

Adult Sunday School Class

“Our Christian Heritage” - Lesson 5

2 John 1:9b He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

Colossians 2:1 For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you . . . **2** that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and *attaining* to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, **3** in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. **9** For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; **10** and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Colossians 1:19 For it pleased *the Father that* in Him all the fullness should dwell, **20** and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

2 Corinthians 2:18-19 Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, **19** that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. . . .

The Old Catholic Age

We continue down the timeline of Christian history to the time period from 170-325 A.D. One writer calls this period “The Old Catholic Age,” so we will, too. This period leads to the first Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) which helped to bring about a fusion between church and state.

The word *Catholic* means “universal.” During this time, there was only one church (no divisions or “denominations”). Groups teaching heresy simply left the church and started their own thing. All local churches were part of the same group, although there were some differences in teaching from place to place.

The Old Catholic Age is known for an evolution of the Bible teachings of God and Christ. Many doctrines that were later adopted by the future Roman Catholic Church made their first appearance during this age. In this age, we find:

- the first real teaching of the doctrine of the trinity (by Tertullian, 210 A.D.).
- the first mention of infant baptism
- the construction of the earliest known public church building (230 A.D.)
- the first endorsement of baptism by sprinkling (Cyprian, 250 A.D.)
- the first mention of using Matthew 28:19 as a baptismal formula
- the first Christian hermits who paved the way for future monasteries and convents (Anthony, 270 A.D.)

Christians during this age endured the greatest persecution of all by the Roman government. The Romans allowed each nation in the empire to worship its own gods as long as no one interfered with the worship of others. Also, as a matter of civic duty, patriotism, and loyalty to the empire, everybody had to participate in

the worship of Roman deities and later, worship of the emperor. Except for Jews and Christians, most people had no problem adding the Roman gods to their own group of gods. Christians were not only seen as religious heretics, but as political subversives. They were considered intolerant because they refused to accept other religions as valid. They were supposed to confess Caesar as Lord, but that title was reserved for Jesus Christ alone.

Before this time, most persecution came against the Christian leadership. Beginning in 250 A.D. under Emperor Decius until the year 313, many Christians, including the laity, were martyred and thousands of others fell away from the church. One writer (Gregory of Tours, 594 A.D.) said those who were martyred during this time “*could not be numbered.*”

The Institutional Church (Catholic or “universal”)

POST APOSTOLIC AGE 90 - 140 A.D.

Mostly biblical and apostolic, emphasis on one God, Jesus as the true God and true man, repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as part of the salvation experience, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, and holiness in life.

Believers as a whole still embraced the message and experience of the apostles.

CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS 130 - 180 A.D.

Presented Christianity as a philosophy.
Introduced pagan terms and ways of thought to Christian doctrine.
Baptism in Jesus name dominant, but Justin’s formula enters scene.
Holy Spirit baptism still prominent.
Though the Christian Apologists were in the minority, their ideas greatly affected Christianity over time. Christianity and paganism began to be mixed.
Holy lifestyle taught and practiced.

OLD CATHOLIC AGE 170 - 325 A.D.

Catholic or “universal” because there was still one church.
Known for being a period of the evolution of the doctrine of God and Christ.
Baptism in Jesus name declining.
A decline of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit during this age.
A holy lifestyle taught, practiced.
The first use of the word “trinity,” the first explicit teaching of this new doctrine during this age.

The Progression of Change During the Old Catholic Age

During this period from 170 to 325 A.D., there were several writers whose writings remain today that give us a picture of the condition of the church. Please see the handout to Lesson 4 to read in detail about Iranaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian.

Cyprian, like Tertullian, strongly advocated trinitarianism, necessity of water baptism, and a conservative lifestyle. However, he remained in the institutional church of the day and became a bishop. Cyprian taught that baptism in the name of Jesus was for Jews only, and that Gentiles should be baptized with the trinitarian formula.

