

Text

Hebrews 12:1-3

Main Point

Nicaea – Witness of the Past

Introduction (300)

Hook

The year 2025 is a special year. It is a special year for the Church, not just Covenant Grace Baptist Church, but the Church Universal. It is special because we remember something significant that happened exactly 17 hundred years ago.

In the year 325, the church, those people who had pledged allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, won a battle. They won a victory whose benefits we still are indebted to today.

This evening, in honour of it's one thousand, seven hundredth anniversary, we turn our attention to the council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed which issued form it.

We don't remember or commemorate just for the sake of it. Many Christians have come before us. And we do well to consider their actions and reactions in this broken and fallen world, in this world where lies are all too easy to believe. We remember their actions to avoid their mistakes and to learn form their good example. Looking back we can be spurred on by their good witness.

Hebrews 12:1-3, referring to OT believers, but also relevant to believers after Christ says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

So let us go and see what witnesses we can find, back in the year 325, in a little town called Nicaea.

Outline

~~Some historic context~~

~~Arian and his teaching~~

~~Nicaean Fathers and their conclusion~~

Part 1 – Historical Background to the Creed

Roman Empire Context

Let us transport ourselves back to the fourth century. Back to the time of the Roman empire: with legions, senators in togas, construction of aqueducts, circuses, gladiators, and emperors. Back to the time of the early church.

Back to the time where there were the stories of Jesus walking on earth were not ancient history.

Back to a time when a grandmother could have remembered someone who knew the first disciples of the Apostles.

By the year 300 AD the church had grown dramatically. Going from a strange sect of Judaism to its own distinct religion with thousands of participants throughout the Roman empire.

Main Focus of the Church to Share the Gospel and Survive

And, as we read in Acts, the church had been very focused: They preached the gospel and established churches.

And they survived. Preaching the gospel and establishing churches was done in the midst of suspicion, opposition, hatred, violence, mob persecution and even state-sanctioned persecution.

Great Persecution

By the year 303, only 22 years before our council, saw some of the worst state-sanctioned persecution.

The Roman Empire was fracturing and the emperor knew it. And here was his solution: get rid of the Christians, then the gods will stop being angry and then Rome will return to its original glory. That was the logic and the logic was put into ruthless practice:

In 303 and 304, the emperor Diocletian (dai-uh-klee-shn) dispatched a series of edicts against the Christians:

Church buildings destroyed, scripture burned, Christian worship forbidden, people forced to sacrifice

to the Emperor, or face capital punishment, all by state edict, all in an attempt to “appease the gods”.

It is hard to imagine the scope of destruction, suffering and death that these edicts unleashed. To become a Christian was to become an outcast. To be a church leader was to sign your death warrant. These were dark times for the church

Edict of Milan

This state-funded, state-sanctioned persecution is known as the Great Persecution and lasted for 10 years. 10 years without knowing when the end would come. 10 years of losing loved ones to the sword or the circus. 10 years of living in this blood thirsty, Christian hating environment.

But then in 313, things suddenly changed. A new emperor was in power and he send out a new edict. This new edict is know as the edict of Milan, which declared tolerance of all religions, including Christianity.

The emperor even ordered measures to reverse damage done to the Christians. And he offered imperial funds to buy back land confiscated from churches.

And then in 324, after a military victory he attributes to God, Constantine openly supported Christianity.

Theological Difference Compounded by Politics

Not only was state persecution finished, the emperor himself was a supporter of Christians.

You can imagine the breath of relief the Christians would have felt. It was safe to be a Christian now.

Christians could now live at peace. It seemed the attack on the church was finally over.

But the attack on the church was not over. It simply took on a new turn. A new approach. A war for truth began. The war for truth was causing heavy losses of unity, and it appeared that what the great persecution could not do, false teaching risked to achieve.

Talking about theological debates, a historian Joseph Lync, sets the atmosphere for us:

“The theological party that won the emperor’s approval was favoured with legal privileges, subsidies, and bishoprics. The losing party faced legal and financial problems and the exile of its leaders. Because the consequence of losing a theological argument could be so severe, the quarrels were all the more fierce. There was a lot at stake.” Joseph Lync Early Christianity.

So, in the midst of this political, social and religious cyclone, a theological quarrel came up. A fierce quarrel with supporters on both sides. A quarrel between a man by the name of Arius and his senior bishop, Alexander.

The quarrel or debate was over a profound question:

“What is the true nature of Christ?”

Application

Church will be under attack

Now before we move on to think about the council in more detail, consider some things we can take from this brief snippet in history.

For one, we are reminded that the church has a constant enemy. The church on earth is the church militant. We are at war and the attacks of the enemy are real. This was true for the church being persecuted and when the political favours changed in 313, and also true for us 1700 years later.

Until Christ returns, we cannot think we are safe from attack. Attacks can come from without and they can come from within. We must be on our guard. We must be proactive.

Yes, the state is not confiscating church buildings, nor is the deity of Jesus challenged in our church, but Sin, Self and the Devil are ever present in our midst, and as one battle is won, we must prepare and be on the lookout for the next.

