

The 5th Century

Setting the stage for the 5th century:

The 4th century could be viewed as an age of Christian politics. But, amidst the challenges faced within the church, the Roman Empire was struggling even more. Since the reign of Emperor Constantine, the center of the Roman Empire moved and continued to exercise its power from Constantinople in Turkey, the eastern part of the Empire. This shift of location also caused a shift in power resulting in the government exercising less influence on the lands west of Greece. A couple of major reasons caused this shift of power. The most important and central of these reasons were political and social unrest.

Following the reign of Emperor Constantine II, the subsequent emperors were markedly sympathetic to Arius leading to huge political and social battles between the east and the west and within the church. Prominent bishops of the east took their sides in this conflict leading to condemnations of heresies, exiles, and social unrest. Imagine being a Christian of the 4th century and experiencing a turnover of your bishop every four to six years due to exile, condemnation for heresy, or death. These controversies did not placate the people but instead riled them up.

A prominent event occurred under Emperor Theodosius at the end of the 4th century. In Thessalonica, a Roman official was murdered causing a riot. The riot was so massive that it went down in history as one of the largest in the Empire, the greatest challenge to Theodosius' rule, and a weakening of the authority of the emperor. With church officials trying to help Theodosius keep the peace, it was obvious that the damage had been done. Yet, events like these were not uncommon towards the end of the 4th century setting off a sense of unrest and a belief in the failures of the central government of the Roman Empire.

Social unrest was also a marked issue of the 4th into the 5th centuries. With the church at odds with itself over the decrees from the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, the people were caught in the same debates and struggles. Do you side with the emperor, the bishops, the councils, the local authorities, or the patriarch? People were caught in the midst of these fights over central dogmas and teachings of the Christian faith. A great example of these challenges is the life of St. John Chrysostom. He lived at the tail end of the 4th century and was considered one of the greatest bishops and preachers of his age. For the majority of his life, he was not a prominent figure. His eloquence in preaching attracted many people to listen to the acclaimed bishop. Yet, he too entered into the religious drama of the 4th century. After the death of Theodosius, his son, Arcadia took control of the Empire along with his wife Eudoxia. Eudoxia was a staunch Christian and a strong sympathizer with both Arius and Nestorius. At first John was unconcerned with the Emperor and Empress. St. John was known for his simplicity which greatly angered the nobility and wealthy. Still not a major issue. When Theophilus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, wanted control of Constantinople, he knew exactly what to do. He convinced the empress that John sided with Origin, who had been condemned for his heterodoxy, liken Origin with John. During this time, Empress Eudoxia erected a statue of herself inciting the ire of John

Chyrstostom. These two events culminated with the exile and deposition of John and the beginning of his “golden tongue” becoming a lash against the empress.

The issues of the 4th century bled over into the controversies and challenges of the 5th century. Political unrest will be heightened, the divide between the East and the West will grow, controversies within the church will erupt anew, and the people will continue to try to figure out how to cope.

The effects of Nicaea and Constantinople

We often criticize the early church for its late acceptance of the first two major councils of the church and the need for subsequent councils to clarify and defend them. Yet, think about our modern era. The Second Vatican Council was the most significant even of the church in the modern era and how was it received? Poorly. Now, seventy years later, we still don’t agree on the proper interpretation of the council and its proper implementation. The same idea applied to both Nicaea and Constantinople. In the west, the councils were received with much greater acceptance and placidity than in the east. Simply put, when the major antagonist of the councils, Arius, was from the east and the west condemned him, it leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of those in the east. This simple idea explains the sentiments of the emperors and empresses of the 4th and 5th centuries who all sided with Arius or his theological successor Nestorius. The west was the stronghold of anti-Arianism and therefore wasn’t challenged or required to make changes in response to the councils.

Even these theological disputes led to one of the greatest changes to church governance of the early church: the rise of the Papacy. Oddly, this change was not an intentional nor a declared change. It simply happened. Let’s examine the events leading to the rise of the papacy. Back in the time of Emperor Constantine, the center of the Roman Empire moved from Rome to Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople. This shift of power left Rome without the central authority that it had enjoyed and come to depend on for several centuries. Left to itself, Rome developed its own central authority under the Pope, who was the leading authority in Rome. Now in full control of the city of Rome, the Pope controlled everything from trade and economics, to social issues and building infrastructure, to religious and moral codes. The need for the authority of the emperor was quickly waning in the east. With threats looming on the borders of the western empire and the east not willing to assist the west due to its own struggles, the Pope became a type of military leader. A great example is when Pope Leo I marched out to meet the invading Huns to sign a peace treaty. How exactly this event went down is still a mystery. Regardless, Pope Leo I was able to secure a peace agreement with Attila the Hun and prevent the conquer and pillaging of Rome. Events like these continued to solidify the power and authority of the Pope to the people of the west.

