
Early Church History, Part 2.

*In the name of almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

As I explained a couple of weeks ago,
I've made the somewhat eccentric decision
to devote my three summer sermons
to significant persons
and events
in early Church history.

I began with one of the earliest
so-called 'heretics', Marcion –
his rejection of the creator-god
of the Old Testament,
and his impact on the formation
of the canon of Holy Scripture.

This morning, I'm focusing
on the first two, of what
would eventually be seven
so-called 'Ecumenical Councils'
of the Church.

Why was the 1st Council convened?

To respond to
the provocative ministry
of one, Arius the Libyan –
a brilliant and charismatic priest,
of the diocese of Alexandria
in Egypt.

Arius was troubled and perplexed
by the orthodox arguments
in favour of Jesus being –
at once –
human and divine.

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At the root of his difficulty
was something he shared
with both Marcion
and the so-called
'Gnostic' Christians.

Namely...,
a radically dualist view of reality –
inherited from certain
Greek philosophical traditions.

Spiritual reality was the home
of truth, beauty, and goodness.

Material reality might participate in these,
but was essentially corrupt,
and more often than not –
opposed to them.

Humanity's hope lay
in the eventual release
of their immortal soul
from its imprisonment
in all things material,
including the body.

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This sharp division
between spirit and matter
meant, for Arius,
that God, who is pure spirit,
neither could nor would
permit himself to be contaminated
by direct contact with
creaturely reality.

Jesus could not then
be God by nature
("of one substance with the Father"),
but must be only a creature.

Though that 'only' is misleading.

Arius acknowledged Jesus
to be a uniquely exalted human being –
deservedly earning the title,
'son of God',
by virtue of his unrivalled
holiness of life.

The most exalted of creatures, then,
but still – a creature –
'god-like' –
but not essentially divine.

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Condemned by his bishop,
Arius nonetheless
found much support
amongst ordinary Christians.

So much so,
that popular lyrics
expressing his position
reached 'the top of the charts'
in 4th Century Egypt
and beyond.

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The result was a divided Church,
not only in Alexandria,
but across the Mediterranean world.

So sharply divided,
that the Roman emperor, Constantine –
for the sake of
the unity and peace
of his empire –
convened a Council in the year, 325,
to settle the matter
one way or the other.

He summoned
318 bishops to Nicaea –
a city on the NW coast of Asia Minor,
modern-day Turkey.

They came, with their support staffs,
from across Europe as far as Britain,
from North Africa,
and from the Middle East.

The champion of the orthodox, Athanasius,
was a young deacon, still in his 20's –
like his older contemporary, Arius,
from Alexandria.

Lacking Arius' charm and charisma,
he was more than his equal
in theological acumen.

Not Greek philosophy,
but St John's Gospel
defined his christology:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God....
The Word became flesh...
and we beheld his glory,
the glory as of the only-begotten
of the Father,
full of grace and truth.
(Jn 1.1, 14)*

He might well have referred
to this morning's lesson from Colossians,
with its warning against philosophy
and its emphatic affirmation
of Jesus' deity:

*See to it, writes St Paul,
that no one takes you captive
through philosophy and empty deceit,
according to human tradition,
...and not according
to Christ.*

*For in him
the whole fullness of deity
dwells bodily....*

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Athanasius accompanied his bishop
to the Council
as his secretary and theological advisor.

The Council lasted for 9½ weeks,
(from May 20th to July 25th)
eventually upholding
the traditional teaching
of the Church
and condemning Arianism
as heretical.

The decision took the form of a Creed –
word for word the 1st 2 paragraphs
and the first clause
of the 3rd paragraph
of the Nicene Creed
(that we recite at every
Communion service).

The anti-Arian affirmation
of the deity of Christ
finds emphatic expression
in the opening clauses
of the 2nd paragraph:

“We believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ
the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of the Father
before all worlds,
God, of God,
Light, of light,
true God, of true God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance
with the Father,
through whom
all things were made”.

Jesus’ uncompromised humanity
is asserted with equal force
in the rest of the paragraph.

Alas, contrary to Constantine’s hopes,
this by no means marked
the end of the controversy!

Arianism reemerged
with doubled enthusiasm
just three years later,
aided not least by
sympathetic Emperors.

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Refusing to compromise –
in his own words,
“What has the Emperor to do with the Church?” –
(Athanasius, *Historia Arianos*. 52.3)
Athanasius, now bishop of Alexandria,
was 5 times banished from his see –
for a total of 17 years
over the next three decades.

When he died in the year 373,
the issue remained unresolved.

