

Church History 101
Lesson 11
Theological Orthodoxy

Key Concepts: When Constantine (c. 272 – c. 337) legalized Christianity in 313 with the Edict of Milan what he found was a church divided. It was divided on two fronts; How to treat those who had turned from their faith in the face of persecution and what was the nature of Jesus.

The Story: Though the church had continued to grow in the face of persecutions, its legalization did not mean that it was united in its practices or its beliefs. The first great issue that Constantine had to deal with was the Donatist controversy. Prior to the legalization of Christianity the Roman leadership in North Africa had been lenient toward Christians. As long as they handed over their scriptures, they could worship and live as they pleased. After the Edict of Milan, Christians in this area, led by Bishop Donatus Magnus, branded all of those who had handed over the scriptures (mostly the poor) as traitors. Any sacraments performed by or for the “traitors” was considered to be invalid. This created a rift in the churches in North Africa which led to threats of riots.

Constantine tried to intervene with gifts to the churches, but these only went to non-Donatist churches, which made matters worse. The Emperor then called together two councils of bishops to sort out the issue. Both of the councils, being heavily weighted with “catholic” bishops ruled against the Donatists. Making the matter worse was the fact that while the “catholic” bishops saw Constantine as head of the church, the Donatists still viewed him as evil. In response Constantine confiscated the property of the Donatists and sent their leaders into exile. Ultimately though this did not unite the church and in 321 Constantine granted Donatists the right to follow their conscience.

The second great issue which was dividing the church was the nature of the person of Jesus. For the earliest church, there was no need to examine the nature of Jesus. All that mattered was that Jesus was Son of God and messiah, through whose death and resurrection the power of sin and death were broken. By the time of Constantine however, the church had become divided between two distinct views of the nature of Jesus. There were those who followed Bishop Athanasius who believed that Jesus was “begotten” of God and thus eternal in nature (meaning Jesus shared God’s very essence) and those who followed Presbyter Arius who believed that Jesus was created and thus had a beginning. While this may appear to be an esoteric argument, it is not. The heart of the matter was, and is, when we look at Jesus do we see God (Athanasius) or do we see someone who is only like God (Arius). If we see God then we know that what he hear from Jesus is what we would hear from God. If we only see someone like Jesus then we may or may not be hearing from Jesus what God wants us to hear.

In order to deal with this division in the church, Constantine called the first church-wide council to discuss the matter. This council was held at Nicaea. Tradition tells us that when the bishops could not agree on language concerning Jesus, Constantine recommended language about Jesus which was adopted. Those believing that Jesus was “begotten” and not made won the day with only two dissenting votes (both of those bishops were sent into exile by Constantine). The language of the council was formalized into what we know as the Nicæan Creed (though the Creed we possess today was the result of later clarifications in both 381 and 451). This creed then became the first basis for orthodoxy (acceptable belief) within the Church. Even today it defines the boundaries of orthodoxy for churches around the world.

Questions:

1. What do you think of the role played by the Emperor in the life of the church?
2. Where do you still see the government playing a role in the church today?
3. Do you think that the church should have clear theological guidelines for membership?