

Events:

The Ecumenical Church Councils

- Ecumenical means general. The term is from the Greek “oicoumene” which literally means “the inhabited world” – first the Roman Empire and later the world in general
- These were usually of a more global nature than the numerous local or regional councils that occurred before, during and after these general councils.
- They were called occasionally to discuss and settle matters of church doctrine
- The very first church council was the Jerusalem Council presented in Acts 15 in which the church declared that new believers did not need to be circumcised
- The first seven ecumenical councils were:
 - First Council of Nicaea (325) – repudiated Arianism, wrote the Nicene Creed, fixed the date of Easter, recognized the primacy of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, and granted Jerusalem a position of honor
 - First Council of Constantinople (381) – repudiated Arianism (again) and Macedonianism (denied deity of the Holy Spirit), and revised the Nicene Creed to add defense of the deity of the Holy Spirit
 - First Council of Ephesus (431) – repudiated Nestorianism and Pelagianism, proclaimed the Virgin Mary as the “Theotokos” or “Birth-giver to God”, and reaffirmed the Nicene Creed
 - Council of Chalcedon (451) – repudiated Eutychianism, described the “hypostatic union” of the two natures (human and divine) of Christ, and declared the primacy of Constantinople and Jerusalem
 - Second Council of Constantinople (553) – repudiated certain Nestorian writings and authors, and confirmed the intent of the Eastern church to stay in communion with Rome
 - Third Council of Constantinople (680-681) – repudiated Monothelitism (that Christ has a single will in two natures) and confirmed that Christ has both a human and divine will
 - Second Council of Nicaea (787) – restored the veneration of “icons” after the iconoclasm of 753 in which the emperor (Constantine V) declared that images of Jesus misrepresented him and that images of Mary and the saints were idols
- Most Protestant churches generally accept the first six councils with reservations

The Trinity

- Who is the Trinity? That was a question during the 4th century. Not everyone agreed on the definition, and it split the church for over 60 years during the Arian controversy. It continues to split the church today.

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- Here is the problem that Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers helped to solve during the years between Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381):
 - At the Council of Nicaea, the word “homo-ousios” was used to describe God’s “substance” or “essence” which sounded to many representatives like Sabellianism (one God, three masks)
 - Athanasius and the Cappadocians introduced the word “hypostateis” to try to differentiate between the essence and the persons so that there was one “ousios” and three “hypostateis”
 - But this also caused confusion in the western church because these two Greek words had only one Latin equivalent (substantia)
 - Three words exist that could be used, but because of the similarities, they cause confusion and misinterpretation between the eastern (Greek) and western (Latin) churches

Greek	Latin	English (sort of)
ousios	substantia	Substance (general), essence, ideal – Plato
hypostateis	substantia	Substance (particular), reality – Aristotle
prosopon	persona	Mask (what an actor wears) – Sabellius

- Had the Greeks used the word “prosopon” instead of “hypostateis”, then the creed would have indeed fallen into a support of Sabellianism
- So what does this all mean to us in the twenty-first century United States?
 - Creeds are for uneducated as well as educated people
 - In the U.S., the average high-school graduate knows around 17,000 word families and can read 90% of all text with a vocabulary of just 6,000
 - How can an infinite, eternal, omnipotent, divine and heavenly God be defined (or constrained) by human and earthly words?
 - Since words change over space and time, we must continually refine our understanding of who God is in terms of common speech
 - BUT: The Creeds did not die for us on the cross. Jesus Christ did.