There is an anonymous writing from the era of Cyprian called the *Treatise on Re-baptism* that strongly affirms water baptism in the name of Jesus. The author was writing about the problem of whether people from heretical groups should be re-baptized if they joined the mainstream, institutional church. He maintained that the name of Jesus is so powerful, they did not need to be re-baptized. He stated,

“Heretics who are already baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ must only be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” He claimed that his position had the support of *“the most ancient custom and ecclesiastical tradition”* and *“the authority of so many years, and so many churches and apostles and bishops.”* Moreover, not only heretics, but many people in the church, both *“Jews and Gentiles, fully believing as they ought, are in like manner baptized”* by *“invoking the name of the Lord Jesus.”* Water baptism in Jesus’ name, as stated in Scripture, is the original baptismal formula of the apostles and continued to be used by the majority of Christians for at least 200 years.

Clement of Alexandria - (died 215) He was a pagan philosopher before converting to Christianity, and Greek philosophy affected his teaching greatly. He combined biblical revelation with philosophical concepts.

Clement was a teacher at the famous school in Alexandria, Egypt. His lectures were attended by large numbers of pagans. He commenced with those truths that could be demonstrated from philosophy, for the purpose of leading his hearers by degrees to embrace the Christian faith.

Origen - was a famous disciple of Clement of Alexandria. He spoke of Christianity as the highest philosophy and stated that his purpose was to blend together the Bible and Greek philosophy. There are many, many writings of his available today.

Origen and his school in Alexandria had their own way of interpreting the Bible. Instead of reading Scripture according to the ordinary and apparent meaning, he typically sought for a hidden, deeper, “spiritual” meaning. Origen’s method of interpreting Scripture came from his view that knowledge is superior to faith. Origen did retain enough Christian elements in his teaching to be accepted by many Christians.

Origen taught that God is a trinity of persons. He introduced two related concepts that were important as the trinity doctrine formed over the next centuries. These were the doctrine of the eternal Son, and the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Origen reasoned that if the Son is truly God, He must be eternal - coeternal with the Father. Therefore, he said the Son’s begetting was an eternal process. Origen said that the Son is always being begotten (generated) by the Father. He said the Son “is a separate being and has a separate essence of His own,” is “a second God,” was “created” by the Father, is “inferior” to the Father, and is not, “the Most High God.”

The Development of the Trinity Doctrine in the Old Catholic Age

Through most of the Old Catholic Age the mainstream of Christianity remained apostolic, although a shift gradually took place during this era, leading to a trinitarian church.

The Church in Alexandria

The doctrine of the trinity took hold of the institutional church in Alexandria (Egypt) early in this period. Tradition says that John Mark (the evangelist and writer of the Gospel of Mark) established a church in Alexandria sometime between 55 - 61 A.D. The first pastor was a convert of Mark's, Anianus, a shoe cobbler. At the time of Mark's death in 68 A.D., the church had grown considerably. Over the years, the apostolic foundation of the church eroded as Greek philosophy entered in. In the second century, the church set up the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria, where the students learned Greek philosophy. Two of the more well-known directors of the school were Athenagorus and Clement of Alexandria (writers of that time). Clement's student, Origen, is one of the most famous of the ancient trinitarians. Clement and Origen greatly influenced the Christian world to reject oneness teaching and accept trinitarian doctrine.

Here is a quote regarding the church in Alexandria: *"The first great figures of the Church in Egypt were scholars rather than bishops, directors of the Catechetical School of Alexandria: Clement and Origen. Both were versed in Greek philosophy and their lives' work was one of great integration: they transformed Christianity from a localized cult for the poorest class into a fully-fledged religion with a philosophy and a cosmology."*

The Church in Rome

The church in Rome was a pillar to Christians everywhere. Of the three great Christian churches of the day (Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome), this church held out the longest in rejecting the trinity doctrine.

