



Nicaea

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Nicaea is a small town in the middle of what is now Turkey. In the fourth century there were no Turks. Asia minor was a part of Hellenic civilization. The people spoke Greek. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 it was decided that God consisted of three persons. The proponents of this formula hence were called Trinitarians. Their opponents, led by Arias, came to be known as Unitarians. That's where we got our start.

This morning I want to tell you how this all came about, but before I do I have a couple of things I want to accomplish. I am going to try to convince you that our concept of time is flawed. Then I want to discuss in some detail what went on during those three hundred plus years leading up to Nicaea. That will be essential to our understanding of what ultimately occurred there.

All of us had some exposure to history in grammar school. We took additional history in high school. At university most of us took at a minimum a course in Western Civ. Subsequently we did some reading in history and we have all seen motion pictures dealing with historical events. I am going to suggest that our impression that these historical events took place in some very distant and remote past is partly because in the past people dressed funny. For example, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, and their friends, wore knickers. They buttoned just below the knee. They wore long stockings, shoes with iron buckles, and three-cornered hats. They either wore their hair down to their shoulders, as did Franklin, or they wore a wig. The ladies wore hoop skirts with lots of petticoats. (You wonder how they got through a doorway, or how they were able to sit down.)

It is natural to suppose that people who dressed this way had to have lived a very long time ago, However, not so. I am 84 years old. If you took just three people like me and placed them on a time line, sequentially, they would cover 252 years. Two hundred and fifty two years ago it was 1756. That's 20 years before the Declaration of Independence. Just three people my age separate us from that time. To put it another

way, I have lived and experienced fully a third of our nation's history (actually 36%). In Tennessee in 1925 there was a trial of a teacher who was charged and convicted of teaching evolution in his biology class. I was living in Arizona at the time. True, I was too young to understand the issues. But I was there.

I will give you this, Nicaea was quite while ago. And people really did dress funny. They wore a sheet and sandals. (It must have been a bit drafty.) However, it was not as long ago as you might think. It would take *just 20 individuals* like me, arranged sequentially, to reach back to Nicaea.

On an evolutionary time scale, the distance between now and 325 is the blink of an eye. In other words, people then were no different than we are. So, if you want an insight into the minds of those at Nicaea, you have only to look around you. Let's do that, let's see what we're like.

We have the ability now to construct tall buildings. But they're a little odd. They have no thirteenth floor. . . There is an area just southeast of Florida where, if it is entered by a ship, the ship runs the grave risk of never being heard from again. This is the Bermuda Triangle. Lots of people believe that there is some sort of anomaly there, maybe a black hole or a time warp or some gravitational distortion. Who knows? . . . There is an organization that meets annually to share photographs, books, and first-hand sightings of. . . flying saucers. The flying saucers are manned by aliens from distant worlds. People don't attend these functions as some sort of lark. They're serious. They're convinced that the Defense Department is fully aware of these UFO's, but they're keeping it Top Secret. . . In our forests, especially in the Northwest, there is a creature, probably a hominid, but much bigger than we are. We know, because its footprints are about yea long. He is known as Big Foot. . . If you want to know what your day is going to be like, you have only to pick up a morning paper, any morning paper will do, and turn to the horoscope column. Your sign and the particular alignment of the planets are predictive of coming events. There may be days when

you'll want to stay home. . . Finally, about one in four Americans believe there are angels.

This is who we are, so don't be too surprised at the beliefs of those attending the Nicene Council.

Almost everyone, though probably not most of you in this room, hold the unexamined assumption that Christianity began with Jesus and his disciples and that Judas, who was clearly a Jew, as you can tell by his name, betrayed Jesus to the Romans. These two suppositions have been sufficient to fuel anti-Semitism until this day. As it happens, the first assumption is not true and the story about Judas is doubtful. Jesus and his followers were all observant Jews, not Christians. The notion of creating a new religion did not occur to them.

We have accounts of Jesus in the New Testament, attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. However, these accounts were written long after Jesus and his contemporaries were gone. Mark's gospel is the earliest and it was written 40 years after the fact. If you arrange the gospels in the order in which they were written, the earliest gospels emphasize Jesus the man, the later gospels focus on Jesus as divinity. In Mark, Joseph is the father of Jesus. There is no virgin birth. Moreover, the earliest versions of these gospels have no indicated authorship. They were anonymous. And they were in Greek. Jesus and his followers spoke Aramaic and they were illiterate fishermen, carpenters, and herdsman. Less than five percent of people at that time were literate. Jesus and his followers wrote nothing. The authors of the gospels were very literate. The attribution of these Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John first appears in the second century. The accounts do not agree among themselves. They do not even agree about when the crucifixion occurred. They do not agree that Mary and Joseph made the trip to Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census. (Roman records are silent about a census at that time.) The authors had no direct evidence of anything about Jesus. They had only oral traditions.

There were other gospels, not included in the Bible. However, they are all too late to provide direct evidence about Jesus. Perhaps most prolific were the Gnostics. They emphasized the gulf between the material and the spiritual. They believed that if you truly came to know the spiritual, you could live forever.

Footnote: The word 'gnostic' means knowledge. Note the word 'agnostic'—it means no knowledge. The root 'gno' is in fact a cognate of the English root 'kno.'

None of their gospels made it in to the Bible.

