

SESSION 2: THEODOSIUS: THE EMPEROR, THE COUNCIL, AND THE COST TO BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY

The late 4th century marked a pivotal period in Christian history, as the Roman Empire shifted from persecuting Christians to integrating Christianity into its sociopolitical fabric. At the forefront of this change was Emperor Theodosius, whose 16-year reign greatly influenced Christianity's theological direction.

Theodosius is celebrated for promoting Nicene Christianity, which formed the basis of orthodox Christian belief. The Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, under his rule, set key doctrinal guidelines defining Christian belief for future generations.

However, this session offers a different perspective, scrutinizing the effects of an Empire endorsing religious orthodoxy on biblical Christianity's essence. As we delve into Theodosius' reign and its impact, we'll explore the intersection of political ambition, religious conviction, and the intertwining realms of history, faith, and governance.

THEODOSIUS: THE MAN BEHIND THE CROWN

Born in Hispania in 347 AD, Theodosius swiftly rose through the Roman Empire's military ranks, gaining a reputation as a formidable leader. He is best remembered for his profound influence on Christianity.

Theodosius' conversion to Christianity, while less dramatic than Constantine's, was fervent. His association with Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, may have influenced his faith. After his baptism, he became a strong proponent of the Nicene Christianity.

His reign, starting in 379 AD, marked Christianity's evolution from a tolerated religion to the favored and official faith of the Roman Empire. Theodosius saw himself as God's chosen instrument to guide the empire towards the 'true' Christian faith. This belief significantly influenced Christian history.

Theodosius' personal beliefs deeply influenced his rule, evident in his legislation, the councils he supported, and his handling of dissent. The Theodosian era was characterized by the interplay between a ruler's personal convictions and the monumental decisions shaping the Christian world for centuries.

THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Council of Constantinople in 381 AD was a pivotal point in church history. Bishops gathered to resolve theological disputes, notably the Arianism controversy, which questioned Christ's divinity as defined in the Nicene Creed of 325 AD.

Emperor Theodosius, a recent convert and strong Nicene supporter, sought to consolidate Christian theological understanding. The Council was thus an attempt to reinforce and clarify the Nicene Creed.

One significant outcome was the expansion of the Nicene Creed, becoming the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which further defined the Holy Spirit's nature and role—affirming its co-equal status with the Father and the Son. This essentially cemented the doctrine of the Trinity into Christian orthodoxy.

The Council's endorsement of the expanded Nicene Creed is its most enduring legacy. The conclusion saw Arianism's decline and Theodosian support for the Nicene stance. However, the impact of the Council extended beyond theology, influencing Christianity's interaction with the world.

However, the rise of "Creedal Christianity" may shift focus from Scripture study to reliance on past interpretations. Ideally, each generation should explore theological concepts independently for a fresh understanding of Scripture.

Despite the Councils, 4th-century believers had direct access to Scriptures, as seen in accessible biblical texts, commentaries, translations, Christian art, and the growth of monasticism emphasizing personal scripture study. Thus, believers could form faith decisions from personal understanding and not just from church councils.

STATE SANCTIONED ORTHODOXY: IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS

The Council of Constantinople, backed by Theodosius, the Empire's powerful figure, had wide-reaching effects, integrating church doctrine with state power.

Non-Nicene Christian groups faced intensified hostilities, with Arians and others targeted by a state-backed orthodoxy. Non-compliant churches were confiscated, and non-conforming clergy faced exile or punishment. Those once persecuted had become the persecutors. This state-enforced orthodoxy dominated Christianity until the rise of the secular "American experiment."

Theodosius sought to erase the Empire's pagan roots. Pagan practices, part of Roman culture for centuries, were banned. Temples were closed or repurposed, and non-Christian festivals and customs faced restrictions or bans. The Empire's multicultural, religiously diverse culture was overshadowed by a monolithic Christian state.

Theodosius also incentivized conversion to Christianity through tax relief and influential positions, boosting the number of Christians but potentially diluting genuine faith. This led to nominal Christianity, where being a "Christian" was more about societal privilege than personal belief.

The post-Council era saw theological directives from the top often overshadow personal spiritual exploration. The quest for Christian unity and clarity may have compromised the individuality of many believers' faith journeys.

CHRISTIANITY'S SHIFT: FROM PERSECUTED TO PERSECUTOR

Christianity's early days were marked by resilience and faith despite persecution. However, the 4th century saw a change when Theodosius' edict in 380 AD made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. The Council of Constantinople in 381 AD further established the Nicene Christian doctrine. This alignment of state power with Christianity altered the dynamics of the faith, shifting it from a marginalized to a dominant position.

The newfound authority also led to oppressive measures against dissenting voices. Non-Nicene factions and pagan philosophers faced harsh penalties, even execution. The closure of the Platonic Academy in Athens in the 6th century signified this shift in power and attitude towards alternate discourses.

The alliance of Christianity with imperial power granted it broad influence, but also involved the challenges of governance. The faith's narrative pivoted from championing virtues like faith, hope, and charity to grappling with authority, enforcement, and dominion.

THE COST OF CONFLATION: CHURCH AND STATE ENTWINED

Historically, intertwining religion and state can distort spiritual teachings, as seen during Theodosius's reign. Christianity's official recognition ended persecutions and increased membership, but also introduced challenges.

When religious decisions became imperial, they often served political ends, causing difficulty in discerning their true motives. Were they based on biblical study or political convenience?

The merger's impact was clear in dealing with dissent. Theological disagreements could now lead to state punishments, risking the stifling of theological exploration. They also suggested that faith could be enforced by law.

