

The Closing of the Ante-Nicene Period

by J.B. Galloway

The sermon discusses the struggle for existence of the early Christian Church, the Nicaean Council, and the significance of the Apocryphal New Testament and other ancient Christian writings.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 6:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:16, 2 Peter 1:20, 1 John 1:5, 1 John 4:1

Topics: "Church History", "Christian Doctrine"

Description

J.B. Galloway preaches on the early struggles of the Christian Church against paganism and Judaism, leading to the formulation of doctrines like the deity of Christ at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The sermon highlights the transition from persecution to worldliness, false teachings, and corruption, eventually leading to the Protestant Reformation. It also touches on the controversies around the canon of the New Testament and the distinction between inspired scriptures and apocryphal writings.

Transcript

The first three centuries of the history of the Christian Church was a time of struggle for existence. All the powers of a superstitious paganism and the prejudice of Judaism were battling against it. They were also laying the foundation for the future progress of Christianity. The chief early writings were defensive, and they had little time or occasion to formulate doctrine. As error began to creep in, it became necessary definitely to state the creeds. The deity of Christ was the first distinctive doctrine of Christianity to be stated. The Council of Nicaea was called in A.D. 325 to settle the Arian controversy. The trouble began at Alexandria. Arius, trying to safeguard the unity of God, had denied that Christ was divine and equal to the Father. Alexander, his bishop, opposed him, but soon died of old age, and Athanasius took up the struggle; and Constantine, the emperor, called a council of all the Church to settle this difficulty. More than three hundred bishops, some coming from as far as India, appeared at Niceaa, and Arius was condemned. With the nominal conversion of Constantine, the persecutions of the Christians stopped.

The opening of the council is described by Eusebius as follows:

After all the bishops had entered the central building at the royal palace, on the sides of which were many seats prepared, each took his place with becoming modesty, and silently awaited the Emperor. The court officers entered one after another, though only such as professed faith in Christ. The moment the approach of the Emperor was announced by a given signal, they all arose from their seats, and the Emperor appeared like an heavenly messenger of God, covered with gold and gems, a glorious presence,

very tall and slender, full of beauty, strength and majesty. With the external adornment he united the spiritual ornament of the fear of God, modesty, and humility, which could be seen on his downcast eyes, his blushing face, the motion of his body, and his walk. When he reached the golden throne prepared for him, he stopped, and sat down as all the bishops gave him the sign. And after him, all resumed their seats.

What a great contrast between this scene and the Church in the days of great persecutions under the Roman emperors! Soon the primitive purity was displaced by worldliness, false teaching, and corruption; then follow the papal system and the Dark Ages. Almost all holiness and righteousness was crowded out until the days of the Protestant Reformation. Only here and there do we see a gleam of light shining out of the night of the Dark Ages.

There was a little controversy among the early writers about which books should form the canon of the New Testament; but shortly after the Nicaean Council, we find lists of all the books that we now acknowledge as the New Testament, and no others. Pappus has a low estimate on how the authentic books were found. He says: "Having promiscuously put all the books that were referred to the council for determination under the communion table, they besought the Lord that the inspired ones might get upon the table and the spurious ones under it, and that it happened accordingly." But this is only a legend. The Holy Spirit helped the early Christians to keep the inspired scriptures separate from the spurious ones.

The Apocryphal New Testament

There are more than twenty of these books. They are written in a style very similar to that of the canonical books of the New Testament, but their character is far inferior to the inspired ones. They contain some truth, and many unbelievable legends. Dr. Talmage says of them: "We are not permitted to think that the shadows of Calvary darkened His pathway as a youth, and the Apocryphal Books of the New Testament show a great deal of the earthly life of Christ not to be found in the Evangelists." Some of these books were probably written as forgeries, and others with an intention of being placed with the books of the Bible. They were all written during these early days, but at different times.