These events increased tension and division between the east and the west. In the east, the church was still roiling in the matters of heresies and heretics. The effects of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople only increased division in the churches of the east. Some felt that the Church of Rome had exercised too much power and had unjustly condemned eastern theologians leading to

a sympathy towards those declared heretics by the councils. Others were staunch supporters of both councils and continued to promote and defend their teachings. These divisions and controversies led to a deepening of the divide between the east and the west. The east was becoming increasingly more worried that the west was going to cease power over the bishops of the east and force them to accept the rule of the pope. Although nothing in the church indicated that this “takeover” by the west was going to happen, the fear continued to grow.

Off in the east, another controversy was forming: Nestorianism. In order to understand this heresy, I want to take some time to show its theological development. The Council of Nicaea declared that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. What exactly does this mean? Over the course of the 5th century, many theories will develop to explain and further this idea. The first of these was Nestorianism. Following from the Council of Nicaea, some theologians in the church began to declare Mary as the Mother of God. Since Jesus is divine and Mary gave birth to him, clearly she gave birth to Jesus who is God. Another group of theologians, normally grouped into the category of the Anti-Nicene fathers, contested this idea. Jesus has two natures, human and divine. We cannot say that God died on the Cross because God cannot die. Neither can we make such assertions as God suffered, God was hungry or thirsty, God was sad, or any of the other human events of the life of Jesus. These events, like Jesus getting tired, suffering the Cross, and more, are limited to his humanity. Jesus only experienced these events as a human but not as God. Therefore we can split up the two natures of Jesus into his humanity and divinity when we address the challenges and events in Jesus’ life from Scripture. Furthering this idea, they challenged the idea of Mary as Mother of God by saying that Mary only gave birth to Jesus’ humanity not his divinity and should be called Mother of Jesus.

As this controversy raged, the Church called another council to address this issue and resolve the dispute caused by the Council of Nicaea. Emperor Theodosius II called the Council of Ephesus in Ephesus, Turkey in 431 to address the concerns raised by the Nestorians. Was Jesus fully human and divine? Can we call Mary the Mother of God? I wish we could say that the council went as smoothly as the Council of Nicaea. St. Cyril of Alexandria was one of the main protagonists of the Council and a strong opponent to Nestorius. He arrived with his followers at the start of the Council and condemned Nestorius as a heretic. Four days later Nestorius’ allies, minus Nestorius himself, arrived and condemned Cyril as a heretic. Two weeks later Pope Celestine with his group arrived and sided with Cyril. Now the Council was in a deadlock between the two groups. After appealing to the Emperor for assistance, the Council reclaimed the truths proclaimed by the Council of Nicaea that Jesus is fully and completely divine and human. These two natures cannot be divided and separated. Therefore we can aptly and appropriately give Mary the title Mother of God since she gave birth to the whole person of Jesus who is divine and human.

Before we can reach the “end” of this debate, another party entered the arena for this great showdown of the 5th century: The Monophysites. Like the Nestorian controversy, other controversies emerged during this century to challenge the dogmatic decrees of Nicaea. One of the most prominent and influential of these challenges is the Monophysites who claimed that Jesus really only had one person either divine or human. If divine, then the humanity of Jesus

was subsumed into the divinity. If human, then the divinity was enclosed in his humanity. Let's take a moment and understand their teachings. Can you give an example of another creature that exists as two natures? We can't. Nothing exists that has two natures. Nature simply doesn't work that way and neither do we. The main protagonists of the Monophysitism group argued that two natures cannot exist within the same person. One must be dominant and the other subservient to the dominant person. Therefore Jesus, although being fully human and fully divine did not act as though he were two persons. The divinity won out and subsumed his humanity into his divinity making him really only God and not fully human. Monophysitism became a major movement in the east and would continue to grow in power over the next two centuries. Although it will change names in the 6th century, its influence and power were still strong and influential causing many bishops, emperors, and empresses to come to its aid.