God preserves his church

As we remember this history, it is so clear that God preserves his church.

- God grew the church for a rabble of peasants.
- God caused the church to grow in the hostile Roman Empire.
- God persevered the church through fierce persecution.

And so when we look around us and we see how apathetic people are about Jesus.

When we see how convinced people are of the lies that ***“my truth is for me and your truth is for you”***.

When we see people redefine sin in order to follow their own desires.

When we see all these things, we must remember that God preserves his church. That God builds his church.

And our job is to be faithful, to be the church, to preach the gospel, to plant and strengthen churches, to make disciples, and trust God when things seem hopeless and helpless.

Link

Now with that political and social atmosphere in our minds, let us look a bit closer at the teaching which initiated this great council 1700 years ago.

Part 2 – Arian’s Teaching

Exposition

Begotten = Created

So Arian, a church elder or bishop, asks the question: “What is the true nature of Christ?”

Arius had good intentions, he had a good cause, He even had bible verses to support his case, but he got the answer terribly wrong.

And his error really pivoted on the understanding of one word. He failed to let the rest of the Scriptures to qualify this word and it led him into heresy.

It all pivoted on the word “Begotten”.

For Arius the word Begotten (monogenēs in the Greek) meant Created.

Even when talking about the second person of the Trinity, as far as Arius was concerned Begotten literally meant created.

Key verses

And sure enough, we see this word Begotten attributed to the Son on a few occasions:

Psalm 2:7

I will tell of the decree:

*The Lord said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.*

John 3:16

¹⁶ *"For God so loved the world,^[i] that he gave his only [begotten/ monogenes] Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:18

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only [begotten/ monogenes] Son of God.

And in the book of Hebrews Psalm 2:7 is quoted multiple times: *"You are my Son; today I have begotten you.*

Implications of Begotten = Created

Now, if Begotten means created, it means Jesus was created, and if he is created it means that Jesus had a beginning.

There was a time when the son was not.

Arius tried to qualify his position by saying that Jesus was the greatest of all things created, He is the first among the created things.

And he qualifies his position further by saying that there is a unique unity between the Father and the Son. A unity shared by no one else.

But it is just a unity of will, not a unity of nature.

The Son is not God in the way the father is God.

The son is of a different substance to the Father.

The son is inferior to the Father in both nature and function, Arius taught.

Push back against Modalism

And his teaching was not in a theological vacuum. It was in fact a push back against another false teaching.

Arian was attempting to defend the truth against the false teaching of Modalism. A teaching that there is just one person in God, but that He reveals himself in different modes. He has a different costume, if you like, when he reveals himself as father, or as son or as holy spirit. This teaching emphasised the oneness of God at the expense of the three distinct persons.

Arian, and the rest of the church, saw that as wrong and so we can understand that he in turn emphasises the distinct persons of Father and Son. He emphasises the Threeness of the persons.

But the pendulum swung too far and in his emphasis of the three persons, he loses the oneness of God.

Protect Immutability of God

Arius wanted to defend against this heresy of Modalism, but he also wanted to protect the immutability of God. The truth that God is perfect and cannot change.

If Jesus is God, Arius argued, the incarnation introduced change to God. Notably, that God had emotions and he suffered. This cannot do, Arius said. God cannot have emotions or suffer, therefore Jesus cannot be God as the Father is God.

Jesus cannot be of the same nature of God.

Summary of Arius position

So we can see where Arius is coming from: He has his verses (good), He wants to protect the three persons of God (good), he wants to protect the immutability of God (good), but he has a critical miss-interpretation which leads him into error.

To the question that was being posed:

“What is the true nature of Christ?”

Arian answered: Christ is of a different nature to God.

Arian even made his teaching into a song, an effective way to spread his message. The first verse went like this:

*“The uncreated God has made the Son
A beginning of the things created,
And by adoption has God made the Son
Into an advancement of himself.
Yet the Son’s substance is
Removed from the substance of the Father:
Etc.”*

Link

So Arian had bible verses, he had good motivation, he even had a catchy song, but he was spreading heresy. And his heresy was not only causing division in the

church, but was undermining the very gospel the church was built on.

How did the church respond?

Which brings us finally to the Council of Nicaea.

Part 3 – Council of Nicaea

Exposition

Before the council

Arian does get push back from his superior Alexander, bishop of Alexandria (Egypt). But he does not listen to the correction of Alexander, and bitter division ensued.

Arian gained following amongst the people, but others rejected him. People in the church were divided, which added further instability to the empire, and the emperor Constantine got's involved.

First, Constantine tries to reconcile the parties, by sending mediators and letters, but to no avail.

When reconciliation was not found, and divisions were getting deeper and wider, Constantine calls a council of church leaders to settle the matter once and for all. The council is to be held at the town of Nicaea, modern day Iznik, in northern Turkey.

The emperor even offers to fund the transport of these church leaders. 1800 are invited, but only around 300 came.

At the council, they actually discussed a lot of things such as:

- When to celebrate easter,
- how to consecrate an Elder (bishop),

- the role of celibacy for the clergy
- and other such church life matters.

But the main focus of the council is to address the Arian teaching.