But eight years later, in 381 –
nearly 60 years after Nicaea –
yet another Emperor
convened a 2nd Ecumenical Council –
this time at Constantinople.

The Creed of Nicaea was affirmed –
with an expanded third paragraph.

The Nicene single sentence –
“We believe in the Holy Spirit” –
was filled out in reaction to
the recent emergence
within the Church
of the so-called
Pneumatomachi
or ‘Spirit-haters’.

Theirs..., was Arianism in a new key –
denying the deity –
not of the Son –
but of the Holy Spirit.

Happily, as at Nicaea,
the wisdom of that same Spirit prevailed:
“We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son
he is worshipped and glorified...”,
and so on.

What shall we say to all of this?

In the first place,
it's a fact that arianism
is back in fashion,
has been indeed, for the past
two centuries.

The late 18th Century
enlightenment philosopher *par excellence*,
Immanuel Kant,
wrote an influential book
which he called –
Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone.
(I. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* [Harper, 1960]).

Retelling the Gospel-story of Jesus,
he stripped it of all that makes him out
to be more than
an exemplary human being.

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And isn't that how many
in our pews think of Jesus?

Impatient of creeds and dogmas,
we prefer to think of him
as an inspirational example
of the best that we can be.

Perhaps that's where
you find yourself.

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If we're honest,
how seriously do we attend
to those phrases that make up
the 1st half of the 2nd paragraph
of our Creed?

And yet...: the Anglican Church has –
traditionally at least –
taken very seriously
the conciliar decisions
of the so-called
undivided Church:
'undivided' for the first 8 Centuries
of its existence –
before the Great Schism
between the Eastern Orthodox
and Western Roman Churches.
Seven Ecumenical Councils
were held during that time,
of which (as I mentioned before)
Nicaea was the first.

The Anglican approach
is well expressed by Arthur Vogel
in explaining his choice of title
for a book he was to edit:
“When first conceived by the publisher”, he writes, “this
volume was tentatively entitled,
Anglican theology.
“Approached to edit such a book,
I declined,
but I hastened to reply
that I would be pleased to edit
a volume entitled,
Theology in Anglicanism”.

His explanation?

“Anglicans have always claimed
to have no theology of their own,
just the theology of
the undivided Church”.

(Arthur A. Vogel, “Preface” in *Theology in Anglicanism* [1984], 7)

That’s it in a nutshell.

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Or..., nearly it!

We’re bound to add –
what no theologian
of the early Church would deny –
that Creed and dogma alike
are themselves answerable
to the final authority
of Holy Scripture.

Another Anglican theologian,
Oliver O’Donovan, puts it well:
“The map may be excellent –
possibly even faultless.
“Yet precisely because it is a map,
it is answerable to the countryside,
not the countryside to it....
“So it is with our guides
in theological exploration.
“They are our seniors,
much to be respected,
and never to be scorned.
“Yet we learn from them best
when we measure [them] ...
against [that] which judges
all theologians equally
and without respect
of persons ...
the apostolic witness [of] ...
Scripture itself”.

(Oliver O’Donovan, *On the Thirty Nine Articles*
[1986/2014], 55f./52)

A good note to end on.

But, please...,
bear with me a minute more.

As with my last sermon,
so this morning,
a key component has been
the difference between
heresy and orthodoxy.

With that in mind
I want my last word to be, not mine,
but that of one
of the great theologians
of the 20th Century,
Karl Barth:
“[T]he concern [of the Councils]”, he writes,
[was] never to set the mystery aside,
as though [by their] formulae
[they could] solve the matter
rationalistically.
“[T]he early Church’s endeavour
was ... to lead the eyes of Christians
in the proper way
to this mystery.”

“All other attempts
sought to resolve the mystery
into a human comprehensibility.

“These theories,
against which the Early Church turns,
do not regard the mystery.”

“[T]he early Orthodox
were concerned to gather us
about this centre;
...nothing must be watered down here;
this salt must not lose
its savour.”

“Hence the great expenditure of effort
by the early Councils and theologians.

“God the holy trinity,
and the genuine unity
of true God and true human
in the one Jesus Christ
[are] ... fundamental.

“And we are challenged
to hold on to it”.

(Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* [SCM, 1949/66], 98)

*Now unto God
who is able to strengthen [us] ...
according to the revelation
of the mystery [of] ... the gospel
and the proclamation
of Jesus Christ –*

*to the only wise God ...
be the glory forever and ever!*

Amen.

(Cf., Rm 16.25-27)

Patrick Patterson

* For those interested in pursuing further the life and witness of Arius, see Rowan Williams (former Archbishop of Canterbury), *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Eerdmans, 2002.