

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Century

The 4<sup>th</sup> century is one of the most pivotal centuries of church history. Many of the major events of the 4<sup>th</sup> century are remembered throughout history and shaped the church in various ways. The reign of Emperor Diocletian remained in the minds of Christians for centuries as one of the worst persecutions in Church history as well as the source of many memorable martyrs. The legalization of Christianity in 313 marked one of the most significant events in the history of the church paving the way for intellectual, cultural, and social development. The two councils that mark this century stand as the first formal councils in the church and set the standard for other councils. The pronouncements from these councils set the standard for the Church's belief for millennia. As far as developments in the Church, the Church Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century set the foundation for the authenticity of the faith and the benchmark for orthodoxy. I cannot stress the importance of the 4<sup>th</sup> century on the church.

### **Emperor Diocletian**

Upon the death of Emperor Numerian in November 284, the senate assembled to elect a new emperor. They chose Diocles as the new emperor. On November 20, 284, the army assembled outside of Nicomedia and unanimously saluted the new emperor beginning his reign. Diocles (Diocletian) spent the first 20 years of his reign focusing on stability and rebuilding. After several decades of assassinations and political maneuverings within the Roman government, Rome needed help. Diocletian began by a restructuring. He focused on building, centralizing power, and fighting off the enemies marching upon Rome's doorstep from many angles. His two Cesars, Maximian and Galerius, oversaw the eastern and western fronts of the Empire. With threats from England, Gaul, and the Middle East, he had many enemies to contend with. Diocletian effectively strengthened the Empire, warded off his enemies, and brought stability to Rome.

Somewhere around the 301, his attitudes began to shift. Until this point he was placid toward the Christians who were becoming dominant throughout the Empire and holding many places of authority in the Roman government. After a visit to the Oracle of Delphi, who prophesized that false oracles will hinder his cause, he turned his attention to the Christians. This prophesy and his desire for unity in the Empire greatly changed his stance. Suddenly, in 303, he issued an edict across the Empire requiring every person to sacrifice to the gods. The next day he issued a second edict requiring the arrest of all Christians throughout the Empire. Thus began the most violent and thorough persecution of Christians in the early church.

Under Diocletian's orders, churches were demolished, Scriptures were confiscated and burned, bishops were killed, and the jails were filled with Christians. To advance his cause, he removed the rights of any Christian to a formal trial and allowed them the option of death or the mines. Throughout this period, many Christians defected from the Church and sided with Rome for the sake of safety and securing their lives. Many, however, choose for the Church and against Rome leading to thousands of martyrdoms. The Church, in response, went underground. With public acts of worship outlawed and Christianity banned, they had no other choice than to hide from the sight of Rome and keep faithful. The future seemed bleak for the Christians.

## **Emperor Constantine**

Off in the west a man was quickly coming to fame, Constantine. Constantius, Constantine's father, had successfully defeated the English and the Gauls who were threatening the peace in the west. His son, Constantine, was one of the major military generals. Constantine received in a vision a sign that if he put the sign of the cross on their shields, he would be victorious. After a major victory, he realized the power of this sign, which forever changed his life. Diocletian was at the height of his power. Yet, as soon as he rose, he also fell. Diocletian reigned for only two more years after issuing his edict against the Christians then he retired. His successor became a complex mess. Following his retirement, Diocletian divided the Empire into East and West. The West part was ruled by Constantius and the eastern by Maximian. These two halves of the Empire would continue to oppose each other for the next decade. Constantine, the son of Constantius, felt that he should have been named Caezar. Having been disappointed by Galerius and sent back to the western part of the Empire, his father, Constantius, died of leukemia leaving Constantine in charge. Now having the power he needed to oppose the eastern part of the Empire, he marched on Severus in the east to unite the Empire.

Constantine's role in the Roman Empire cannot be overstated. After marching upon Severus, he united the Empire once again under one leadership and central authority. Although the Edict against the Christians had been rescinded in 311 due to its ineffectiveness, Constantine went one step further. In 313, he issued the Edict of Milan legalizing Christianity across the Roman Empire. It's important to take a moment and explain what this edict did and didn't do. Legalizing Christianity meant that the Christians could openly and publicly live their faith again. It didn't, however, change the dominant religion of Rome. Constantine himself didn't profess the Christian faith until his deathbed. His mother, St. Helena, however, was a major supporter of the Church and built many churches throughout the Holy Land. In honor of this Edict, Constantine gave the Church a chunk of land on which sat the Lateran Palace which became the Lateran Basilica.

