



## Lesson 2. Emperor Constantine and the Arian Controversy Leading Up to Nicaea

**Introduction: Agree or Disagree: We ought to seek and support political candidates who will make laws based on Biblical teachings.**

### 2.1 Constantine, The First Christian Emperor

The third century was a time of crisis within the Roman Empire due in part to a succession of incompetent and short-lived emperors and rampant inflation. The slide into chaos ended in the early fourth century shortly before the rise of Constantine. Emperor Diocletian divided the empire into four administrative districts (tetrarchies), which was effective in the short term but also left the door open for competition among the tetrarchs, one of whom was Constantine's father, Chlorus, in Gaul (Britain/Spain).

Constantine went on a military campaign to reunite the empire and was declared Augustus (emperor) in 305 and finally gained control of the western empire by 312 with the capture of Rome at Milvian Bridge. In 310 he saw what looked like a ChiRo (an abbreviation for Christ) in sky. Being raised a pagan, he inquired of bishops what it was. He became convinced that God gave him protection and would use him to unite the empire, which he accomplished by 324.



Whenever he added more of the empire to his own rule, he immediately declared toleration for Christians and ordered the restoration of Christian property seized during the recent persecutions.<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea and a budding church historian, saw God's hand in all that Constantine did.

In words and actions Constantine was sincere about his Christianity (with some inconsistencies as a sinner/saint!). Consider the following details from his life:

- Declaring himself a Christian made no sense politically or militarily, when only 5% of the empire was Christian and the vast majority of political and social elites were pagan.
- After conquering Rome, he refused to sacrifice to Jupiter as previous conquerors had traditionally done. Instead, he immediately began supporting the Roman church by

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<sup>1</sup> "Since it was already perceived long ago that freedom of religion ought not be denied, but each one ought to be given the right to follow his own thoughts and desires according to his own choosing, we have ordered that Christians also be permitted to retain the faith of their own religion and persuasion. ... Now, truly, every one of them who has the desire to observe the Christian religion may do so without disturbance or molesting." (Eusebius)

donating land and his own funds to build a basilica for the church (and future churches in new capital of Constantinople).

- In the years ahead he kept the well-known Spanish bishop, Hosius of Cordoba, with him as his personal chaplain.
- Due to a popular misunderstanding that baptism only forgave previous sins, he waited to be baptized until near his death in 337, after he had abdicated his throne. He saw many of his duties as emperor as conflicting with his Christian beliefs.
- While he was not an official baptized convert (and therefore could not participate in public worship and the sacrament), he was accepted by the bishops, etc. as a believer. He held private devotion and worship at his palace.
- While he summoned various councils (and personally paid all their expenses), including the Council of Nicaea, he never presided over them nor insisted that he had a vote. Rather he consistently allowed and encouraged the bishops to settle doctrinal and disciplinary matters among themselves. He would then publish and enforce their decisions (i.e. exile) afterwards.
- Give him grace... there had NEVER been a Christian Emperor before!

## 2.2 Constantine Seeks to Keep the Church Unified

During the persecutions, some Christians caved under the pressure to perform sacrifices. Many later repented and wished to be readmitted to the church. The catholic church leaders welcomed back such Christians after an appropriate period of repentance. Those who disagreed, wishing to keep the church “pure” of such apostates, formed new breakaway churches. The Novatians (centered in Rome), the Donatists (primarily in northwest Africa), and the Melitians (in Egypt) all became rival groups that lasted for several centuries.

1. How might a church today deal with a person seeking to rejoin a congregation after denying his or her faith in a public setting? Consider the following passages in your answer.

**Matthew 18:21-22** Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

**Matthew 26:74-75** Then [Peter] began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately a rooster crowed. <sup>75</sup> Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.

**John 21:17** The third time [Jesus] said to [Peter], “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

Constantine believed his empire and the Christian church were linked in their destinies. He became more involved after being asked to mediate disputes between the church in Carthage and the Donatists.<sup>2</sup> He instructed them to settle their dispute in council with an equal number of bishops on either side explaining their position and the bishop of Rome (as a “neutral party”) serving as judge. Constantine was also told of disagreements about church practices, such as the wide variety of methods (and resulting confusion) used for choosing the proper day to celebrate Easter.<sup>3</sup> Finally, he was made aware of a growing dispute arising out of Egypt and spreading across the east from the teachings of an Egyptian priest named Arius, who had openly challenged the respected bishop of Alexandria about his teachings on the divinity of Christ.

