

1 **Orthodoxy, Diversity, and Progress**

- Module: History
- Lesson 36

2 **Some Recommended Sources**

- Rodney Stark, *How the West Won, and The Triumph of Christianity*
- David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*
- James Hannam, *God's Philosophers*
- Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods*
- Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*
- Tim Barnett (web article at Stand to Reason), *Did the Council of Nicaea Invent the Deity of Christ?:* <http://www.str.org/article/did-council-nicaea-invent-deity-christ#.WTvgthPyv2U>
- Inspiring Philosophy, *The Truth About the Council of Nicaea*, YouTube video (app. 10 min.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSKBGdv07nQ>

3 **The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis**

- According to this thesis, there were multiple "christianities" in the early years, none of them with any more legitimate claim to be "authentic" Christianity than any of the others.
- This hypothesis is based on the belief that there were competing and mutually incompatible views of Jesus and his message throughout the church.
- Each of the chief competing views supposedly had a geographical center in the Christian world.
 - Alexandria (Egypt): Gnosticism
 - Ephesus (Asia Minor): Gnosticism and/or Docetism
 - Edessa (modern northeastern Turkey): Marcionism
 - Rome: Historic "orthodoxy"
- Rome, using manipulation, coercion, and its political power, forced its own version of orthodoxy on the rest of the church. Central to this imposition of its will was Emperor Constantine's heavy-handed conduct at the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century.

4 **The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis**

- Popularizers of this view in the general public are, among others, Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman, and Dan Brown's best seller *The DaVinci Code* and the accompanying movie.
- This view of Christianity is now very widely held in the popular culture, and is fostered by skeptics and cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

- Bauer's thesis and postmodernism: According to postmodernism, truth is only subjective and relative, and a function of power. Under postmodernism, the only "heresy" is the idea that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Hence, the Bauer-Ehrman thesis readily appeals to postmodern thinkers.

5 **The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis**

- In fact, historic orthodoxy (Jesus as Messiah, his deity, his atonement, the Trinity, the resurrection, etc.) has been demonstrated to be the church's earliest and virtually unchallenged view of Jesus and his teachings until the 2nd century.
 - The historic view of Jesus is evidenced in the New Testament itself, particularly in the early creeds quoted in the New Testament. The New Testament has been demonstrated to have been written well within the first century, some of it within twenty years or so of the life of Jesus.
 - The earliest church fathers disclose in their writings an exclusively orthodox position.
 - The canon of the N. T. was largely set and recognized by the church by the late 1st or early 2nd century.
 - There is no credible evidence that anything other than orthodox Christianity was the prevalent belief in Alexandria, Edessa, and Ephesus.
 - As we will see, the Council of Nicaea did not "invent" historic orthodoxy.

6 **The Myths About the Council of Nicaea (325 A. D.)**

- There was no church-wide orthodox view of Jesus prior to this council.
- Constantine called the Council in order to enforce the Roman version of Christianity on the numerous other competing versions throughout the church.
- There were days of quarreling and bickering between the many factions until finally the Roman version won as a result of Constantine's use of his imperial and political power.
- The Council of Nicaea, under Constantine's control, invented the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus.
- Modern orthodox Christianity is the result of this political manipulation, and has no more claim to be the true Christianity than any of the many various views prevalent then or now.

7 **The Facts About the Council of Nicaea (325 A. D.)**

- The council was called by Constantine to enable the Christian bishops to resolve a dispute within the church created by the teachings of Arius (Arianism).
- The Council was not a free-for-all of competing Christianities, but met to discuss several issues, of which Arianism was the chief issue of concern, and the refutation of which was its most significant result.

- The chief question considered had to do with the relationship of Jesus with the Father—whether Jesus’ deity was inferior to that of the Father (as per Arius). While Arianism was spreading, it was clearly at odds with what the vast majority of the church had believed since its beginning (that Jesus was co-equal w/the Father). It had already been deemed heretical in various regions of the church.
- While Constantine attended and participated at some level, and his contribution appears to have been influential, he did not dictate the outcome, compose the final creed, or “sign off” on the creed, since he was not a bishop.

