

HEROES AND HERETICS:

An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

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John of Damascus – Defender of Icons

Life:

- **John of Damascus** (c. 675-749) was a Syrian monk and priest, and was the last of the Church Fathers.
- He was born and raised in Damascus in a prominent Syriac family known as Mansour. Both his grandfather and his father had served in the administration of the Umayyad Caliphate (his grandfather having served previously under the Byzantine emperor Heraclius until that city fell to the Islamic armies in 635). It is interesting to note that during the early days of the Caliphate, the civil servants were still mostly Christian, having been retained from the previous (Eastern Roman) administration; but that by John's time, there was a push toward Islamization of the civil service, which may have been one reason why John became a monk.
- He moved into the Mar Saba monastery, near Jerusalem, and lived and served there until he died, in 749.
- He is best remembered for his influential writings in defense of the use of icons by Christians. He also wrote against heresies – most significantly, against the tenets of Islam. And he is acknowledged as a Doctor of the Church by the Roman Catholic Church because of his teaching on the Assumption of Mary.
- We see in his life and writings, therefore, a drift away from the rigorous striving after biblical orthodoxy that had characterized the early centuries of the church.

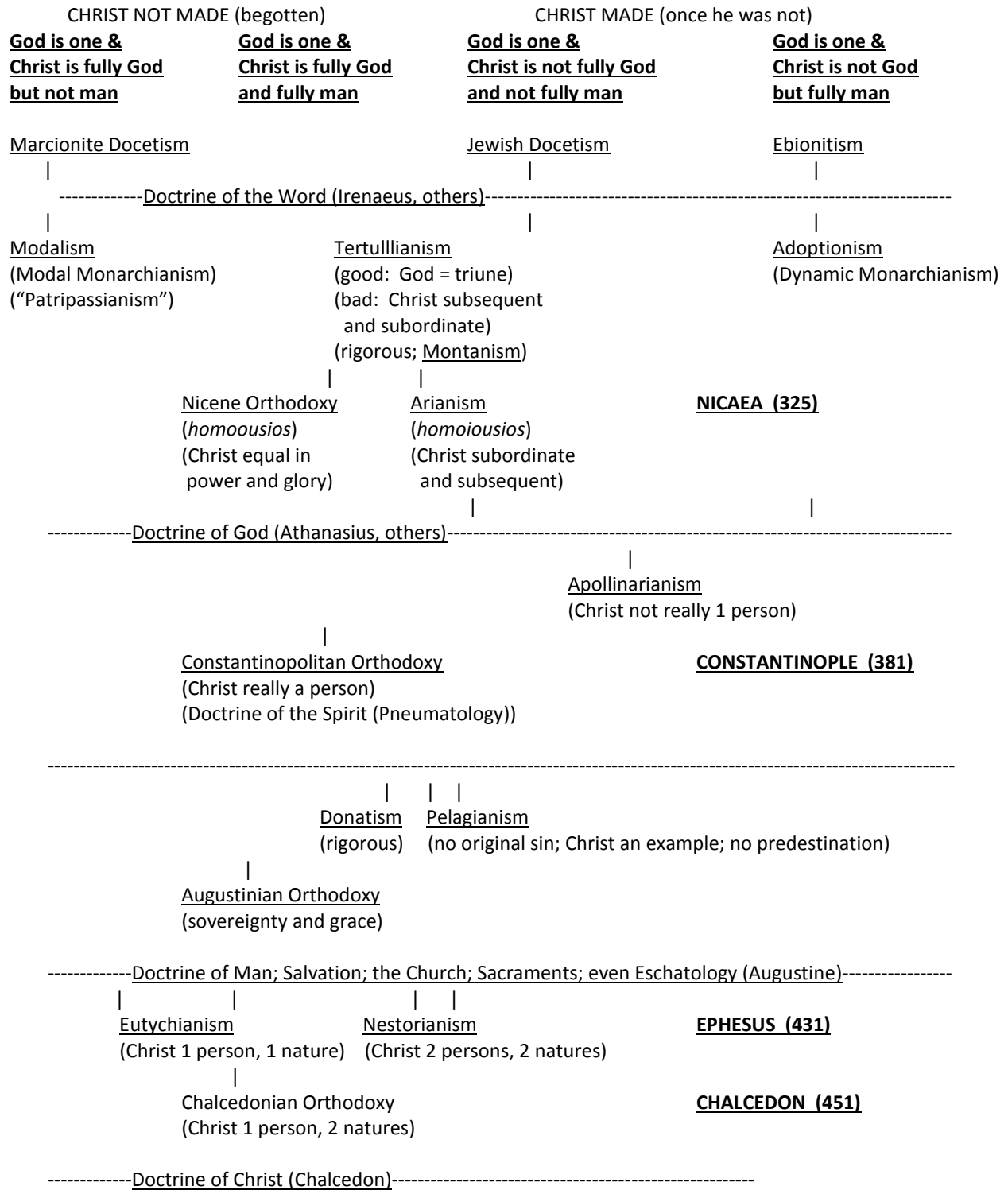
The Iconoclastic Controversy:

- **The Iconoclastic Controversy** refers to a conflict in the church that was triggered when the Emperor Leo III issued a decree (in 730) prohibiting the religious use of icons in the Eastern church. This Imperial opposition to icons (referred to as "iconoclasm" – "icon + breaking") seems to have been triggered (a) by the gradual drift of popular church practice toward the veneration of icons and (b) by a sense that Islam's abhorrence of images put the church, with its allowance of increasingly unorthodox practices, in a negative light. But the Imperial iconoclasts were met and ultimately defeated by the iconodoules ("icon + venerators"). The conflict (which the Byzantines referred to as the "Iconomachy" (literally, "icon + struggle") went on for decades, until 787, then broke out again from 814-842. In the end, (a) the use of icons was vindicated by the church, and (b) as a consequence of the conflict, the Western church, which had supported the use of icons against the Imperial policy of prohibition, drifted toward increased independence from the Emperors and their civil power to coerce the course of religious practice.
- The rise of the belief in the **intercession of the saints**, and in the "**hierarchy of sanctity**" (from the Trinity, to the Virgin Mary (or Theotokos, "God-bearer"), to the saints, to living holy men and women. In order to obtain blessings and/or favor, one had to go through an intermediary, who would in turn **intercede with Christ**. This in turn was rooted in a deep sacramentalism, a belief in God's presence (and of the availability of his blessing) in particular localities and/or objects.
- All this combined with to facilitate the rise of **pilgrimages (to holy places)** and the adoration of **relics, holy objects**, associated with holy people – e.g., remains of the saints themselves, or of objects that they presumably had touched. As subject to abuse (and fraud) as the trade in relics could be (and often was), at least these were objects still required, for their supposed power to be effectual, that believers have contact, either with a place or an object, with that which the saints had touched.
- But with the rise of the **veneration of images**, entire new vistas for abuse opened up, as now these holy objects could be, as it were, mass produced.
- Many in the church opposed this drift into the veneration of icons, which came to be regarded among some as being capable of transmitting holy power in their own right, so that "the image acts or behaves as the subject itself is expected to act or behave. It makes known its wishes ... It enacts evangelical

teachings, ... When attacked it bleeds, ... [and] In some cases it defends itself against infidels with physical force ..."

- The goal of the Iconoclasts was to restore the church to its traditional stance of opposition to idolatry. Iconoclasts were appalled by what they perceived as **iconolatry** (or icon worship).
- *From Wikipedia:* Theologically, one aspect of the debate, as with most in Orthodox theology at the time, revolved around the two natures of Jesus. Iconoclasts believed that icons could not represent both the divine and the human natures of the Messiah at the same time, but separately. Because an icon which depicted Jesus as purely physical would be **Nestorianism**, and one which showed Him as both human and divine would not be able to do so without confusing the two natures into one mixed nature, which was **Monophysitism**, all icons were thus heretical. Reference was also made to the prohibitions on the worship of graven images in the Mosaic Law but the nature of Biblical law in Christianity has always been in dispute. However, no detailed writings setting out iconoclast arguments have survived; we have only brief quotations and references in the writings of the iconodules (icon supporters).
- At the Council of Hieria in 754, convened by the Iconoclast Emperor, veneration of icons was prohibited. This was referred to by as the "Seventh Ecumenical Council," but was rejected as such by many in the church opposed to iconoclasm, including especially John of Damascus and the Western (Roman) church.
- John and others distinguished between worship and veneration of icons; and argued that the Incarnation had superseded the Old Testament prohibitions on likenesses.
- In 786-87, the Empress Irene convened another council, the Second Council of Nicaea, which overrode the iconoclasts and affirmed the veneration of images. This council is recognized by the Eastern and Western (Roman Catholic) churches as the true Seventh Ecumenical Council.