Tradition says that the Apostle Peter went to Rome and became pastor there. He was crucified in 67 A.D., and designated Linus as the next pastor. Below is a list of the bishops (senior pastors of the many house churches) of the church in Rome who retained oneness teaching (dates are approximate):

- Peter (42-67 A.D.)
- Linus (67-79 A.D.)
- Anacletus (79-90)
- Clement (90-99)
- Evaristus (99-107)
- Alexander (107-116)
- Sixtus (116-125)
- Telesphorus (125-136)
- Hyginus (136-140)
- Pius (140-154)
- Anicetus (154-165)
- Soter (166-174)
- Eleutherus (174-189)
- Victor (189-198)
- Zephyrinus (198-217)
- Callistus (217-222 A.D.)

As we read the writings of the era, we see that there was a battle to hold onto oneness, apostolic teachings in Rome regarding the doctrines of God and Christ. Callistus, the last bishop on the list above, wrote:

“The Word is the Son Himself, the Father Himself. There is only one and the same indivisible Spirit, except in name. The Father is not one thing, and the Son another: they are one and the same thing, the divine Spirit which fills all things above and below. The Spirit, made flesh in the virgin, is not other than the Father, but one and the same thing, hence Scripture says: ‘Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?’ (John 14:10). The visible element, the Man, is the Son; and the Spirit which dwells in the Son is the Father. I will not speak of two gods, the Father and the Son, but of one alone. For the Father who rested in the Son, having assumed flesh, divinized it in uniting it to Himself, and made it one with Himself, so that the names of the Father and Son apply to one and the same God. The personality of God cannot be duplicated; consequently, the Father suffered with the Son.”

Callistus was reportedly murdered by an angry mob on October 14, 222 A.D. He was succeeded by Bishop Urban (222 - 230) who was the first trinitarian bishop of Rome: a change occurred in the great church of Rome. The church in Rome split and turned trinitarian in 222 A.D.

Although there were many great oneness preachers in the Old Catholic Age, yet most of what we know about them is written by their enemies.

One great oneness preacher of the day especially got under the skin of Tertullian (who was, if you will remember, the “father of Christian trinitarianism”). The preacher was Praxeas (150-220), from Asia Minor who spent much time in Rome. Tertullian wrote the following statements about Praxeas:

“He asserts that Jesus Christ is God and Father Almighty. Him he contends to have been crucified, and suffered and died; beside which, with a profane and sacrilegious temerity, he maintains the proposition that He is Himself sitting at His own right hand.”

“As in respect to the (Old Testament), they hold to nothing else but, ‘I am God and there is none other beside me;’ so in respect to the gospel, they defend the response of the Lord to Philip, ‘I and the Father are one; he who seeth me seeth also the Father;’ and again, ‘I am in the Father and the Father in me.’ To these three summaries of doctrine, they would that the whole of both the Old and New Testament should give place.” [Tertullian is trying to make it sound as if only a few Scriptures support the oneness teaching.]

*“In the course of time, then they say the Father forsooth was born, and the Father suffered - God Himself, the Lord, Almighty, whom in their preaching they declare to be Jesus Christ.” [Praxeas, like the other oneness preachers of the day, did not teach that the Father suffered directly, but *in the flesh* (that is, as the Son)].*

“...so that all in one person, they distinguish two, Father and Son, understanding the Son to be flesh, that is man, that is Jesus; and the Father to be Spirit, that is God, that is Christ.”

Tertullian tried to maintain that the trinity teaching was first, and the oneness teaching was a heresy that came later. This is believed by many people today. However, the opposite is true.

The First Council of Nicaea

Trinitarian Christians grew rapidly in numbers by the beginning of the 4th century (the 300's). After nearly two centuries, the influence of the apologists who mixed Greek philosophy with Christianity had done its work in the Christian faith. The doctrine of the trinity developed and changed as time went by.

After the worst period of persecution of Christians, a new age began in 313 for the trinitarian Christians with the announced conversion of the Roman Emperor, Constantine (c. 274-337 A.D.). Constantine, who was already interested in Christianity, reportedly saw a flaming cross in the sky (as a sign that he would conquer) just before his important victory at Milvian bridge (312 A.D.). He was told, “In this (sign) conquer.” That night, Christ reportedly appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to place the sign of the cross on the shields of his soldiers. Constantine won the battle, and he and his brother-in-law, Licinius, became co-emperors of the realm, Constantine ruling in the west, and Licinius ruling in the east.

