

THE NICENE CREED

**“...God from God, Light from Light, true
God from true God, begotten, not
made, consubstantial with the Father.”**

PASSAGES CLASS

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Bill Stevenson

THE SETTING - THE ROMAN EMPIRE ABOUT 300 A.D.

- Waning days of the Roman Empire.
- In the East is where it's happening: the arc from Greece to Egypt and the language is Greek.
- But the Empire is in decline; Germanic tribes pushing boundaries, Persia, the old enemy, again a threat.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE



DIOCLETIAN

- Rose up through the ranks and proclaimed Emperor by his army in 284.
- Defeats the Persians, seals the border and creates order out of chaos.
- He believes a return to traditional values and practices will revitalize the Empire.
- In short he wants to:

MAKE ROME GREAT AGAIN!

FAC ROMAM ITERUM MAGNA!



But, There's Just One Little Problem...

- There's this once little Jewish sect that has become a full blown religion over the past three hundred years.
- There are over 6 million of them, 10% of the Empire. They call themselves Christians and worship a Messiah, Jesus the Christ.
- They're everywhere, in the major cities, in the civil service, the Imperial household, in the army!

The Great Persecution...

- Not only are the Christians in every class of society but they refuse to honor and even respect the traditional Roman Gods – and Diocletian, as Emperor, is a god!
- The solution, the same old solution, is to force the Christians to submit even if it involves destruction of property, torture and death.
- So begins the Great Persecution of the Christians in 303.

The Great Persecution...



... Fails

- The Great Persecution fails because:
 - There are a lot of Christians
 - Not everyone wants to harm them
 - The Christians are not cowed – on the contrary, many seek martyrdom
- The good news:

CHRISTIANITY IS HERE TO STAY!!!

Constantine the Great

- Fast forward to 324 and there is a new sheriff in town – Constantine.
- Born to privilege, he is known as the first Christian Emperor: “In this sign you will conquer”.
- His mother, Helena, is a Christian but Constantine is not baptized until he is close to death because he doesn’t wish to alienate non-Christians and because, maybe he is...

Constantine the Great



RUTHLESS

FORM XXIII: APPLICATION TO BECOME ROMAN EMPEROR

Part II. STANDARD TEST FOR ROMAN EMPEROR APPLICANTS

...

27. Gaul is divided into how many parts?

28. Do you feel ruthless?

- a) Sometimes
- b) Often
- c) Almost always
- d) Never

29. What is the square root of MMXXIII?

30. How many cohorts in a legion?

31. Name two of Virgil's poems?

32. How many barbarians does it take to change an oil lamp?

- a) Four

Constantine the Great

- How do we know?
 - First Son
 - Second wife
 - Brothers-in-law
 - Father-in-law

Constantine the Great

- Constantine takes stock of the Empire and has a totally different conclusion about the Christians.
- If you can't beat them, join them.
- Does not make Christianity the official religion of the Empire but recognizes it as legitimate.
- His dream, like Diocletian, is to make Rome great again and sees Christianity as the great unifier for all the disparate elements of the Empire.

But, there is just one little problem...

- The Christians, it seems, are not unified.
- There are disagreements on a whole host of issues including the church calendar, polity, and liturgy.
- But the one thing that threatens to split the church apart, the one thing that is causing name calling, shouting, accusations and even bloodshed is the one thing that you have thought would be figured out over the past three hundred years....

The Question

Who is Jesus Christ?

Who is Jesus Christ ?

- Not a Jesus Seminar type question
- All Christians believe Jesus is our Savior, speaks for God, is divine, was crucified and resurrected and ascended into heaven.
- The question is more subtle than that.
- Basically, was there God first and he created Jesus or is Jesus actually God himself?

Who is Jesus Christ?

- There are essentially two schools of thought:
The Arians led by a 60 years elder/priest named Arius from Alexandria. They believe Jesus is:
 - Not God and human at the same time
 - The Son of God created by God; there was a time when the son was not
 - Resurrected/Divine/Immortal
 - But Not God; the Father is greater

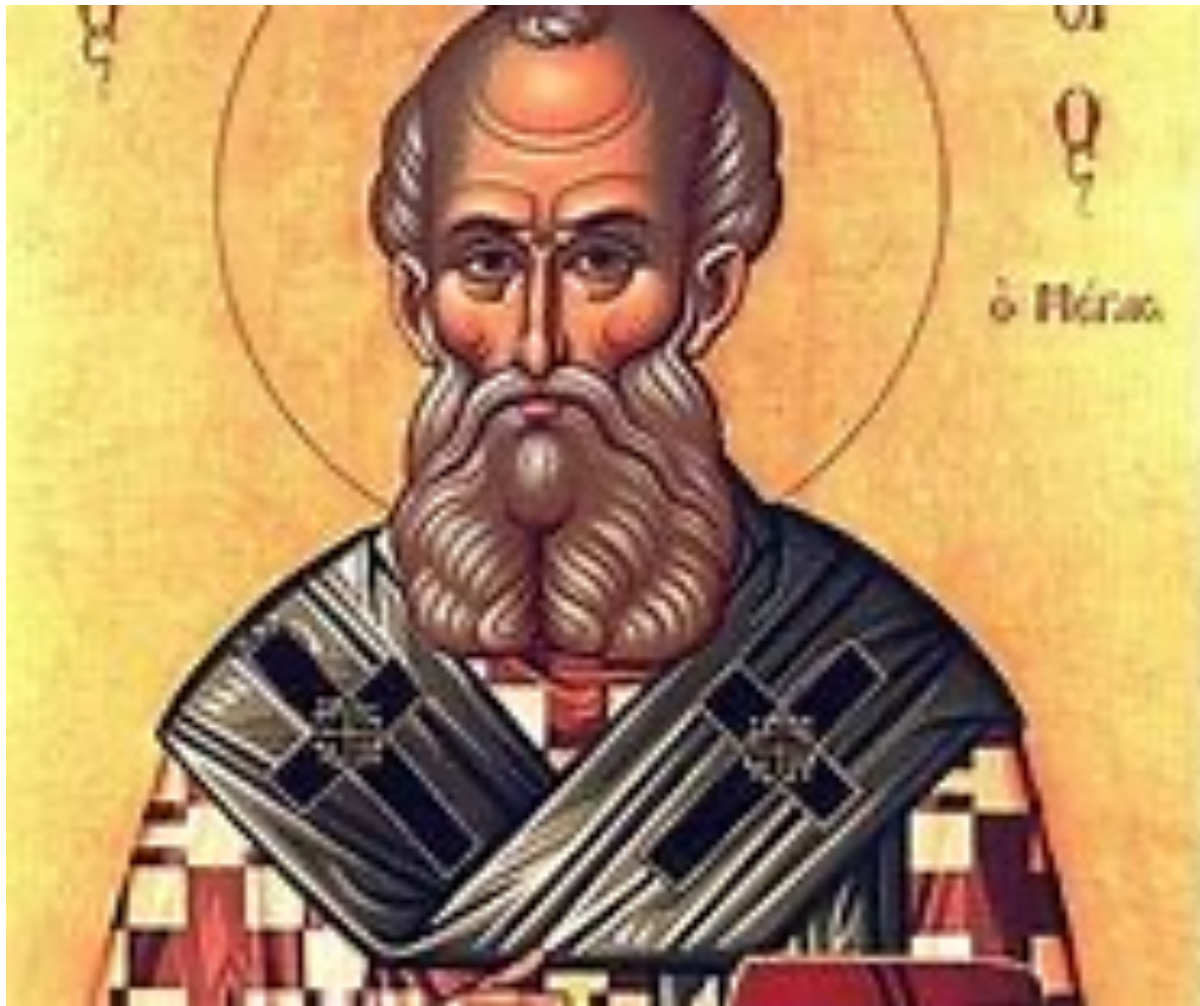
Arius



Who is Jesus Christ?

- The other school of thought are known as the Anti-Arians led by a young deacon named Athanasius (who speaks for the Bishop of Alexandria) They believe:
 - Jesus is fully divine and fully human at the same time.
 - God descended into human flesh and took the burden of human sin on his own shoulders so that we might have eternal life.
 - A human being could not grant us immortality and resurrect our physical bodies.