8 **The Facts About the Council of Nicaea (325 A. D.)**

- The Council did not “invent” orthodox Christianity or its view of Jesus. These had been long established and are evidenced in the New Testament itself, the writings of the earliest church fathers, and the church’s recognition of a N. T. canon.
- What was particularly new in the Nicæan Creed was the word that was agreed upon to express the relationship of Jesus with the Father, that of homoousios to denominate the nature of both. They are said to be of one nature (homoousios).
- While the deity of Jesus has clear implications regarding the Trinity, the subject of the Trinity was not specifically addressed at the Council of Nicaea. It was addressed years later at the Council of Constantinople (381 A. D.).
- Arianism actually grew in influence after Nicaea until it was again soundly refuted in the Council of Constantinople. It has persisted in various forms throughout history, and can be detected in both Mormon and Jehovah Witness Christology.

9 **Common Myths About Christianity’s Impact**

- Rome was a vibrant and growing culture until Christianity brought it to an end and precipitated the fall of the Roman Empire.
- Following the fall of the Roman Empire, Western civilization was plunged into a thousand years of “Dark Ages”, the so-called “age of faith” (as opposed to the “age of reason”).
- During the Dark Ages the church resisted and suppressed cultural and scientific progress for the sake of religious dogma.
- The church’s opposition to cultural, intellectual, and scientific progress and all “profane” learning was epitomized by the burning of the library of Alexandria (390 A. D.) and its 700,000 volumes by an enraged mob of Christians.
- The “age of faith” finally yielded to the “age of reason” with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.
- The epitome of the long running “war between science and religion” was the trial and conviction of Galileo.

10 **A Long Line of Myth-makers**

- Zosimus (late 5th-early 6th century), a pagan Byzantine writer.
- Voltaire (1694-1778) (French Enlightenment philosopher)

- Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) (The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)
- John William Draper (1811-1882) (History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science)
- Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) Early evolutionist ("Darwin's Bulldog"), and agnostic.
- Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) Aristocratic British philosopher, mathematician, historian, and much more. Self-described agnostic and/or atheist.

11 **The Greek Miracle**

- The Greek city states saw dynamic intellectual, literary, artistic, technological, political, and military progress from c. 600-338 B. C.
- This "Greek Miracle" may be considered the beginning of the road to modernity.
- The Greek Miracle wanes and progress stagnates as city states are subsumed into various Greek empires (such as the Athenian empire). (The maintenance of empire tends to detract from intellectual, cultural, technological, and scientific energies.)
- Christianity actually preserved much of Greek interest in philosophy and the rational God.

12 **The End of the Roman Empire**

- Rome's intellectual and technological prowess was largely borrowed from Greece.
- Rome's progress was impeded by the same phenomenon that eventually stunted Greek progress: empire.
- Historians do not agree on what caused the fall of the Western Roman Empire. More than two hundred different causes have been claimed by historians. There is no credible evidence that Christianity caused the fall of Rome, nor even that Rome's fall was essentially an internal failure.
- The fact that the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire remained for another 1000 years, heavily influenced by Christianity, strongly suggests Christianity was not the cause of the fall of the Western Empire.
- The fall of Rome appears to be chiefly due to flawed long-running strategic military policies.

13 **The End of the Roman Empire**

- Rome's military defeat was due to several factors:
 - Altered defensive strategies that had been in place for nearly a century.
 - These altered strategic policies contributed to a diminishing of military training and discipline.
 - Improved "barbarian" military tactics and discipline. (Many "barbarian" military leaders were former Roman soldiers.)
- Major advances that followed the fall of Rome.
 - Agriculture (iron plow, padded horse collar)
 - Industry (use of wind and water power)
 - Transportation (development of wagon brakes and swiveling front axels)

- Arts
- Warfare

14 Access to Greek Learning

- Most of the vibrant intellectual activity of the Greco-Roman world was actually the product of the Greeks and therefore written in Greek.
- With conquering of the Western Empire by the European barbarians, knowledge of Greek in the West virtually died out, leaving Westerners with little or no access to the philosophical and scholarly traditions of the earlier Greco-Roman world.
- Meanwhile, the scholarly traditions of the Greco-Roman world remained alive in the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire, which retained its knowledge of Greek.
- As large sections of the Byzantine Empire progressively fell to the Islamic conquest, these intellectual resources (both writings and scholars) were absorbed into Arabic societies.
- Eventually Western thinkers regained a knowledge of Greek and access to the great intellectual resources of earlier Greek philosophical and scholarly traditions, enlivening Western scholarship.

