

Four Major Heresies

In the pre-Constantinian period several heresies developed, notably those of the Ebionites, who denied any divinity to Christ; the Sabellians, who taught that Christ and the Holy Spirit were but revelations of God and had no separate existence; the Montanists, who preached the approaching end of the world and the second coming of Christ; and the Gnostics, who fused Christianity with Persian mysteries of Zoroastrianism, the Greek philosophy of Platonism and crude superstition, to arrive at a belief in two gods and an elaborate system of charms and incantations.

ARIAN HERESY

The dispute, known as the Arian Heresy, or the Trinitarian Controversy, threw the church into a turmoil and very nearly wrecked the unity of the faith. According to Arius, within the Trinity, the Son was inferior to the Father, was not of the same divine substance and was not coexistent in eternity with the Father, but had been created by Him; his doctrines approximated Unitarianism today.

Athanasius, supported by the patriarch Alexander, championed the Trinity with the doctrine that Christ was coeternal, consubstantial, begotten and not created, and in every respect one with God. The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., attended by 300 bishops, decided in favor of the Athanasian Creed and declared Arius and his followers to be heretics. They drew up the famous Nicene Creed.

PNEUMATOMACHIC HERESY

In essence this view declared that the Holy Spirit was not an integral part of the Trinity at all but was in substance akin to the angels.

The Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. condemned this view as heretical.

CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

The basis of the argument was laid in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, who maintained that as Christ's God-head was the incarnation of the Word in man, there must have been two distinct persons in Christ, the divine and the human. The human man, born of Mary, was made divine by the indwelling of the Logos which was sent from God; Mary was the mother of the man Christ, but not of the God Christ; it was wrong to refer to her, as was commonly done as Theotokos (Mother of God) since she was in actuality merely Christotokos (Mother of Christ).

The Council convened in Ephesus in 431 A.D., the ancient city of Diana, and since its conversion to Christianity had become the center of the worship of Mary. Without waiting for the opposition to arrive, the council condemned this view supported by Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople.

MONOPHYSITISM

The triumph of Cyril over Nestorius led his followers into a heresy no less dangerous than that of the Nestorians. Having established that Christ was not two persons but one, it was argued that the divine and the human natures must be indivisibly fused into a single nature.

A council was summoned to meet at Ephesus in 449 A.D. and proclaimed the Monophysite belief the true doctrine of the church. A storm of protest arose. Dioscorus, the president of the council, did not allow the Roman delegates to present their case, he being a monophysite.

MONOPHYSITISM REVOKED

A new council was summoned to meet at Chalcedon in 451 A.D., and was attended by 630 prelates. It repudiated the decisions of the "Robber Council" of Ephesus which was declared to be no true council at all, denied the doctrines of the Monophysites and deposed Dioscorus from his see.

The creed which the Council adopted was based essentially on the Tome of Leo and provided that the orthodox must believe that Christ was one person, with two natures, without confusion or conversion, the properties of each nature being complete, but united into a single person.

THE PRIMACY OF ROME

For the next 30 years the dispute between the Monophysites and the orthodoxy continued until emperor Zeno attempted a compromise in 482. It was unequivocally rejected by the Roman see. The persistency of the Roman see was finally rewarded in 519 when the emperor Justin I ordered that all the clergy subscribe to a profession of faith drawn up by Hormisdas, which condemned Nestorians and Monophysites equally, and asserted that, as St. Peter spoke through the Rome bishop, the orthodoxy of Rome was by divine ordination and was at all times unimpeachable. To this humiliating document the proud prelates of the East were forced to subscribe. Rome alone of the great patriarchates had never fallen into heresy, Rome alone was infallibly orthodox; through Rome and through Rome alone came the voice of God; the supremacy of the Roman see was well in process of establishment.

Leon Willis