Heroes:

Cappadocian Fathers

- Three men from Cappadocia in the mid to late 4th century
 - Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea (born 330, died 379)
 - Gregory, bishop of Nyssa (born c. 335, died after. 394)
 - Gregory Nazianzus, bishop of Constantinople (born c. 330, died c. 390)
- These men held close relationships to each other
 - Basil was Gregory of Nyssa’s older brother
 - Basil and Gregory Nazianzus attended the University of Athens together
- They are best known for helping to clear up misunderstandings between the western church (Rome) and the eastern church (Constantinople) concerning the ongoing Arian controversy
- All three men were well educated, devout men who could speak their ideas clearly, and were patient in explaining their positions

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- All three men were supporters and encouragers of the monastic movement:
 - Basil, in speaking to the desert hermits, once asked, “If you continue to live alone, whose feet will you wash?”
 - Basil also wrote the “Rule of Order” for the eastern monasteries
- Both Gregories participated in the Council of Constantinople in 381 and were key figures in resolving the Arian controversies and uniting the eastern and western churches on the meaning of the Trinity

Heresies:

Monarchianism

- The name comes from the work “monos” (one) and “arche” (rule)
- The belief that God is one and only one God
 - This is over against Arianism, which taught that there were three gods
- But there are no “three persons” to the Godhead
 - The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are denigrated (scorned or belittled)
- Monarchianism takes on two forms
 - Modalistic Monarchianism – Sabellianism or Patripassianism
 - Dynamic Monarchianism – Adoptionism

Sabellianism (Modalistic Monarchianism)

- Named for its chief proponent Sabellius, who taught around 215
- Also called “Modalism” or Modalistic Monarchianism
- Taught that God was one person with three “modes” or roles
 - The Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not exist as separate persons
 - They are just three “faces” or “masks” (Gr. “prosopa”, Lat. “persona”) of the “same” essence (“homo-ousios” again)
 - They exist only as acting roles similar to a role played by an actor using the Stanislavsky method in which he really lives like the current role he is playing in order to be play it more effectively
- Proponents argue that the only number ever attributed to God in Scripture is “one” and never “three”
- Christians may counter belief by pointing to several passages in which two or more persons are specifically mentioned at the same time:
 - The Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22)
 - The Great Commission by Christ (Matthew 28:18-20)
 - Christ must go away so that He can send the Spirit (John 16:7)
 - Passages in which Christ prays to the Father

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Lesson 9 – 9/27/2009

- One logical conclusion of Sabellianism is that it must have been the Father that suffered on the cross
 - This was pointed out by both Tertullian and Cyprian and was called “Patripassianism”
- Some leading churches today are modalists:
 - United Pentecostal Church denies the Trinity and hold to “oneness” who believe in Jesus only
 - Also the United Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ

Adoptionism (Dynamic Monarchianism)

- The name comes from Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) in his 3-volume “Textbook on the History of Dogma” for describing the heretical stream of Greek theology in which Christ is simply a man who has been gifted with divine powers
- It is called “monarchian” because it seeks to reconcile the claim that Jesus is the Son of God with the Jewish doctrine of the “Shema” in Deuteronomy 6:4
- It is called “dynamic” because Jesus’ receiving the “Christ” (spirit) at his baptism enabled him to work wonders (Gr. “dynameis”)
 - But this came after he had already proven his holiness
- Ebionism, which we studied in Lesson 5, was an early form of Adoptionism
- Theodotus of Byzantium popularized this teaching in the 2nd century
- He taught that Jesus was born merely human and earned the divine title of Christ through his sinless devotion to the will of God and thereby became the perfect sacrifice to redeem humanity
- Supporters of Adoptionism use verses similar to the following:
 - Mark 1:11 (in which the Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism and God declared him to be his son)
 - Romans 1:3-4 (in which God’s Son “... descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead...”)
 - The non-canonical book “Shepherd of Hermas” (59:5-7) teaches that Jesus lived as a virtuous man, received the Holy Spirit and was adopted as the Son of God
- Theodotus was condemned by Victor I (Bishop of Rome, 189-199)
- Other forms of Adoptionism continued to arise in later centuries:
 - 3rd century Antioch – Paul of Samosata
 - 8th century Spain – Hispanic error
 - 12th & 14th centuries – “Neo-Adoptionism”
- Adoptionism makes Christ’s redeeming work ineffective
 - Jesus was the perfect example for us to follow
 - Jesus self-sacrificed, lived a sinless life and so achieved a perfect union with God
 - We can also self-sacrifice and become sinless by our good works and so achieve our own perfect union with God!