It is difficult to believe that Jesus would encourage a sinful ruler to massive bloodshed for personal advancement. Neither does Constantine's conversion include repentance, water baptism, or the infilling of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Constantine was not baptized until he was on his deathbed in 337. He delayed on the theory that he could continue his sinful lifestyle and then receive complete remission of sins in the end.

Constantine's life was not a godly one - in 324, he defeated Licinius in battle and had him executed. In 326 he arranged the murder of two rivals to the throne - his nephew and his oldest son. It is suspected that he is also responsible for the death of his second wife. His desire for political power governed his actions. However, He saw Christianity as the wave of the future and that he could use it as a means of consolidating his political power and unifying his diverse realm.

In 313, a summit was held in Milan, Italy, that guaranteed full religious freedom to Christians, like what was given to other religions. Sunday was declared an official day of rest. Bishops could hold their own courts and have their decrees enforced by the police power of the state. Death by crucifixion was abolished.

In the meantime, Constantine realized that a great controversy over the deity of Jesus Christ threatened to divide the empire, so in 325 he called for the first

ecumenical council to solve the problem. It would be held in Asia Minor in Nicaea. It would be the first council to be held since the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

An “ecumenical council” is a worldwide council that pertains to the whole Christian church. What would be decided there would be accepted by all. The First Council of Nicaea did the following:

1. It was the first, but not final, official step in the formulation of orthodox trinitarianism.
2. It marked the beginning of using ecumenical councils to resolve doctrinal disputes.
3. To a great extent, it helped with the merger of church and state.

What was discussed at the First Council of Nicaea? A couple of decades earlier, a great controversy erupted in Alexandria, Egypt, between Arius, a presbyter, and Alexander, the bishop, over the deity of Jesus Christ. The controversy spread rapidly and threatened the unity of the church in the empire. Constantine saw Christianity as a tool to unify the empire, and so the controversy had to be resolved.

Therefore, the council was convened on May 20, 325, and the subject of the identity of Jesus Christ in relation to the Godhead was the main topic. Arius maintained that there is one God, not a trinity, and that Jesus is not truly God, but, in effect, a demigod. He is a created being of greater rank than humans, but not equal to the Father. This position is a lot like that of Jehovah’s Witnesses today.

At the council, the leading spokesman against Arius was Athanasius, a young deacon from Alexandria who later became bishop. He taught that God is three persons yet only one being and that these three persons are coequal, coeternal, and coessential. The debate centered on the Father and the Son (the Holy Spirit was discussed in a later council). The Arians attacked the deity of Jesus while Athanasius defended it, saying that Jesus is equal to the Father yet a second person.

Of the 300 bishops who attended the council, three groups developed - those who defended Arius, those who defended Athanasius, and the majority who didn’t really understand the issues but wanted peace.

A creed which was to be a summary of the Christian faith was proposed at the conclusion of the council. Constantine pronounced the creed to be divinely inspired, made it the law of the land, and insisted that any bishop at the council that did not sign the creed be exiled. Arius and two other bishops did not sign - and were exiled and excommunicated. The Council declared that this was a formulation of Christian belief handed down from the Apostles. Here is the Nicene Creed of 325:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very [true] God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father; By whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He

suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

(But those who say: 'There was a time when he [the Son] was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.)

Athanasius believed one divine person was eternally begotten from another divine person. The First Council of Nicaea was the first step in formulating the official trinity doctrine.

The diety of Jesus Christ was not the only subject on the agenda at the Council. The Roman emperor powerfully influenced the decisions of the Council. Afterwards, he pronounced its decrees to be divinely inspired, made them laws of the empire, and made disobedience punishable by death. For the first time, a political ruler convened a church council, became a factor in determining doctrine, and instituted a church creed. For the first time, Christianity adopted a creed other than Scripture and made adherence to it mandatory. For the first time the state inflicted civil penalties on people who did not conform to church dogma.