We will notice briefly a few of them:

The Gospel of Mary, The Protevangelion, I and II Infancy contain many stories about the birth and early life of Mary and Jesus. In the first two, Mary is given a supernatural birth similar to that of Christ. In the books on the Infancy, many miracles are attributed to Jesus as a Child, such as stretching out a board so it would be as long as another in the carpenter shop at Nazareth, making clay birds to fly away, the taking up of spilled water in His mantle after the pitcher had fallen and broken, and similar ones. These are absurd and unbelievable.

In Christ and Abgarus, the King of Edessa sends a letter to Jesus to come and heal him, and Jesus answers that He must go up and fulfill His mission, and that He will send one of His disciples to cure him.

The epistles of Clement, Barnabas, and Hermas have received separate treatment; and the letters of Herod and Pilate are interesting, but doubtless fictitious.

Holiness In The Apocryphal New Testament

Much is said about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary and Jesus in the first of these books, and the idea of purity, holiness, and sanctification is frequently mentioned in a number of the apocryphal books. The most important of these are treated in the previously mentioned books.

The Syrian Documents

Most of the early Christian documents are written in Greek or Latin, but some fifteen have reached us in the Syrian language. Most of these relate Christian history and life; several stories of Christian martyrs occur. These are heroic and inspiring. Examples of Christian piety, courage, righteousness, and holy living are of frequent occurrence.

The First Harmony of the Gospels

The Diatessaron of Tatian is the first attempt at producing the four Gospels as one story; about two-thirds of the verses of the Gospels are used. Tatian says that he was a Syrian and a convert of Justin Martyr. He was born about A.D. 110 and perhaps saw Justin martyred in A.D.

166. His harmony was greatly appreciated in the early centuries, and manuscripts of it occur in many languages. He later became a Gnostic, and was regarded as a heretic.

Pseudo Gospels, Epistles, and Apocalypses

Recent research has brought to light many of these from the early days of Christianity; many of them are just fragments. We may mention from these The Gospel of Peter, The Revelation of Peter, The Vision of Paul, The Apocalypse of Sedrech, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Zanthippe, and the Narration of Zosimus.

Near the beginning of The Revelation of Peter we find these words: "And the God will come unto my faithful ones who hunger and thirst and are afflicted and purify their souls in this life; and He will judge the sons of the lawless." After this the writer says that the Lord told them to go into the mountain and pray. Then he describes a very vivid vision of paradise which he sees, and this is followed by a vision of hell.

Other Ancient Fragments

Sermons

The oldest known sermon outside of those recorded in the Bible was discovered by Bryennios in the Jerusalem monastery and published in 1875. It is from an unknown Greek or Latin author from about the middle of the second century. It is interesting to note that it begins by addressing the hearers as "Brothers and Sisters."

Another early Christian fragment contains what seems to be a paragraph from a sermon on "The Spirit of Prophecy." It reads as follows:

Man being filled with the Holy Ghost speaks as the Lord wills; the spirit of the divine nature will thus be manifest. For the spirit of prophecy is the essence of the prophet order which is the body of the flesh of Jesus Christ, which was mingled with human nature through Mary.

From another old sermon, speaking of Christ, we read:

He is the Light; therefore He is the Sun of our souls. He is the Life; therefore we live in Him. He is Holiness; therefore He is the slayer of sin.

Prayers

A number of other interesting old sermons from the first centuries have been found. Also a number of fragments of old Christian prayers have been brought to light recently.

Hymns

Several very ancient Christian hymns have been discovered, but none more interesting than a collection known as the Odes and Psalms of Solomon. Dr. J. Rendel Harris, of Cambridge, found it in a Syriac manuscript of sixty-four leaves, and published it in 1909. Scholars regard it as the work of a Jewish Christian of the first century. It contains more than a thousand verses.

From Ode 15 we quote these words:

Behold! the Lord is our mirror; open the eyes and see them in Him; and learn the manner of your face; and tell forth praises to His Spirit; and wipe off the filth from your face; and love His holiness, and clothe yourselves therewith; and be without stain at all times before Him. Hallelujah!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jb-galloway/the-closing-of-the-ante-nicene-period/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net