



There are many things today that seem good for us. However, we must learn to discern between God's will and the subtle manipulation of the devil. As we continue to enjoy the fruits of technology, we need to be aware of the evils inherent in technology. The computer is a useful tool, but also a dangerous weapon of Satan if we wander into unsuitable sites or make contacts in chat rooms that are unwise. Even democracy can be a weapon of Satan. Witness the way society accepts homosexuals, even within secular churches. Single parenthood is an accepted alternative to traditional two-parent families. These are only two examples of the many dangers facing us today. We must be diligent in seeking the will of God so that we keep to His truth. Let us pray and ask God to guide us and keep us safe.

Catholicism

Listed Scriptures

Josh 6; 1 Sam 15; Mt 3

Lesson Aim

- 1) To understand that we will lose the way to salvation if we disobey God's teachings.

Memory Verse

"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of ram." (1 Sam 15:22)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Jer 23:9-40; 2 Pet 2; 1 Jn 2-3

BIBLE BACKGROUND



The word "catholic" originally referred to a united, global community of believers. Hence, the early church that existed after the death of the Apostles was called the Catholic Church. Up to the eleventh century AD, there was only one church. Deep-rooted differences in theology led to the first major schism (division) within the church.

Apart from heresies, the Catholic Church struggled with controversies about beliefs. One major controversy that plagued the church during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries was about the humanity of Christ. Debates raged regarding how Christ, the Son of God, was God Himself (the doctrine of the Trinity), and how he was both man and God (the doctrine of the person of Christ, or Christology).

These theological issues became very serious. The Emperor Constantine tried to settle these differences by calling on meetings which important church leaders from all over the Roman Empire would attend to debate the issues and hopefully settle on an agreed doctrine that all churches would follow. These meetings were called councils. Many councils of Bishops were held, but four of them came to be accepted as general of ecumenical (universal) councils. These were the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), the Council at Ephesus (431 AD), and the Council at Chalcedon (451 AD). The decisions reached at these ecumenical councils were binding upon the whole church all over the Roman world. Many statements of beliefs called “creeds” were formed at these meetings.

The problem for the early church was that not everyone agreed with the creeds that came out of the ecumenical councils. There were deep divisions between the churches of the West, centered around Rome and Alexandria in North Africa, and the churches of the East, centered around Antioch. The division between east and west never healed, and led to a permanent parting of ways in 1054. The Eastern Church became what we now know as the Eastern Orthodox Churches, while the Western Church became the Roman Catholic Church. Many of the original teachings of the apostles were forgotten, lost or changed through time as people relied more and more on their own wisdom instead of following closely the guidance of the Lord.

W A R M U P



Begin a discussion by brainstorming. Ask students the following questions, writing down their answers on the board in point form:

- How many of you have friends who are Christians?
- Do you know what church they go to?
- Apart from the churches mentioned here, do you know of other types of Christian churches?

Depending on the answers given and prior knowledge of the students, either point out that they have given many different groups of Christians, or that what is on the board is just a small sample of the many groups of Christians. The teacher could add other groups that the students may not be aware of.

Next, tell them that we live in a world where significant portions of the world population call themselves Christian. However, the similarity often ends there amongst the myriad Christian groups.

Certainly, they all claim to believe in God. Some are adamant that God is the only being to be worshiped. How do these people define God though? Some would say He is but one aspect of the three beings that form the Trinity. Some churches include the Virgin Mary and the Saints as those whom we should revere. There are many questions asked by people, such as: Who is Jesus Christ? Is He God? Was He fully human or not when He was on the earth?

How will we know what to say to friends regarding the true church? Most Christians today feel that, as long as we believe in Jesus Christ, we are all the same and will receive the same salvation. How can we refute that claim? The most important way is to study the truth diligently. We need to read the Bible, pray regularly, and ask God for wisdom and understanding. This is the only way we are able to fully understand the will of God. However, another way is to explore the source of all the confusion. How did we end up with so many different types of Christianity? When did this happen? We must look to history for answers. The purpose of the next three lessons is to give you a brief overview of the development of the Catholic Church from the time of Constantine to the Protestant Reformation.

B I B L E S T U D Y



Part 1

The Problem of Circumcision

The first major disagreement within the early church is actually recorded in Acts of the Apostles. Read Acts 15.

- a. What was the main point of dissension in this chapter?
(Jewish converts insisting that circumcision was still necessary for gentile converts.)
- b. What was Peter’s argument in vs. 7–11?
(God himself chose to save the gentile Cornelius and his household. He chose Peter to preach the gospel to them, and gave the whole household of Cornelius

the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:34–48). If God should open the door of salvation to the gentiles freely, why should Jewish converts block the grace of God by imposing circumcision upon gentile believers? We should believe that the grace of Christ alone will save any who would believe in the same way.)

- c. How did Barnabas and Paul witness to God’s work?
(They spoke of all the miracles and wonders that God had worked through them as they evangelized to the gentiles.)
- d. What decision did the council make regarding circumcision?
(Gentiles would not be troubled by circumcision. The only rules they must obey are to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood (Acts 15:19–20).)
- e. How did the leaders of the council come to their decision?
(Based on the works of God, and from the teachings of the scriptures (Acts 15:13–18).)

The conflict over circumcision was resolved when the believers obeyed the direction God showed them through His works and visions. They also used the Scriptures as a guiding principle. They were therefore able to keep to the true faith and teachings of Christ.