## **New struggles in Christianity**

With freedom comes abuse of freedom. With the legalization of Christianity, the struggles of the previous century came to their fore. The first controversy to emerge in a prominent way was Donatism. The Donatists held the view that anyone who apostatized from the Church by handing over holy books, relics, or holy objects to Rome or defected from the faith by swearing to Caezar can not be forgiven and must be excommunicated from the Church. This view was held strongly by many of the Christians in the east and especially in Alexandria. The controversy grew to such an extent that Emperor Constantine sent a delegation to the British Isles in 314 to hold a council to address this issue. The Council of Arles found the Donatists as heretics and banned the teaching as heretical. Donatism didn't die. St. Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century dealt with them and the Council of Trent in 1574 finally put an end to these teachings.

Donatism was not the only major issue to emerge with the legalization of Christianity. Arius, who began his teaching in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, rose again to power. With the aid of his bishop, Bishop Alexander of the Diocese of Alexandria in Egypt, he would become prominent enough to convince almost all of the bishops of the eastern part of the Empire of his teaching. Now with

60% of the Christian world under his control, he planned to force the Pope in Rome to accept his teaching.

### **The Council of Nicaea**

Watching as the fight between Rome and the Christian east was escalating, Emperor Constantine decided he needed to act. He called all the bishops of the church together at Nicaea in Turkey to discuss and debate the matter. Notice the new way of dealing with issues of beliefs and Church matters. Since the Council of Jerusalem in 48 AD, the bishops of the church had not gathered to discuss matters but instead continued to debate and discuss them through writings and open debates. Now these debates were settled by arguments amongst the bishops and in a way that would be definitive.

The two major players at the Council of Nicaea were Bishop Nicholas and Arius. These two entered into a very heated debate which ended with Nicolas prevailing over Arius. Legend states that Nicholas decked Arius to end the debate but this story has largely been debunked. Nevertheless, the Council of Nicaea ended with several proclamations. The first, and most important for us, is the Nicæan Creed which is the first formal declaration of belief that united and solidified Christianity. The second was the condemnation of Arius and his teachings as heretical. Third, the declaration of heresy of the Donatist teaching. Lastly, yet not as critical, the establishment of Dioceses and the boundaries of power and authority for the bishops.

What is the effect of the Council of Nicaea? The most important effect of the Council of Nicaea for us in understanding the Church Fathers was the codified set of beliefs and the condemnation of a belief as heresy. Now, when the Church Fathers write, we have a way to deduce the truth of their writings. Additionally, many of the fathers, following the Council, wrote defenses of the truth faith and reactions, if not condemnations, to the heretical beliefs in their respective regions. We finally have a way to settle these debates, understand the orthodox teaching of the faith, and to be able to defend and understand the faith.

### **Reaction to Nicaea**

Most of us hoped that the Council would finally settle this matter and that we can now focus on the mission of the Church. Instead, quite the opposite happened. Emperor Constantine died shortly after the Council concluded in 337. His successor, Constantine II, sympathized with Arius and the Arian movement. Having believed that Arius was right and wrongfully condemned, he called his own council and debated the issue eventually restoring Arius' teaching and authority in the east. In the west, this council was not accepted because none of the western bishops were invited neither was a large contingency of the church present. Arius, feeling that he had been restored, continued his movement to advance his beliefs. With the Emperor's support, it felt like he might succeed. Following this council, the Emperor required bishop Alexander of Constantinople to reinstate Arius. As Arius was preparing to enter the Cathedral for his removal from the list of heretics and to be reinstated into the church, he had to relieve himself. He found a latrine where he released all of his bowels in a bloody mess and died. You can find the full story on Wikipedia if you wish.

Unfortunately, the death of Arius did not lead to the death of his heresy. The successor of Constantine II, Theodosius, was also an Arius sympathizer. Theodosius, however, did something more valuable for the Christians, he made Christianity the official state religion in 380 with the Edict of Thessalonica. Not only was Christianity allowed but now the norm for the Empire. Thousands converted to the faith, some because they no longer feared persecution and death, some because it gave them political advantage, some because they believed, and some because it was the thing to do. Now with many more Christians and the Empire becoming predominantly Christian, the Church had to respond to this too. The length of preparation for Baptism was reduced to 3 months.

But Arianism was not dead. Emperor Theodosius still agreed with the Arian teaching and tried to promote them. Frustrated by the western part of the Empire and its insistence that the Council of Nicaea justly condemned Arius and promoted the truth faith, he convened the Council of Constantinople in 380 to resolve this dispute. Lo and behold, the Council of Constantinople really did only three major things. First, it ratified the declarations from the Council of Nicaea. Second, it defended the declaration that Arianism was a heresy but allowed those heretics back into communion. Third, it established the Bishop of Rome as a place of prominence amongst the patriarchs.