It is hard to imagine 300 men debate this topic, but after much deliberation, the council decided that Arius was wrong. They summarised their conclusion in what we know as the Nicene Creed, which we can still read and affirm today.

Begotten is a metaphor.

And it all pivots on the key word begotten. The Nicaean fathers rightly concluded that when speaking of the Son, begotten does **not** mean created.

When talking of the Son, “Begotten” must **not** be taken literally or humanly.

“Begotten” is a metaphor.

More accurately “begotten” is an anthropomorphism. It is using human language to describe something about God. It tells us something about God, but we must reject all creaturely notions about the word, notably the notion of beginning.

The church fathers made that clear distinction by stating in the Nicene creed that the Son is “begotten and not made”

Right image form Begotten

From the idea of Begotten we should get the idea that the Son is from the Father. In the same way that the light we see comes from the source of light. Light form light.

The word begotten, ***monogenēs***, gives us this idea of generation. Of coming from something, of coming from a source.

What more, other passages of scripture clearly show Jesus as divine and eternal.

So, his generation from the father is an eternal generation. He is eternally begotten.

Let me say it this way, since Jesus Christ is eternal, infinite, immutable and impassible God, his begottenness or his generation is eternal, infinite, immutable and impassible.

We qualify the idea of being begotten with his divine attributes in order to remove the creature connotations of the word.

To go into the depths of what it means that the Son is begotten is not the point of this study, there is much to unpack there.

The point we should get from the metaphor, is that the Son is Begotten in an eternal divine way, not in a creaturely way.

And since the son is begotten (eternally), the Son is made of the same substance as the father. Light from light. He has the same essence as the father. Begotten does not teach a different substance, but the very opposite.

Same substance

Which is exactly the point the Nicene creed makes.

Because he is begotten and not made, because he is **from** the essence of the Father, he is of the **same essence** as the father.

He is God from God, true God from true God.

Now this is obviously addressing Arian's view of begotten. Arian wants to say that since Jesus is begotten (literally), Jesus is created and therefore of a different substance to the father and less than the father.

The Nicaea Fathers clearly and emphatically say NO! Jesus is begotten (eternally), and not created, therefore he is of the same substance as the father.

And since he is of the same substance as the Father, Jesus is not number 2, He is coequal.

Therefore, the Nicene Fathers in the Nicene Creed proclaim and confess: Jesus is God.

But they affirmed it carefully, to not swing the pendulum back the other way and fall back into the false teaching of Modalism.

The Creed - 325

Let me read the creed, and notice how pivotal the idea of begotten is:

*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 from the Father, only-begotten,
that is, from the substance of the Father,
God from God,
light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one substance with the Father,*

*through Whom all things came into being,
things in heaven and things on earth,
Who because of us men and because of our salvation
came down,
and became incarnate
and became man,
and suffered,
and rose again on the third day,
and ascended to the heavens,
and will come to judge the living and dead,
And in the Holy Spirit.*

Aftermaths

This was the creed which was formulated. I hope you can appreciate the emphasis on “begotten not made” and that the Son is of “the same substance as the Father”

Sadly, but unsurprisingly, Arian rejects the creed.

And subsequently he and two other bishops who still supported him were sent into exile by Constantine.

And thus the Council of Nicaea goes down in history.
1700 years ago.

This battle for truth was won, but the fire of false teaching would flare up again and another council would be convened to clarify and reaffirm these truths. But that is a story for another day.

And even today, the true nature of the Son needs to be taught, believed and confessed and if need be, defended. And so we thank God for the Nicæan Creed and the Nicæan Fathers who formulated it.

The creed stands as a stronghold for people in their search for truth.

And also a stronghold to build from to preserve and grow in the truth.

Application/Conclusion

How do we protect ourselves against heresy?

And so as we think about this pivotal time in history, exactly 17 hundred years ago, we are reminded at how quickly false teaching can go from a small flame easily snuffed out to a forest fire devouring everything in its path.

False teaching is dangerous and it will bring destruction and division. We must be on our guard against heresy.

We should not be quickly persuaded by a couple of verses and a good cause to form our knowledge of who God is.

All heresy appeals to our human nature in some way. Be it our emotions, desires or our intellect.

We must let the whole Bible inform our doctrine, not just one verse.

We must let the Bible drive our doctrine, not our emotions.

And even when we respond to false teaching we must do so in a Biblical way. A good cause does not mean it has a good solution.

To be on our guard against heresy, we should listen to those around us, those whom we trust and those who

love us and know us. We all have blind spots and we should never be too proud to admit that.

We must not let our pride get in the way of admitting we are wrong. Nor should we let politics, social pressure or losing face stop us from admitting we are wrong.

We are not going to be put into exile for admitting we are wrong. Indeed, humility is a show of maturity towards Christ likeness, and pleasing in His sight.

And of course, as we seek to avoid heresy, we should look to those in the past. Look to those who have thought long and hard, those who have been faithful to scripture, and those who have helped summarize the truths found in Scripture.

God preserves his church and he preserves his Word, and the council of Nicaea and the Creed of Nicaea is a striking example of God doing just that.

Let us pray