Part 2

The Question of the Divinity or Humanity of Christ

Believers tried to understand who Jesus Christ really was and how He related to God. This led to the heresies described by the apostles in the New Testament letters. After Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, this question continued to plague the church. The conflict came to a head with the preaching of Arius, senior presbyter of one of the churches in Alexandria. In 318 AD, he clashed with Bishop Alexander on this issue.

Arius believed that Jesus Christ was different from the Father. Jesus Christ was only the Son and did not possess the divine qualities of the Father, such as immortality, sovereignty, perfect wisdom, goodness and purity. The Son was begotten by the Father and did not exist before that. The Father produced the Son as a creature, but the Son was the creator of the rest of creation. The Son did exist outside of

time, before all things. Yet he did not know the Father perfectly and did not share the same being as the Father. He did, however, receive enough grace and wisdom from the Father so that he was able to reveal the Father to humankind.

This began a vigorous debate regarding the nature of Christ that lasted over the next few centuries and shaped the doctrine of the Trinity in the Catholic Church. Arius was quickly branded a heretic together with all his followers. However, he did have support from some of the bishops. Over the next few decades, as the various factions within the church fought over this issue, supporters of Arius rose in favor but were banished again. The controversy was fuelled by political rivalries between the eastern and western churches. Two main rival groups emerged, one based in Alexandria in the west, and one in Antioch in the east. The Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians never agreed in their doctrines of the divinity or humanity of Christ.

Into this mix came the emperors. Once Constantine became the first Christian emperor, he was anxious for any divisions within the church be settled. He sent his religious advisor, the Spanish Bishop Ossius, to try and reconcile the different factions, but Ossius did not succeed. Hence, Constantine summoned a meeting of bishops from east and west to settle the issue. The meeting was initially planned for Ancyra (modern Ankara). Then the venue moved to Nicaea, near Nicomedia (today’s city of Iznik). This was the Council of Nicaea. This council was significant because several things happened that influenced the future of the church:

- a. The meeting resulted in the writing of the Creed of Nicaea. This creed stated the official beliefs of the church. It was formulated to combat the position of Arius and stated that the Son and the Father shared the same substance. They rejected Arius’ claim that there was a time when the Son did not exist, or that the Son was inferior to the Father in any way.
- b. From Nicaea also came important regulations (called “canons”) about church organization. The bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea and Jerusalem were given special status. They had superiority over other churches and bishops. Soon after, the Bishop of Constantinople was also included, since the Roman Emperor ruled from there, and it was considered the new Rome. There were also canons that outlined the importance of certain church practices such as the performing of the Holy Communion (called the Eucharist) for those about to die but had not been baptized, or stopping the clergy (a name referring to ordained ministers in the Catholic Church, that includes priests and bishops) from transferring from one city to another. There were

twenty canons that were drawn up from the meeting, dealing with these issues of organization.

- c. Constantine himself called the meeting, presided over the meeting, and influenced the decisions. He gave the decisions reached by the council the status of imperial law. This was the beginning of a change in relations between church and state. Other emperors later on would also involve themselves in church debates, supporting one side over the other and making doctrinal decisions a law to be obeyed.

The Council of Nicaea did not have the widespread support that the Emperor hoped for. Very few bishops from the west attended it. When the decisions were imparted to all the churches, there were many who opposed the decisions. The debates over these decisions continued to rage over the next few centuries and ensured the permanent rift between eastern and western churches.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING



As we have seen, there were conflicts within the church even from the time of the apostles. However, the way they approached the solutions were different. Consider the accounts from both sections above, and make a list of similarities and differences in approaches and results.

(Similarities: Councils were called to resolve differences; debates were heard; decisions were made based on the arguments made at the meeting; any other relevant points are acceptable. Differences: In Acts, the apostles called the council and were actively involved in seeking the solutions, whereas later on, the church allowed the Emperor to take the leadership role in decisions relating to doctrinal beliefs; the apostles based their decisions on Scripture and the works of God, while decisions made by the Bishops during Constantine's time were more politically oriented (east vs. west); decisions made by the apostles were accepted by the whole church, whereas the creeds and canons of Nicaea became contentious issues within the church for a long time afterwards; any other relevant points are acceptable.)

LIFE APPLICATION



Fellowship Time

Fellowship time. Remember to begin with a prayer, and perhaps hymn singing if there is time. Make sure everyone is involved. Fellowship is a special time to bond with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Make an effort to speak to someone you do not normally speak to. Learn at least one new thing from those you know well. Such times help us to form a special, spiritual relationship with one another. Once we have this bond, we will always have someone to turn to in times of difficulties and trouble. In this way, we are able to help each other to keep to the true path of salvation.

REFLECTION & PRAYER



At the end of the fellowship, reflect on the fact that the early church drew further and further away from the truth because believers were not diligent enough to keep to the original teachings of Christ and the Apostles. People began to voice their own interpretations of what was taught, using their own wisdom and knowledge. This was their downfall. As Paul says, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness,' and again, 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'" (1 Cor 3:1-20).

Let us remember to turn always to God for the truth. We must be watchful, and guard against using our own human wisdom to determine matters of God. If we do that, we will fall. There are many warnings in the Bible of people who followed their own reasoning and disobeyed God. We have read some examples of these instances in our Bible readings this week. In our prayer, let us ask God to help us remain humble before Him, always seeking His guidance, and bowing to His will. Let us pray.