Following Constantine's death, there was a revival in the empire of the beliefs of Arius which further caused division. One emperor tried to reinstate pagan worship, but by 381 Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official state religion. He outlawed all pagan practices. The worship of Greek and Roman gods was completely dead by 500 A.D.

The Ecumenical Catholic Age

Following the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), the doctrines of the Catholic church formed in earnest. The period of time from 325 to 787 is called "the Ecumenical Catholic Age" because during this time there were seven major church councils that formulated Christian doctrine. Remember, the term "catholic" means *universal*. The Christian church at this time was still perceived as one church without divisions (like denominations).

During this age creeds were formed that stated the doctrines of God, Christ, human nature, and salvation. These creeds defined Christian "orthodoxy," or what defines what institutional Christianity was for that time - and is today. The system of sacraments of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy began to take shape during this time. The canon of Scripture (the books of the Bible that are accepted), while already recognized and used by Christians from the earliest times, was officially endorsed and stated during this age.

The church offices and the structure of leadership of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches developed during this age. In the West (Roman Catholic), the bishop of Rome was successfully given supremacy as the pope during this era. We see the first real pope take his place with authority.

In this ecumenical age, monasteries appeared along with the monastic way of life, and orders of monks and nuns became an integral part of Christendom. With the wave of pagan converts to Christianity beginning in the days of Emperor Constantine, many pagan practices infiltrated the church. Many superstitious, nonbiblical elements became standard.

The Christian church was divided into East and West by language (the West using Latin, and the East using Greek) and by different liturgies and approaches. The East never accepted the papacy. East and West finally split officially in 1054. The capital of Catholicism in the West was Rome, and the capital of Eastern Orthodoxy was Constantinople.

During this age, the West experienced the fall of the Roman Empire. In 410, Alaric and the Visigoths sacked Rome. In 451, Attila and his Huns invaded Italy. The Vandals sacked Rome in 455. The Roman Empire officially ended in 476 when a group of Germanic tribes conquered Rome. Meanwhile, the East became known as the Byzantine Empire which survived until the Ottoman Turks conquered it in 1453.

Meanwhile in the West, the conquering Visigoths, Vandals, and other barbarians quickly embraced Christianity in varying forms. In 432, Patrick went to Ireland and converted the entire country. In 597, the Anglo Saxons of England were converted to Christianity and the first archbishop of Canterbury was appointed. By 663, the church in England was aligned with Rome.

The Evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Here are the major steps in the development of the doctrine of the trinity.

1. About 150, the Christian Apologists (Greek Apologists), beginning with Justin Martyr, defined the Word (Logos) to be the Son. They said the Word (Son) was a second divine being begotten by God the Father at a point in time before creation. They said the Word was subordinate to God. A new, threefold baptismal formula was introduced.
2. About 210, Tertullian introduced the term *trinity* and formulated the concept of one God in three persons. In Tertullian's trinity, the Father alone is eternal and is superior to the other two persons. He was also the first to cite Matthew 28:19 as a baptismal formula.
3. About 215-230 Origen also taught trinitarianism. His contribution was the teaching that the Son is eternal and is being eternally begotten by the Father. This elevated the status of the Son.
4. Through Athanasius, the First Council of Nicaea in 325 rejected Arianism (a teaching that states that Jesus is not truly God but, in effect, a demigod and that he is a created being of greater rank than humans, but not equal to the Father). The council declared that the Father and the Son are of the same substance, making them equal.

5. The Council of Constantinople in 381 confirmed the doctrine of Athanasius, but added that the Holy Spirit was an equal part of the trinity along with the Father and Son.
6. The famous theologian, Augustine (354-430), put in definite form the teaching of the trinity that the three persons are coequal, coeternal, and coessential (of the same substance).

Over 200 years passed from the first teaching of two divine persons (about 150 A.D.) to the full acceptance of the doctrine of the trinity (381). About 100 years passed from the introduction of the teaching of the trinity to the time when it became dominant (about 300). Almost another century passed before it was completely defined by the church and officially accepted (381).