### **The begin of the patristic age**

As the legalization and ratification of Christianity spread across the Empire, the Church enters a new age. The language of the Empire switches to Latin from the original Greek, the Roman emperors will begin to distance themselves from the issues in Rome, the Church enters an era of peace, controversies will continue to erupt across the Empire, and paganism dies away. Over the next three centuries, the advancements in theology and biblical study by the Church Fathers leads to a golden age that we will not experience again. Each new controversy and heresy will lead to one or more of the Fathers commenting on it and refuting it. The level of scholarship by church leaders grows at an unprecedented rate. Christianity is on the cusp of a new era.

### **Saint of the Day: St. Gregory of Nyssa**

Like most of the Church Fathers, we know little about his early life. We do, however, know much about his family. Gregory was born into a very religious family. Two of his brothers became bishops, his mother was the daughter of a martyr, his sister became a saint, and his other brother was known for his asceticism even in a worldly profession. This deeply religious upbringing had its impact. When Gregory was in his teen years, he sought to study rhetoric, which would have landed him a job in the government. His brother pleaded with him to choose otherwise. When the path of a rhetorician failed, everyone was relieved. Gregory even married a woman and was remonstrated for the act. He later decided to live with her as a sister when he became a bishop. These early events had a deep impact on his understanding of himself and his calling. Later in his life he would write a book called *De Virginitate* (On Virginity) in which he greatly exalts the importance and value of virginity in following the Lord most fully.

After his early years, assumed from the works of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory became Bishop of Nyssa at some point, scholars assume around 371. Gregory was not fond of the episcopal office and tried to flee from it. These feelings were common for the time. Anyone who sought the office of bishop was often refused it and would not be allowed to accept it until they showed some humility for the office. Basil, Gregory's brother, consecrated him as bishop. Basil, however, did not give Gregory much praise as a bishop. Instead, he called him weak, naïve, clumsy, and unfit for the office, Basil used to complain about how Gregory meddled in his own affairs. Regardless, Gregory became the bishop of Nyssa.

His life as a bishop got off to a rocky start. Upon arriving at his diocese, several of the people who had vied for the office of bishop of Nyssa caused great trouble for him. They declared his election to the episcopate illegal, brought him before the magistrate, and tried to exile him. Realizing the poor treatment he was enduring, Gregory fled to safety and was considered exiled from his diocese. When Valens, the interim bishop, died. Gregory returned to his diocese and was received with great joy. Shortly after his return, his brother died. The death of his brother caused an immense change in his activity as a bishop. He was called to several councils to adjudicate heresies that were emerging and called upon several times to remedy disorder in the church.

Emperor Theodosius elevated the see of Nyssa causing Gregory's status to rise with it. He was renowned for his preaching and was called upon several times to preach at funerals of important dignitaries like princesses, emperors, and bishops. The end of his life was met with great activity and lots of appointments throughout the eastern part of the Empire. Yet, we know nothing about his later years or death. He simply disappears from the records around 390. Gregory is best known for his writings on Scripture and theology as well as his sermons.

### *The Life of Moses*

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, challenges to Christianity by the Greek philosophers were common. The Greek philosophers emphasized the ability to reason to truths and sought reasoned arguments as the sign of intellectual ideas worth exploring. To the Greek philosophers, Christian, and especially Jewish, thought was the work of uneducated children; they had little interest in the stories told by Jews and Christians alike. The Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century sought to change these sentiments felt by the Greek philosophers. The most notable challenge was the Old Testament. The Old Testament felt like a series of fables, stories, and held little value to the intellectuals. Yet, this is where the Church Fathers began. St. Gregory of Nyssa took up this task with the story and life of Moses. For Gregory, Moses was the paradigm of the Christian life. Moses understood God as completely other to us, unlike the Greek philosophers who felt that god was a concept or idea. God was a person who could be met but met in a cloud of unknowing or not by the normal visual senses. God had to be revealed to the person. The work focuses on Moses' experience of God as the context through which we understand the Christian life.

Gregory's work became a classic of Christian spirituality. Although most people prefer to read more modern works, his work was considered one of the more commonly read texts of his time and carries a simplicity and ease of read not common among the Church Fathers. His style is

very simple: he follows the life of Moses from the beginning of his life to the end expounding upon Moses' life as the pathway through which a Christian should live theirs.

Gregory's work is an excellent example of Patristic exegesis, expounding upon Scripture. We often dismiss the earliest Christians in favor of our modern techniques or assume we need to be qualified or learned in order to study Scripture. Men like Gregory prove all that wrong. Although he was highly educated, his work is largely based out of prayer and reflection. He takes the life of Moses as a real historical event with a real historical person whom he can learn from. From the basic elements of Moses' life, Gregory draws conclusions both about the life of Moses and our lives. For him, the life of Moses is one of perfection and those who seek perfection should imitate his virtues. Therefore, Gregory focuses on each element of Moses' life as a step in the path towards perfection. We must read this text as a explanation of the life of Moses rooted from Scripture and experience.