Was the debate over? No. Emperor Theodosius II died after falling off a horse and was succeeded by his sister Pulcheris and her husband Marcian. Marcian supported Nestorius and wanted to settle this dispute once and for all. One year after he began his reign and 20 years after the Council of Ephesus, Marcian called the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This Council brought up everything that had been debated and discussed up to this point. After ratifying the Council of Nicaea, the debates over the interpretation of the Council began. What do we mean by Jesus being fully human and fully divine? How does this work in the singular person of Jesus? The debate ended due to one major work called *The Tome of Leo*. Pope Leo had written a defense of the dogmatic proclamation of Nicaea against the Nestorian and Monophysite teachings. Once this document was read during the Council, the Council Fathers declared that the successor of Peter had spoken. Notice the change in language. For the first time in the history of the Church a statement from the pope in Rome had ruled at a council and swayed the decision in favor of the orthodoxy of the west. Following this declaration, the Council decreed one of the most restrictive and defining declarations about the nature of Jesus: Jesus is fully human and fully divine without change, separation, division or alteration. Namely, the two natures of Jesus are fully and completely their proper natures. The human nature isn't changed or altered into something divine and vice versa. His humanity is fully human and his divinity is fully divine without causing division within him nor a separation of the natures. They are united yet separate in the one person of Jesus, called the hypostatic union.

Unfortunately, the Council of Chalcedon with its declarations were not widely accepted. As you can imagine, the west fully accepted this decree and followed the pronouncements without challenge. The east, however, did not fare so well. Instead, many of the local communities throughout the east refused to accept the council and separated from communion with the Church becoming the anti-Chalcedonian churches. Many of these churches remained outside communion with the Church even to the present day. Yet, the Council had its effects. For the most part, Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism were condemned as heresies and slowly faded from the forefront of Christianity. The Church had a final declaration on the unity and separateness of the two natures in Jesus helping to heal and end controversies. It felt like the controversies were finally settling down.

The future was not as bright as many hoped. Years of controversy, strife, and division had taken its toll on the weakened Roman Empire. Upon the death of Emperor Marcian at the age of 65, no legitimate heir was able to take the throne. The Senate convened to elect an heir but the one they elected declined. Eventually someone stepped into the role but the weakened state of the Empire led to a greatly diminished emperor. In 457, the two halves of the Empire elected their own leaders solidifying the divide in the Empire and causing its fall. Most historians agree that 457 is the year the Roman Empire ended. The east transformed into the Byzantine Empire as Leo I took the throne and was crowned by the Patriarch of Constantinople becoming the first ruler of the Byzantine Empire and the first emperor to be crowned by a bishop. The west did not fare as well as the east. The strong relationship between the empire and the church held together the control that was once held by the emperors of Rome. The west, having elected its own emperor and then falling to various feudal lords over the next century, would be ruled by the pope and splintered into several feudal kingdoms beginning the age of feudalism.

Before we end the 5th century, we need to explore and understand the theological developments and the roles of the Church Fathers in the 5th century. Many of the greats of the Church Fathers were highly influential during this century. St. Ambrose of Milan advised emperor Theodosius during the great massacre in Thessalonica. St. Augustine of Hippo was one of the most influential and outspoken proponents of the faith in North Africa leading to a revival of faith. St. Jerome translated the entire Bible into Latin allowing the western church to have an official copy of the Bible in their language. St. Cyril of Alexandria was the major proponent of orthodox theology at the Council of Ephesus. St. Pope Leo I established the authority of the Pope, promoted the orthodox faith at the Council of Chalcedon, and maintained order in the western half of the Empire.

Yet, amidst these great men and their tireless efforts to promote the church and her teachings were many controversies and challenges. The greatest challenge of the age was with the theologian Origin. Origin came from the school in Alexandria and was one of the most influential theologians of his age. He wrote extensively and primarily commented on the Bible. His teachings, however, were a little suspicious. Throughout his life time and over the next century, his writings and those who ascribe to them would be both accepted and challenged. Since he was judged as heterodox, which means a mix of orthodox and heretical, those who wanted to condemn another would claim that that person followed the teachings of Origin. Many people accepted his works and they were highly praised. Yet, not all of them. This situation with Origin illustrates the tumultuous nature of theology and theological works of the 5th century.

