



Who do you think you are? Thinking Like a Christian April-June 2020

26th April: Who is God, who is Jesus?

The gospel in the Roman Empire: AD 0-451

Acts 1:8; 28:30-31.

By the end of the New Testament, the church was already spread across the Roman Empire. It was very small and, humanly speaking, very weak.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. ...

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food... I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

(Letter from Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus/Bithynia, to the Emperor Trajan, AD112)

1. Was Jesus really a man? Gnosticism

What Gnosticism was

The hero: Irenaeus of Lyons (c. AD130-200).

1. Jesus came to redeem our *whole selves – bodies included*. That's why he became flesh! He came to be a new head for humanity ('recapitulation') John 1:14; Hebrews 2:14-16

2. Only the creator can recreate. So Jesus must be the same God as the God of the Old Testament. (1 Cor 15)

3. Real 'knowledge' only comes from God through Jesus – and therefore through the Apostles. The Gnostic 'knowledge' was wrong because it was not *apostolic* – and the church must believe what the Apostles wrote, nothing else. 2 Timothy 1:13-14

And the seeds of what would become a big problem... truth is found in the one organisation of the catholic church.

2. Lord of lords and King of kings: The conversion of Constantine AD312

in AD306 Constantine, son of the Emperor Constantius, was in York when he got the news that his Father had died. In AD312 he had made his way back to Rome to face the rebel Maxentius. They fought at the Battle of Milvian Bridge.

313 Edict of Milan. (Constantine pretty ambiguous in his own beliefs: the seven-day week and 'Sunday'!)

Effects: End of persecution

Rise of monasticism

Lesson: governments cannot ultimately be neutral about Christianity.

3. Was Jesus really God? Arianism

Christianity faced another major cultural problem: Aristotle.

Arius taught that the 'Word' which became flesh in Jesus was *created* by God, the first and greatest of his creations. 'There was a time when he was not'.

Constantine found the Christianity he had embraced was in danger of tearing itself apart. So he called the **Council of Nicaea** in **AD325**.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

(The Creed of Nicaea)

Defeat for the Arians?

The hero: Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria 328-373.

- Only God himself could restore man, the image of God, to fellowship to himself. Only God could offer himself a sacrifice for sins. A created being – no matter how great – couldn't do it. Put simply, an Arian Christ could not save us.

- Countered Arianism not merely by arguing proof-texts but by showing the internal consistency of the gospel. It is when we understand the 'big picture' of the gospel, as the whole Bible presents it, that we can see that the Arians' proof-texts could not mean what the Arians thought they meant.

¹ Gerald Bray, *Creeeds, Councils and Christ*, p106

... it was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption, except the Saviour Himself, that had at the beginning also made all things out of nought: and that none other could create anew the likeness of God's image for men, save the Image of the Father; and that none other could render the mortal immortal, save our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Very Life; and that none other could teach men of the Father, and destroy the worship of idols, save the Word, that orders all things and is alone the true Only-begotten Son of the Father.

... For there was need of death, and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all, that the debt owing from all might be paid. Whence, as I said before, the Word, since it was not possible for Him to die, as He was immortal, took to Himself a body such as could die, that He might offer it as His own in the stead of all, and as suffering, through His union with it, on behalf of all.

(Athanasius, 'On the Incarnation of the Word of God')

What should we learn from Athanasius?

1. Who Jesus is is absolutely vital to the gospel
2. Claiming to be 'bible-based' is *not* enough to guarantee your orthodoxy.
3. Sometimes remaining faithful puts you in a tiny minority

And some problems...

4. Who is Jesus, and who is God? Christ and the Trinity

Once Jesus' full humanity and full deity had been settled, that left two questions remaining:

- How can Jesus be both?
- What does this mean for who God is?

Who is Jesus?

Eutychianism

Nestorianism

Apollinarianism

→ **Council of Chalcedon 451: One person, two natures.**

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

(Chalcedonian Creed)

Who is God?

A bi-nity?

- Council of Constantinople 381: revised the 'Nicene' Creed, to the form we know today.

Three persons, one essence, in unity.

→ Don't be a modalist or a tritheist!

The 'Athanasian' Creed (not in fact by Athanasius, but intended to capture his theology)