Scriptures do not advocate merging spiritual leadership with political power. Jesus distinguished temporal and spiritual spheres, and Paul emphasized individual conviction over conformity.

Historically, the church-state intersection has raised questions about political influence on theological decisions. While not diminishing the genuine intentions, the merger could have allowed political needs to overshadow theological perspectives.

THE NON-CREEDAL PERSPECTIVE AND THEODOSIUS' LEGACY

Christianity's non-creedal approach emphasizes the importance of Scripture and personal conviction, rooted in biblical texts. Creeds risk overshadowing these core tenets.

The Bible often highlights personal faith. For instance, the Bereans in Acts didn't just accept teachings, but verified them through scripture (Acts 17:11). Paul also instructs believers to study and understand God's word (2 Tim. 2:15). Creedal faith can sometimes discourage individual study.

Councils like Constantinople, supposedly held to resolve theological disputes, could also be seen as power consolidations. The edicts they created risk becoming theological limitations, discouraging future generations from exploring scriptures independently. Theodosius' endorsement of the Nicene stance may have prioritized imperial unity over ecclesiastical consensus, possibly suppressing personal faith journeys. This raises questions about the role of government in religion.

THE FREE-CHURCH PERSPECTIVE: A CALL FOR INDEPENDENCE

The free-church perspective arises from a core belief: the church, as Christ's body, should function autonomously, free from external influences, particularly from the state. This viewpoint highly values the independence and self-governance of local congregations, emphasizing the priesthood of all believers.

Historically, Reformation era Anabaptists embodied this belief. They faced persecution from both Catholic and Protestant state churches, advocating for believer's baptism instead of state-endorsed infant baptism and insisting on the separation of church and state. Their commitment was not only theological but also practical; in their communities, religious beliefs were practiced earnestly, free from state mandates and the temptation of political power.

Fast-forward to contemporary times, the U.S. First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom originates from a similar sentiment. By preventing the government from establishing a religion or prohibiting its free exercise, it fosters an environment where faith is personal, genuine, and free from external coercion.

However, the fusion of religious belief and political power has historically proven to be a risky double-edged sword. While it provided the church with protection, privileges, and power, it also made the church subject to the fluctuations of political currents. The church's moral authority, and its freedom to speak truth to power, is at risk when it becomes too closely tied to that very power. The hazards of such an alliance are clear: religious beliefs can be exploited for political gain, theological positions may be modified for convenience, and genuine faith can be eclipsed by political allegiance.

An independent church, operating separate from state control, serves as a safeguard against these risks. It invites believers to a sincere faith, uncontaminated by political alliances, and encourages them to engage with theological truths on their own terms, deeply rooted in Scripture and personal conviction.

WHEN CHURCH AND STATE PARTNER, CHRISTIANITY LOSES.

The Council at Constantinople solidified the Nicene Creed. The lesser-known Council at Thessalonica, a year prior, declared Rome a Christian state, setting a lasting precedent. This only changed when U.S. forefathers, like Roger Williams and Patrick Henry, advocated for religious freedom. The Thessalonica council's edict, *Cunctos Populos*, made Christianity the state religion, embedding "wrongly divided" Christianity into history. The edict states:

"It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our clemency and moderation, should continue to adhere to the religion which was taught by St. Peter to the Romans; which faithful tradition has preserved; and which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity. We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches."

Evangelicals might not understand this, but the "state religion" was a modified form of Judaism, taught by St. Peter and based on apostolic teachings and the Gospel's doctrine. It differed from Paul's doctrine of grace through faith without works. Some Protestant reformers recognized this and aimed to restore a more Pauline doctrine, but with limited success.

Although grace believers have always existed, the misinterpreted Kingdom of God didn't benefit Christianity.

CONCLUSION

The reign of Emperor Theodosius marked a pivotal point in the history of Christianity. His fervent support of Nicene orthodoxy and the convening of the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD set the stage for Christianity's rise to prominence within the Roman Empire. However, this ascent came at a cost.

With imperial patronage, Christianity gained unprecedented influence but also inherited the complexities of state power. The merging of theological authority and political dominion led to rigid uniformity, often enforced through coercive means against dissenters. The genuine, scripture-based faith journey of individuals became overshadowed by top-down credal dictates.

Theodosius' legacy leaves some difficult questions. When the church aligns too closely with temporal power, does it risk compromising its spiritual mission? Can credal uniformity and state-sanctioned orthodoxy stifle the believers' personal wrestling with scriptural truths?

While the Council of Constantinople aimed to resolve divisive disputes, its credal approach has continued shaping Christianity for centuries since, often minimizing scriptural study in favor of accepting established tradition. The decision to declare Nicene Christianity the state religion intertwined imperial and spiritual realms, influencing both the church's development and perceptions of its role in society.

This examination invites us to reflect on the complex dynamics between church authority, political power, and personal faith. It calls us to prioritize a Christianity rooted in scripture, untethered from state machinery, and based on the integrity of individual conviction over coerced conformism. The costs of conflating the spiritual with the political warrant careful discernment, both from the pages of history and the guidance of biblical principles.

As we turn the pages of history from the era of Theodosius to the 6th century, the marriage between church and state continues to solidify. Emerging on the scene is Justinian I, whose extensive reign heralded monumental changes that expanded the empire and left an enduring legal and theological legacy. Justinian envisioned himself as God's agent to promote unity, harnessing the power of law and religion to synthesize the diverse strands of church, state, and society.