It is very useful to know that the early Christians were not converted Jews. They were converted European pagans. Much that we find in pagan religions were readily imported into Christianity. Polytheism or multiple gods are characteristic of Christianity. Besides the three "persons" of God there are all manner of saints, angels, and the mother of Jesus, who is often prayed to. There are guardian angels for all professions and activities. The practice of propitiating the gods and offering sacrifices (The crucifixion of Jesus is viewed as a sacrifice) comes directly from pagan traditions. Pagan demi-gods furnish a model for Jesus as both man and divine. The Christmas tree and yule log are pagan in origin.

The principal architect of Christianity was Paul of Tarsus, along with his contemporary, John. It is Paul who wrote those letters to the Ephesians, letters to the Corinthians, etc. However, Paul of Tarsus and John had no direct knowledge of Jesus nor of any of his contemporaries. They relied entirely on oral histories.

It is important to know that secondary deities in the Near and Middle East all had a default biography. They were all born of a virgin, all were the son of a god, all died and were resurrected and all ascended to heaven. I will give you just a few examples. Osiris of Egypt had this precise biography. Adonis is a little more interesting. He was born of a virgin, was the son of god, and was killed in a forest. A group of women found the body and wrapped it in muslin and added perfume. They then carried the body to a grotto and left it there overnight. When they returned in the

morning, the body was gone. It had risen and ascended to heaven. Mithra, the god of the Roman empire before Christianity, had a similar biography. Finally, there was a deity who had a similar life *subsequent* to Jesus. He was born in 570 A.D., became a merchant, acquired a following, died, was resurrected and ascended to heaven (the Miraj) on a horse with wings. It was Mohammed. Some believe the Miraj was allegorical and occurred during a dream. Others believe it literally.

While Paul of Tarsus used a default biography for Jesus, he greatly emphasized the idea of Salvation. If you accepted Jesus you could live forever. The idea really caught on and Christianity spread throughout the empire. Officials of the empire were oppressive toward Christians. They were thought to be subversive. Christians preached that the rich could not gain entry into heaven and that the meek shall inherit the earth. The Romans were not amused. They persecuted the Christians. Christians were brought to the Coliseum and fed to lions for the entertainment of Roman citizens. In Asia Minor Christians dug elaborate, multi-storied caves in the sides of mountains to avoid persecution. Archeologists have found entire churches in these caves.

The turning point in our story for the comes when the mother of a future emperor acquires an appreciation of Christianity. She communicates that sentiment to her son. When Constantine ascends the throne he is ambivalent about the Christians. They were a nuisance, but they had some good ideas. He came up with a novel solution: He would co-opt the Christians. He proposed to them that he could make Christianity the official, established church of the empire, turn over all the pagan temples and schools, and their treasuries. In return, he expected the Christians to tone down the rhetoric (give unto Caesar what is Caesar's). Most important, they must stop their constant bickering. There were many sects and they all had different ideas about Jesus. An established church of the Roman Empire had to have a clear and constant vision. Christians were interested. Constantine called a special meeting of Christian bishops from all over the empire. He first wanted it to meet in the city that was to bear

his name: Constantinople. But he thought the weather better in Nicaea. Constantine attended and participated in the council's deliberations. His participation was crucial. Constantine invited all 1,800 bishops. Around 300 came. But they were allowed to bring two priests and three deacons, so the total number of attendees was over 1,500.

The first problem to be deliberated was the nature of Jesus. Was he god or man? Or was he both? For Arias and his followers, the idea of Jesus as god, or both, raised two problems. First, between father and son there is a clear sequence. First the father, then the son. But a god has no beginning. He has always existed. So this posed a logical impossibility. Further, Jesus as god posed a direct challenge to the First Commandment. Athanasius and others countered that the First Commandment issue could be dealt with by declaring there is one god, consisting of two persons, the father and the son. Athanasius argued that God and Jesus were "of the same substance."

But there was more. The familiar story was that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem while Mary was with child. There was no room at the inn, so they were put up in a manger. Parenthetically, you might like to know that the noun 'manger' is a cognate of the French verb 'manger' (to eat) which has the exact same spelling. The connection here is that the manger was a place where the animals ate.

The difficulty with the story is its strong implication that Joseph was the father, a troubling notion, since Mary's condition was an immaculate conception. Since Joseph was an ordinary mortal, this was not in his repertoire. The theologians had to find another agency for this conception. They found one in the beliefs of the Brahmins of India. The Brahmins had a notion of a magical entity that could perform tasks not possible for mere mortals. It was a ghost.

Once again, Arias objected, noting that this introduced another deity into the equation, not permitted by the First Commandment. But Athanasias and others simply plugged in the same device used for the father/son difficulty. Actually, some aspects of the Trinitarian view had been in play even before Niceae. But now it was definite that

God would be one, but would consist of three persons.

Constantine saw this as a solution to the bickering and the disputes. Some followers of Arias, noting his inclination, defected because they were counting on the prospect of becoming the established church of the empire. Their agreement was a kind of Faustian bargain. They surrendered their convictions to gain an established church. The advocates of this formula became known as Trinitarians, while their remaining opponents were known as Unitarians.

When the tide turned against him, Arias went home to Alexandria. Later, the Council declared Arias to be a heretic and ordered his writings burned.

However, the Nicene Creed did not at first fully take hold. Constantine flip-flopped in his support of Athanasius because he was more interested in keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius and asked Arius to return and be re-baptized, canceling his excommunication. However, Arius died before he could be baptized. Later emperors forced an Arian view on the church. Emperors Constantius and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. But in 381 the Trinitarian view was reaffirmed.

Arias and his ideas were not forgotten. When, in the eighteenth century several Congregational churches in New England voted to become Unitarian, they cited the words and cause of Arias.