Constantine tried to broker peace in this dispute by sending a letter that called for unity to the disputing parties. When this did not bear fruit, he sought to solve the problem with an examination before a panel of bishops. This was how disputes were fairly decided within Roman legal practice. A similar tradition had developed in the church since New Testament times (as we saw previously in Acts Chapter 15). Constantine—perhaps at the instigation of his advisor, Bishop Hosius—decided that a small council or synod, or even a regional gathering, would not be sufficient to deal with the complex issues that had already spread so widely. Therefore, the idea was born of a great, or general, council that would include bishops from across the inhabited world. So Constantine sent invitations across the empire for bishops to come to an “ecumenical”<sup>4</sup> council at the city of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

2. How important is it for the Christian church to be outwardly united? in its teaching? in its customs and practices?

**John 17:6-8, 20-21** “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. <sup>8</sup> For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ...<sup>20</sup> “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

**1 Corinthians 1:10** I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

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<sup>2</sup> A breakaway group of Christians who did not think that bishops and priests who had renounced Christ under the pressure of persecution should be allowed back into the church. Also taught that those who had been baptized or received the sacrament from such was as a result rendered invalid.

<sup>3</sup> As Passover is determined by the lunar calendar it can officially fall on any day of the week. Council standardized it.

<sup>4</sup> That is from across the “inhabited world” (Greek, *oikoumene*).

**Romans 16:17** I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

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**Colossians 2:16-17** Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

**Romans 14:1, 5, 13** Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. ...<sup>5</sup> One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ...<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

## 2.3 The Teaching of Arius

The controversy surrounding the teaching of Arius was the single most important reason for calling together the Council of Nicaea. Arius was a Christian priest in a suburban church of Alexandria in Egypt. He had been educated to be a clear and rational thinker in the tradition of Greek philosophy. When Bishop Alexander explicitly stated that God the Father and Jesus the Son were equally divine and eternal, Arius' logic took him in a different direction. Since Jesus was the Son and begotten of the Father, Arius believed Jesus could not be eternal in the same sense the Father was and thus could not be equally divine. Arius' logic found favor with a number of other church leaders and teachers, especially in the Eastern Empire. Sometime in the early years of the controversy, Arius put his theology into verse in a writing called the Thalia (Banquet). Here are a few of the surviving lines:

We praise him [the Father] as without beginning in contrast to him [the Son] who has a beginning.

We worship him as timeless, in contrast to him who in time has come to exist.

He who is without beginning made the Son a beginning of created things.

He [the Son] has none of the distinct characteristics of God's own being.

For he is not equal to, nor is he of the same being as him.

As far as their glories, one infinitely more glorious than the other.

The Father in his essence is a foreigner to the Son, because he exists without beginning.

Hence the Son, not being [eternal] came into existence by the Father's will.

For it is impossible for him to fathom the Father, who is by himself.

For the Son himself does not even know his own essence.

3. Luther made a distinction between the ministerial and magisterial use of reason: We use reason as a servant (ministerial) in interpreting Scripture but not to judge (magisterial) what Scripture says. How might that distinction be applied to the discussion of Father and Son at the time of Arius?
4. How do the following passages support the eternal nature and begetting of the Son, who was also begotten in time as the human, Jesus Christ? How then must we understand the passages that describe the “begetting of the Son”?

**John 1:1-3, 14** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ... <sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

**Hebrews 1:1-3** In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

**John 10:30, 38** “I and the Father are one. ... Understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”

**Hebrews 13:8** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

5. Consider the following doctrinal statements and explain how a misuse of reason or logic led to its false teaching. Think of Scripture passages that give the correct understanding.
  - A. Jesus has a real human body that is in heaven, and a human body cannot be in multiple places at once. Therefore, Jesus’ body cannot be present in the Lord’s Supper; the bread and wine must be symbolic.
  - B. The Bible clearly teaches that God has elected (chosen) some people to be saved. It logically follows that God also therefore elects some people to be damned to hell.
  - C. The Bible clearly teaches that human beings are responsible for their sin. It logically follows that humans are also responsible, at least in part, for their own salvation or for choosing to believe.

## **Closing Thought and Prayer**

Our God orchestrates all history for the good of his Church. It is no coincidence then that just as one of the most insidious heresies should emerge and rapidly gain steam, the Lord provided the opportunity for this error to be addressed in the open.

**Next Time: The Necessity, Content, and Use of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds**