

The Post-Nicene Imperial Church

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – an overview of the Imperial Church after Nicea, and the work of Athanasius
2. aim – to cause us to consider the importance of fighting for orthodoxy in a time of relative ease

b. outline

1. The Rise of Julian
2. The Work of Athanasius
3. The Council of Constantinople

c. overview

1. our *timeline*
 - a. the conversion of Constantine has done away (mostly!) with persecution, and Christianity has become the *de facto* standard of religion in the Roman empire
 - b. many have “embraced” Christianity in order to be a “part” of the life of the empire, and the church has enjoyed a newfound period of prosperity and peace
 - c. however, a number of *significant theological* issues arise during this time, including direct threats against the very fabric of the faith (e.g. Arianism)
 - d. fortunately, the church was able to convene an **Ecumenical Council at Nicea** to formalize the nature of the Trinity (and of the Son in relation to it) which would become its *orthodox position*
 - e. unfortunately, the church was unable to stop the advance of Arianism after Nicea, even during the remaining days of the life of Constantine ...

I. The Rise of Julian

Content

a. the death of Constantine

1. Constantine I died in 337, at the age of 30 (or 31)
 - a. he was baptized, on his deathbed, by Eusebius of Nicomedia (a common practice)
2. after the death of Constantine, the army killed most of Constantine’s relatives
 - a. not to establish a new dynasty, but to assure that Constantine’s three sons inherited the throne
 1. Constantine II – ruled over Gaul (W Europe), Great Britain, Spain, and Morocco (**Nicene**)
 2. Constans – ruled over an area between his brothers: Italy and N Africa
 3. Constantius II – ruled over the E, including Constantinople (*i.e.* as pro-Arian)
 4. a cousin, Julian (only 6 at the time) and his half-brother, Gallus survived (due to youth)
 - b. the massacre was blamed on Constantius because he was in Constantinople at the time
3. Constantius eventually became emperor over all of the empire
 - a. he eventually called for Gallus to be the *caesar* to him as *augustus* (because he had no son)
 - b. but, Gallus was inept and conspired against Constantius, who had him beheaded
 - c. so, Constantius called for Julian to come as his *caesar*, but tension arose between them too
 - d. before their conflict could come to a head, Constantius died, and Julian rose to sole emperor
 - e. because Constantius was a full supporter of Arianism, at his death, Jerome remarks: **“the whole world woke up as from a slumber, and discovered itself to be Arian”**

b. the life of Julian

1. Julian studied philosophy in Athens, abandoning his early upbringing in Christianity
 - a. this was during a period of “exile” from the court (probably for his protection)
 - b. he eventually became known as **“the apostate”** because he *abandoned* his initial faith
2. Julian eventually rose to the position of lone emperor (**see above**), and he despised Christianity
 - a. his first act as emperor was to seek revenge against those who kept him from the throne
 - b. he sought to restore the “lost glory” of paganism, particularly that of temple variety
 - c. but, he *did not* pursue a program of persecuting Christians
 1. because there was too much in place to support them; he knew it would backfire against him

- d. instead, he used an “end-run” kind of attack to force Christianity back
 - 1. he prohibited Christians from teaching classical literature (“his” materials)
 - 2. he publicly ridiculed Christians as “Galileans” (**i.e.** following a Galilean)
 - 3. he believed that Christians had “misinterpreted” the Hebrew Scriptures
 - 4. so, he began a rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (as a rebuttal against 70AD)
- 3. Julian was killed (unexpectedly) in an ill-advised campaign against the Persians
 - a. **rumor**: his last words are reputed to have been “Thou has conquered, Galilean!”

b. the reality of Julian

- 1. ultimately, his desire to return the empire to its pre-Christian state had failed – although his reign lasted only 18 months, it was the first *real* attempt to “undo” the effects of Constantine’s conversion
- 2. in the post-Nicene empire (as in the *modern* world):
 - a. there was always an *uneasy* connection of Christianity to the state (despite its growth)
 - b. there were always new issues for the church to handle during the time (despite Nicea)
 - c. the orthodox *often* found themselves in the *minority*, holding tenuously to the faith ...

II. The Work of Athanasius

Content

a. the life of Athanasius

- 1. born somewhere in the Coptic region of the N Nile Delta in Egypt
 - a. he was short with dark features, and often called the “black dwarf”
 - b. he was Alexander’s (bishop of Alexandria) secretary at the Council of Nicea
 - c. he was appointed to the position of bishop upon Alexander’s death (**328**)
- 2. early in life, Athanasius was introduced to the desert monks (and maintained that connection)
 - a. he was not particularly versed in rhetoric or logic, or elegance of style
 - b. but, he was particularly close to the people with whom he lived
 - 1. he had learned a monastic discipline and austerity which earned him great admiration
 - 2. he wrote simple treatises centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ **as God**

b. the tenacity of Athanasius

- 1. Athanasius perceived Arianism to be a threat to the very core of Christianity: **the Incarnation**
 - a. **i.e.** Arianism proclaimed Jesus to be a “lesser” being than God himself
 - b. thus, Athanasius saw this heresy as a threat to the idea that God *himself* had come down in human form to conquer evil (**e.g.** an emperor visiting a town and it receiving special privilege)
- 2. Athanasius’ enemies (particularly Eusebius of Nicomedia) plotted against him many times
 - a. they accused him before Constantine of murder, using the victim in magic rites
 - 1. he answered the charge by bringing the “victim” (Arsenius) before a Synod in Tyre
 - b. they had him banished by Constantine (to Trier, in the W)
 - 1. Athanasius had gone to Constantinople to gain an audience with Constantine by throwing himself in front of the emperor’s horses
 - 2. Eusebius told Constantine that Athanasius would stop the wheat shipments to Rome, which caused Constantine to banish him to Trier
 - 3. he was restored to Alexandria by the decree of Constantine’s sons (**see above**)
 - c. they later drove him out of Alexandria by force, claiming that he was an illegitimate bishop
 - 1. he was smuggled to Rome, and convinced the Roman clergy of the Nicene position
 - 2. this helped solidify the Nicene orthodoxy in the W
 - 3. he was recalled to Alexandria under the 2nd son of Constantine, and was received joyously as a “man of the people” (the Arians were largely from the upper-classes)
 - d. they forced him (again) out of the city under Constantius’ sole emperorship
 - 1. Constantius was a committed Arian, and sought to enforce this theology on the church
 - 2. the governor, under the orders of Constantius that Athanasius be expelled, attacked him *physically* during a church service, but Athanasius escaped to the desert, where he remained for more than 5 years (and Arianism grew dramatically during this period)
 - 3. the rise of Julian (**see above**) rescinded all banishments, and Athanasius returned home
 - e. later, they forced him (again) out of the city under Julian

c. the theology of Athanasius

1. Athanasius fought against the prevailing (and ineffective) theology of Arianism
 - a. Arianism had begun to sink into a “speculative” theology, moving from salvation to logic
 1. thus, it could no longer answer the questions of *how* people are saved (**always a danger**)
 - b. it was *this* that Athanasius seized upon to make a case for Nicene theology
 1. if the corruption of humanity was so *great*, only a “new creation” could redeem it,
 2. then, the work of salvation could be nothing less than a work of *creation* (or *re-creation*)
 3. so, only the *Creator himself* could possibly do a work of *re-creation*
2. so, Athanasius worked to develop a “compromise” to the Nicene view of the “substance” of the Son
 - a. he recognized that *some* opposed the Nicene formula because it *implied* that there was *no difference* between the Father and the Son
 1. some preferred *homoiousios* (of a *similar* substance) rather than *homoousios* (of the *same*)
 2. they were afraid of *Patripassianism* (**i.e.** that the *Father* had suffered on the cross)
 - b. so, he gathered a Synod of Alexandria in 362, and declared that Nicene orthodoxy could be understood as “of one substance” (in three persons) or “of three substances” (in one God)
 1. **i.e.** as long as the Father and Son are seen to have the same substance, and
 2. as long as the distinctions between the Father and Son are not lost or downplayed
 - c. the “compromise” = that while the Father and Son possess the same nature (or substance), they are distinct from one another, such that they could be “said” to have differing substances
 1. **note:** the issue of *personhood* will come later ...

III. The Council of Constantinople

Content

a. the Council of Constantinople (381)

1. unfortunately, Athanasius did not live to see the victory of Nicea; he died 8 years earlier (373)
2. a **Second Ecumenical Council** (the First Council of Constantinople) gathered in 381
 - a. it was called under Emperor Theodosius I, and the “compromise” of Athanasius was ratified
 - b. but, it *also* added supplements to the Nicene creedal formula (against *Pneumatomachianism*)
 1. **i.e.** that the Spirit was not divine, only a creature (**too!!**)
 2. so, the language of the Holy Spirit was *amended* to include:
 - a. that he proceeds from the Father (later amended in the 6th C. to include the Son)
 - b. that he is to be worshipped like the Father and the Son
 - c. and, that he is understood to be the One who spoke by the prophets
 3. the language of the Church was *added* to include:
 - a. that there is one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic church
 - b. that there is one (and only one) baptism for the remission of sins
 - c. that the church looks for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come
3. **principle: if orthodoxy is worth living under, then it must be worth fighting for ...**