Athanasius



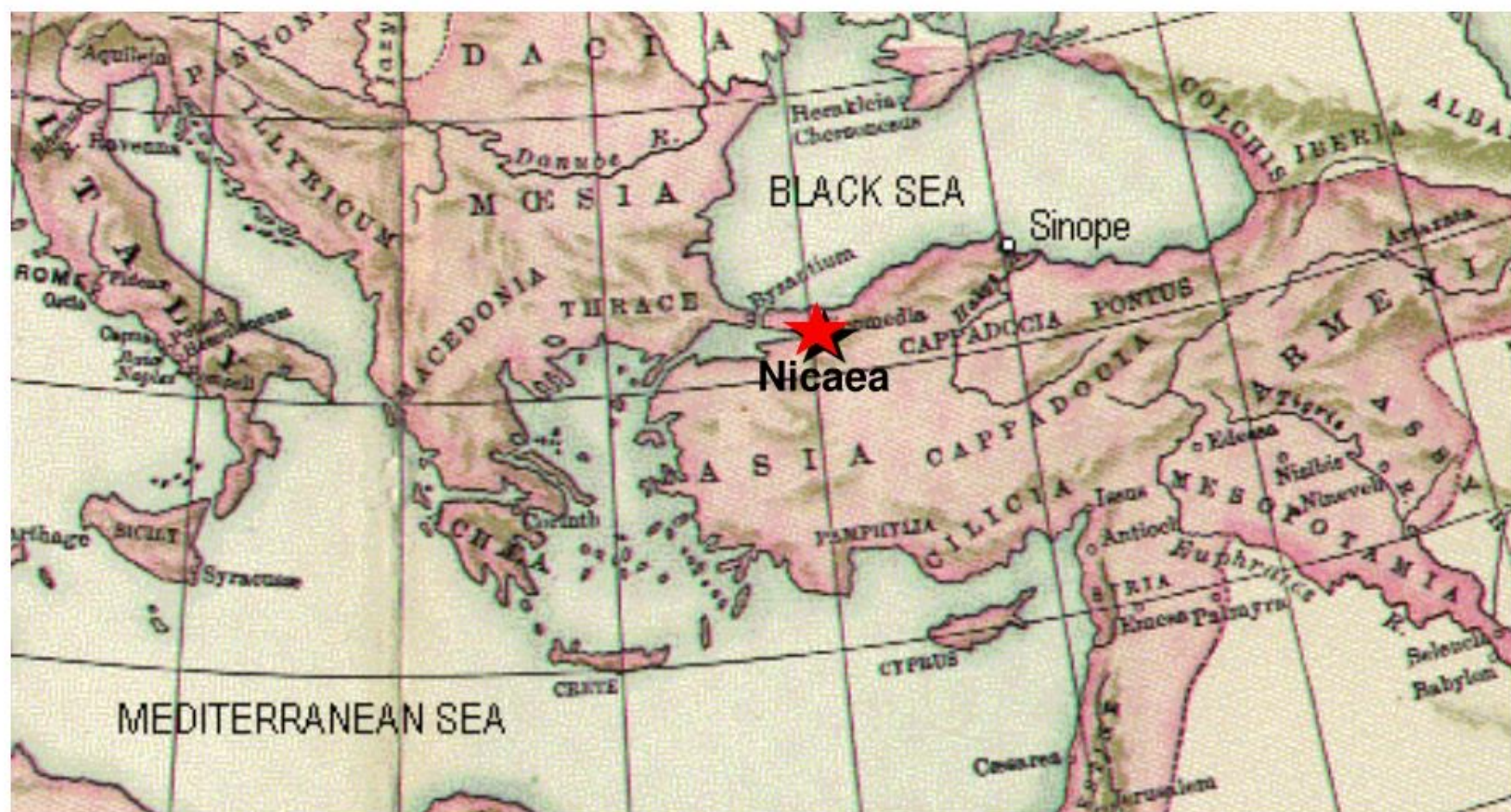
Enter Constantine

- A rift in the Church is not what Constantine has in mind.
- Since there no hierarchy in the Church at this time, Constantine decides to hold a conference and get this matter settled once and for all.
- Constantine knows the perfect place for the conference: his summer palace at Nicaea – great location, sleeps two thousand.