THE HISTORY OF HERESIES CHART:



After the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon), the Church lost its way:

2nd Council of Constantinople (553):

further condemnation of Nestorian influences and Origen;
also
condemned the grammatico-historical method of Antioch, in
favor of the allegorical method of Alexandria

3rd Council of Constantinople (680-681)

condemnation of Monothelism

2nd Council of Nicaea (787)

restored the veneration of icons and condemned iconoclasm

JOHN FRAME : PASTORAL AND SOCIAL ETHICS

II. The Second Commandment:

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.”

A. Main Thrust (narrow focus)

Forbids making images for the purpose of bowing to them—i.e., doing homage to them as representations of deity, and / or as media through which God draws near.

1. Context of worship.

- a) The formulations in Exodus and Deuteronomy seem at first reading to forbid all image-making, i.e., all art.
- b) Other considerations, however, counteract this first impression:
 - (1) Scripture never suggests that there is anything wrong with art in itself, except possibly in these passages.
 - (2) Scripture not only permits, but warrants the use of ornamentation and in particular the making of pictures—of cherubim, bells, pomegranates, Exodus 25-28; note especially 25:18ff., 28:33ff., chapters 35-39; cf. I Kings 6:14-36, 10:19ff. Cf. also Numbers 21:8, Ezekiel 41:17-20.
 - (3) The brass serpent was ordained by God to heal the people as they looked toward it (Num. 21:6-9), This was not idolatry. But the people 132 later made idolatrous use of it (2 Kings 18:4), and God was then pleased with its destruction...

1. On the “Pedagogical Use of Images”:

- a) Advocates of images in the church have often claimed that while images should not be worshipped, they may be venerated (doulou), and may serve an important educational function, especially among the illiterate.
- b) Protestants generally deny the distinction between worship and veneration (but see later discussion on fifth commandment). Yet, they have sometimes defended the use of images as an educational tool. Such was Luther’s argument: these are “books for the laity.” Compare quotes from him in Hodge, Systematic Theology, III, 303f. Hodge does not himself contest Luther’s point, though he opposes the introduction of images into places of public worship because of the possibility of abuse.
- c) The Heidelberg Catechism, however, unambiguously opposes the pedagogical use of images (Questions 97, 98): God, it says, “has willed that his church be instructed, not by dumb images, but by the preaching of his word.”
- d) Comments:
 - (1) As we have seen, the second commandment is not dealing, at least directly, with the use of images to instruct, but rather with the use of images as mediators between God and man in worship. Does instruction through images, then, involve “bowing down” before them? That is the basic question.
 - (2) The question cannot be answered by saying that images are inaccurate representations of their objects. Cf. previous discussion, C.1.b.v. No picture is exhaustive in its correspondence with the thing pictured; but that does not imply any inaccuracy. Inaccuracy is found, often,

not in pictures themselves, but in our interpretations of them; and of course, that sort of inaccuracy is found in verbal teaching also.

