it was a watershed. Imperial and non-imperial Christianity would never be reconciled. Instead, something new happened. The Church split for the first time, something that would happen many more times in its history. The imperial Church now found itself focused solely on the Mediterranean—it had no choice; Eastern Christians were not going to be pushed around by the emperor. But unlike their Western cousins, Christians in the East would now have to survive in the midst of hostile and alien religions, without the backing of an emperor.

“The split between Western, imperial, Chalcedonian Christians of the Mediterranean—which, confusingly, includes the Eastern Orthodox—and the Eastern, non-imperial, Oriental Orthodox Churches, became known as the Chalcedonian Schism. Those with dissenting views, such as Cyril’s followers, split off to found denominations like the Syriac Orthodox Church in Antioch, later known as the Jacobite Church; or the one in Alexandria, Egypt which subsequently became known as the Coptic Orthodox Church. Of course, followers of the Oriental Orthodox Churches do not recognize the legitimacy of the Council of Chalcedon and its pronouncements.