Nicaea



The Council of Nicaea – AD 325



Council of Nicaea 325

- Some 250 to 318 Bishops arrive at Constantine's summer palace. Many still bear the scars from the Great Persecution.
- The number one item on the agenda is the Arian controversy, but other issues are also to be discussed and decided in this, the first ecumenical gathering.
- Constantine addresses them in Latin but chats with them in Greek.

Council of Nicaea 325

- A draft of a creed is presented to the gathering:
 - “God from God, Light from light, life from life. Son, only begotten first begotten of all creation, begotten before all the ages from the Father...”
- Constantine likes it but suggests the word “homousios” be added – that is Jesus and God share the same essence, the same substance, or reality, or being. Anti-Arianism.

Council of Nicaea 325



Council of Nicaea 325

- The debate rages. The vote is cast on the draft Anti- Arian (i.e. Jesus is God) creed.
- It is not even close. Only two Bishops vote against it and they exiled along with Arius.
- So that was that... the Arian controversy was brought before a council of clergymen and the matter decided. So ordered.

Constantine is delighted. Time to move on to administrative matters, like when is Easter?

But There Is One Little Problem...

- Turns out that the representatives to the Nicene Council, the Bishops, don't speak for everyone in their respective sees.
- Many ordinary Christians remain Arians notwithstanding what was decided at Nicaea.
- Many bishops, while paying lip service to the Nicene Creed, remain Arians as their core belief.

Constantius

- Constantine dies 337.
- His three surviving sons divide the Empire; two are killed in battle and Constantius the survivor becomes sole Emperor in 353. He leans toward Arianism.
- Athanasius and Constantius at odds.
- There further develops a West Latin Nicene versus an East Greek Arian split.

Constantius Cont'd

- Constantius convenes nine councils to seek consensus 351-360 (tries to beat Dad).
- In 356 Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, is exiled. Alexander riots.
- The Arian view predominates by 359, the word homoousius is outlawed.
- By pressure from Constantius, Latin and Greek bishops agree to a new creed, “the Son is like the Father in all things.”

One Step Backwards

- Constantius dies 361 and his nephew Julian become Emperor.
- Julian is not an Arian nor a Nicene follower – he is a pagan!
- But there is not a pagan renaissance and he is killed in battle in two years later.
- Valens is next up – he is an Arian and it appears that Arianism “the Son is not” will prevail.

Two Steps Forward

- In the 370's the Cappadocians introduce the concept of the Holy Spirit and argue that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are three separate beings but are one and the same in essence.
- But violent conflict between radical Arians and Nicene supporters continues.
- And – the barbarians invade the Empire – Emperor Valens is killed in battle in 378.

The Last Emperor – I promise.

- With the Empire crumbling, Theodosius becomes Emperor – he is very committed to Nicene orthodoxy.
- He convenes on 381 the Council of Constantinople in which the Nicene Creed is adopted and expanded to include “the Holy Spirit ...who with the Father and Son is together worshipped and together glorified”.
- Arianism is outlawed – seriously. Christianity becomes the official religion.

Summary

- Diocletian - Great Persecution fails 313.
- Arianism and anti-Arianism (Who is Jesus?) split church.
- Constantine convenes Council of Nicaea 325 – Father and Son of same substance.
- Yet Arianism (a time when the Son was not) and pro-Nicene (Father and Son of same substance) supporters still clash
- Arian views predominant in the East c.360's
- Holy Spirit introduced by the Cappadocians as of same essence 370's.
- As Empire weakens - Arianism is outlawed 381.³⁶

Epilogue Part I

- Since the Council of Constantinople, the Doctrine of Trinity as described in the Nicene Creed is orthodoxy for Christianity.
- The Nicene creed survived the Great Schism
- The Nicene Creed survived the Reformation
- The only challenge is the rise of Unitarianism in England and the United States in late 18th and early 19th Centuries. Four U.S. Presidents have been Unitarians.
- All major Christian denominations proclaim the Trinity with the exception of the Unitarians, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Epilogue Part II

- Constantine – all he wanted was Christian unity.
- The emperor made it plain that he considered the escalation of the doctrinal conflict among high-ranking Christians not only disruptive of Church unity but disreputable and almost certainly unnecessary.