- (3) Similarly, it is not adequate to say that since God cannot be pictured any image of him is a lie. As we have seen, there are images of God in the world. Further, there are ways of representing God which, rightly understood, do not mislead people about God's invisibility, etc. It would be ridiculous to say that the upper circle of Van Til's two circle diagram is a graven image in the sense of the second commandment. But short of ruling out such markers, where do we draw the line? And, even if we grant the substance of this objection, it does not apply to pictures that do not claim to represent God.
- (4) As we have seen, it is true that between the fall and the parousia God instructs his people primarily by word rather than by image. However, that is not an absolute principle. There have been theophanies, and these have played an important role. Further, consider Jesus' use of illustrations of spiritual truths from the natural world, the use of vivid metaphors and "imagery" in the Bible, the temple ornaments, sacraments, etc.
 - (a) This sort of teaching assumes that created objects are in some measure fitted to illustrate (and thus to "image") spiritual truth.
 - (b) This sort of teaching, but not only this sort, inevitably produces vivid mental images in us. If the instructional use of images is to be rejected, then, it would seem that even mental images must be avoided. Indeed, the Catechism opposes representations of God even "inwardly in our mind." However, I must take exception here to the Catechism. It seems almost impossible to think without some mental imagery. (Think, "The Lord is my shepherd.") This consideration doesn't, of course, destroy the objection to images. If images as such are wrong, then mental images are too, and we must get rid of them no matter how hard it is. However, when the objection requires such an extreme asceticism, we ought to think hard about it.
- (5) It seems to me that to deny the pedagogical use of images one would have to show that being instructed by an image amounts to bowing down to it. It is true that instruction is part of worship, and that we are called to respond to instruction in awe, reverence, obedience. That reverence, however, is not directed toward the medium of instruction in any sense parallel to that of the idolater. We do not worship our preacher as a representative of God. Thus, I am not convinced that an adequate case has been made against the pedagogical use of images.
- (6) Still, we must be aware of the human tendency to worship the creature above the creator. The presence of pictures in the church is a very serious temptation for many people, especially when they become a permanent part of the church architecture.

2. Images of the Incarnate Christ.

Many have objected to the use of any pictures of the incarnate Christ on the ground of the second commandment. WLC opposes "the making of any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons."

Arguments:

- (1) Since God may not be pictured, and Jesus is God, Jesus may not be pictured either.
- (2) Iconoclasts in the Eastern Church argued that those who venerated images of Christ were circumscribing Jesus' divine nature. To worship the picture would involve the assumption that his divine nature is limited, circumscribed by the human nature and is therefore picturable. Or it would imply that the human nature alone is pictured and thus is separable from the divine nature.

- (3) Some have argued that since we don't know what Jesus looked like, any picture will be a lie.
- (4) Some take the second commandment to exclude any representations of deity.
- (5) The danger of idolatry, at least, is always present when pictures of Jesus are used for any purpose.

(1) I disagree with a.(1) on two grounds:

- (a) As we have seen, Scripture does not teach purely and simply that God cannot be pictured.
- (b) But even if God in himself were in every sense unpicturable, it is clear that Christ, God incarnate, was picturable. He could be seen, felt, touched, as well as heard. His face could be held in memory (and there is surely no suggestion in Scripture that such mental images were sinful! On the contrary, recall the emphasis upon the eyewitness character of the apostolic testimony.) To deny this is Docetism, pure and simple. In this respect, clearly, the Old and New Covenants are sharply different. At the establishment of the Old Covenant, there was emphatically no form (Deuteronomy 4:15). At the establishment of the New, there emphatically was (I John 1:1ff., etc.).

(2) Reply to a.(2): The relation between the two natures of Christ is, of course, a difficult matter at any point in theology. I would argue, however, that Jesus himself is, in both natures, in his person, image of God. In him, deity was in one sense "circumscribed," for all its fullness dwelt in him; though in another sense, God was active beyond the body of Jesus. To picture Jesus is to picture a divine person, not one "nature" or other. To venerate such a picture, I believe, would be wrong for reasons already adduced. I do not, however, think that an adequate argument has been given against pedagogical use of such pictures.

(3) Reply to a.(3): As we've said earlier, a picture does not become a "lie" simply by being non-exhaustive. And, in fact, we do know something about Jesus' looks: He was male, Semitic, in middle life, was known to wear a robe, etc. And if the shroud of Turin turns out to be authentic...

(4) Reply to a (4): As we have seen, the second commandment doesn't forbid all images of God, only those intended for use in worship, as we earlier discussed it.

(5) Reply to a.(5): True.