15 Christianity and Scientific Progress

- The Possibility of Progress
 - The “idea” of progress—
 - “...the idea of progress was inherent in Jewish conceptions of history and was central to Christian thought from very early days.” (Rodney Stark)
 - European idea of progress “is unique in human history.” (Moses Finley, 20th century classical scholar)
 - Pagan and eastern religions tended to view time/history as circular, rather than linear, hence there was no inherent value or purpose in progress.
 - Progression of knowledge and theology is characteristic of Western civilization.
- Medieval science and discovery was extensive.
 - Every major scientific breakthrough in later centuries was built upon discoveries and developments that occurred during the Medieval era.
 - European (Christian) Medieval progress was profound, extensive, and eclipsed anything in the rest of the world.

16 The Myth of the “Dark Ages”

- The term “Dark Ages” and the concept of such a period of intellectual and scientific stagnation originated in the 14th century.
- Supposedly, for 1000 years following the fall of Rome, nothing of intellectual, scientific, technological, or artistic significance occurred, chiefly due to Christianity’s preoccupation with dogma and resistance to progress.

- Faith was viewed as being a direct antithesis to reason. Christianity was “at war” with science, as epitomized by its persecution of Galileo.

17 **The Reality: There Were No “Dark Ages”**

- Historians today reject at virtually every point the myth of the “Dark Ages.”
- The Medieval era was a period of vibrant intellectual, scientific, technological discovery and development.
- Virtually all such vibrant growth was fostered and financed by the Church, and took place in the universities which were founded and sponsored exclusively by the Church.
- Nearly all the great intellectual minds of the Medieval era, as well as during the period of the Renaissance, were Christians.

18 **The Church and Science**

- The church, throughout the Medieval era and the Renaissance, historically supported and encouraged scientific enquiry and intellectual endeavors.
- The church was the chief patron of science.
- All early universities were founded and supported by the church.
- Virtually all early scientists, including Copernicus and Galileo, were Christians.
- “Contrary to the conventional narrative, science did not suddenly flourish once Europe cast aside religious ‘superstitions’ during the so-called Enlightenment. Science arose in the West—and only in the West—precisely because the Judeo-Christian conception of God encouraged and even demanded this pursuit.”
-Rodney Stark, *How the West Won*

19 **The West vs. the Rest**

- In the Far East, especially China, numerous significant inventions were made. (e. g. gunpowder, canons, mechanical clocks, printing press, etc.)
 - In most cases, the Chinese failed to appreciate the potential for the development of these inventions for the benefit of Chinese society.
 - After the invention of the mechanical clock, the court Mandarins ordered all the clocks destroyed.
 - After a period of two decades of remarkable seagoing voyages to India and Africa under the Chinese explorer Zheng He in the early 15th century, the Chinese emperor halted the building of any more seagoing vessels and destroyed those of Zheng He.
- It was left up to the Christian West to appreciate the value of these inventions and discoveries, to develop them much further, and to employ them in the advancement of Western society and power.

20 **The West vs. the Rest**

- Illusions About Islamic Learning and Scholarship
 - The common view of Islamic culture concurrent with the Medieval era in the West is that while the Christian West lie intellectually moribund during the “Dark Ages”, Islamic science and learning flourished.
 - In reality, the sophisticated culture and learning attributed to Medieval Islamic peoples was, in most cases, actually the culture of the dhimminis (the conquered peoples), such as Judeo-Christian/Greek culture of Byzantium, Copts and Nestorians (Christian sects), Persians, and Hindus.
 - Dhimminis not only originated most “Arabic” science and learning, they actually did most of the translating of those works into Arabic, giving the appearance that such works were Arabic in origin.
- As the dhimminis became progressively converted to Islam and distanced in time from their original culture, intellectual and scientific vibrancy of the Islamic world diminished and virtually vanished.

21 In Summary

- Christianity is not what caused the fall of Rome, nor did the fall of Rome precipitate a technological and intellectual stagnation leading to a “Dark Ages.”
- The end of the Roman Empire actually released long dormant intellectual and technological energies.
- There was no such period as the “Dark Ages.” Virtually all scientific discoveries of the Renaissance and the subsequent “scientific revolution” were possible because of earlier discoveries made in the earlier Medieval era.
- Far from opposing scientific exploration and discovery, the church was the chief benefactor and supporter of science.
- The Judeo-Christian worldview, and the biblical teachings about, God, man, and nature, is what lifted Western civilization from its early pagan moribund status, and thrust Western civilization into its dominate position in the world by the late middle ages which continues today.

22 Next Week:

- Jesus in History