Heresies:

Beyond Nestorianism and Monophysitism, which largely affected the east, a few other heresies emerged in the west.

Pelagianism: promoted by Pelagius, Pelagianism was similar to the 3rd century heresy of Donatism. Realizing the incredible challenge of living the Christian life and the depressing event of so many people leaving the faith due to persecutions and heresies, Pelagius emerged as a reaction to all these issues. He promoted the idea that holiness is necessary for salvation and the

only way to truly be holy is through choices and hard work. We need to perform charitable actions and be devoted to God through our actions if we are to be saved. His teachings continue to grow in their gravity. For priests, the holiness of the priest affected the validity of the Sacraments. If the priest was not free from sin or living a holy life, then the Sacraments he performed were not valid. For him, Jesus came to show us the path to salvation and teach us how we ought to follow his example. Jesus did not come to free us from sin but to show us how to become free from sin. The Church reacted quite strongly against Pelagius and his teachings. His basic ideas denied Original Sin, the necessity of Jesus' death and Resurrection, and denied the necessity of grace.

The second major heresy in the west is Manichaeism. Founded by the prophet Mani in the 3rd century, it came to Europe by the Greek philosophers. Manichaeism holds the belief that the universe is divided into two forces: good and evil. They balance each other out and therefore are eternally in this cosmic dual for supremacy. Goodness is immaterial and spiritual whereas evil is material. Therefore the proper life of a Manichean is to free oneself from the body and the cares of the world so as to rise to the higher spiritual plane of freedom and life. Manichaeism denied the importance of the creation of the body. It also criticized the Sacraments for using material things which are evil.

Saint of the Day: St. Pope Leo the Great

The early life of Pope Leo is unknown. We believe that he came from an aristocratic family from Tuscany. The first instances we have of this man is his life as a deacon under Pope Celestine I in 431. He was widely known for his love for the Lord, his intelligence and persuasive nature, and for reconciling Christians. Under both Pope Celestine and Pope Sixtus III, Leo was sent as an ambassador throughout the church to settle disputes. While he was on assignment to the region of Gaul to bring peace between the chief military commanders and the chief magistrate, Pope Sixtus died. Leo was unanimously elected Pope in 440. This election reflected the respect he had amongst the people and his service of the Lord.

As Pope, Leo showed his dedication to the Church in several ways. He changed the title of the Pope to reflect the privileged honor he felt to sit on the Chair of St. Peter to "servant of the servants of God," a title of humility and service. He began to take the helm on the administrative side of the papal office by caring for the people of Rome and becoming the leading authority in Rome. He fought to preserve unity within the Church and the faith through his work at the Council of Chalcedon and through diplomatic relationships with the east. When Attila the Hun advanced against Rome with the intent of conquering it, Pope Leo engaged Attila on the battlefield without an army and greatly awed the conqueror who agreed to Leo's peace terms.

Leo's papacy is marked by four aims. First, to oppose and root out heresies including Pelagianism and Manichaeism. Second, for promoting the orthodox faith. Third, for the care of his people. Fourth, for his sermons, many of which are still read and enjoyed today as some of the best examples of the sermons of the Church Fathers.

Pope Leo died on November 10, 461 and was hailed as one of the greatest popes in the history of the church. He was the first person in the church to be given the title “great.” He was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XIV in 1754.

St. Augustine – A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed

The early church was deeply immersed in Sacramental as well as dogmatic beliefs. A person preparing for entrance into the Catholic Church, would be prepared through several rites in order to open their lives spiritually to the mysteries they will eventually participate in. Baptism, for example, was not explained nor was the catechumen given instruction in the Rite of Baptism until after the person was baptized. This lack of explanation gave the Sacrament a mysterious and shocking experience for the person being baptized. Following baptism, the Sacrament and the faith would be explained in a series called Mystagogy.

St. Augustine, one of the premier of the Church Fathers, also wrote instruction to those who were on the verge of entering the Church and for those who already participated in the mysteries. The Creed, which we take for granted today, was newly developed nearly 50 years prior to Augustine’s birth. Therefore it was new to everyone. In one of the classic sermons of St. Augustine, he opens up the truths present in the Creed and unveils its mystery to those preparing for entrance into the Church.