

Opening Words from Constantine's opening speech at Nicaea

I know I must express my gratitude to the King of all, because in addition to everything else he has allowed me to see this, which is better than any other good thing; to receive you all gathered together I rejoice to see your gathering, when I see you with your souls in communion, and one common, peaceful harmony prevailing among all.

Reading

Today's reading is a bit unusual, it comes from the minutes of the Council of Chalcedon, a church council that took place in the year 451 CE. Exactly what is said isn't super important, I think the contrasting tones are the interesting part.

But afterwards, to frighten us, they invoked as similar the heresy of Nestorius, shouting at us, 'Cut into two those who say two natures! Cleave, kill, and drive out those who say two!' – so that, out of fear of the Nestorian heresy, we would not be judged orthodox but condemned as heretics.

Dioscorus the most devout bishop of Alexandria said: 'Since they say that they didn't hear the sentences and decrees but simply signed a blank sheet passed to them, it was quite improper of them to sign without being assured about the pronouncements of the council, especially since matters of faith were at stake. Since they are making accusation that they were given a blank sheet to sign, who then composed their declarations? I ask your magnificence to make them answer.' The most glorious officials and the exalted senate said: 'Let the proceedings be read.'

Sermon

I read this to demonstrate an important fact about the Church Councils: they were at the same time incredibly bureaucratic and boring, getting into the weeds about the proper way to sign a decree and make a pronouncement, and incredibly heated, with vicious rhetoric describing violent acts used to intimidate opposing bishops.

So what were the church councils, and why were they, and are they, important?

The early church councils that I'm talking about today, specifically the councils of Nicaea in 325 and Chalcedon one hundred and twenty six years later, were gatherings of Christian bishops from all over the Roman empire to hammer out what this new religion would be. Christianity was only a couple hundred years old at this point, and it was a turbulent time when very little was defined. At the time of Nicaea, Christianity had only been legalized just over a decade before, so Nicaea was one of the first chances Christians had to have a global, public meeting. These were huge undertakings: bishops would travel for months across the empire to reach the councils, bringing with them large numbers of attendants.

And their ramifications are felt even today. More than a billion people recite the Nicene creed every week, reciting words that were written 1700 years ago. (Fun fact: the version of the creed that is recited today is actually not the creed written at Nicaea. It is the edited version produced in Constantinople 60 years after the council of Nicaea.)

The council of Chalcedon led to a split that created the Oriental Orthodox Church, one of the oldest branches of Christianity that is still around today.

The church councils were considered holy. After all, they were gatherings of all the Christian religious authorities in the world. The church fathers who wrote the Nicene

creed are, by later Christians reverently called “the 318” (in reference to how many were supposedly there.) They were considered vehicles through which God communicated his doctrine to Earth. These church councils were thought of as ways in which human beings could receive divine law.

They were also incredibly messy, bureaucratic battlegrounds. Bishops argued and argued about whether or not a letter had been properly read at a prior council. They read the minutes of previous church councils, and bishops accused them of misrepresenting things that had been said. Here’s my favorite example of bureaucratic trickery. At Chalcedon, the Egyptians arrived a week before their main opponents, the Antiochenes. The moderator told them that the council couldn’t start until he had read the letter from the emperor, which he wouldn’t do until everyone had gotten there. The Egyptians innocently asked what the letter said, so that they would know when the council started, the moderator read them the letter, at which point the Egyptians said “Gotcha! The council has started.” When the Antiochenes arrived a week later, they were naturally upset, and began holding their own, separate council which they declared to be the only legitimate one. Both councils voted to depose the chair of the other council, and it was such a mess that the emperor had to send a new moderator to restart the whole affair. This is the kind of thing that happened at these sacred gatherings that decided major theological questions.

And I think that they were holy, not in spite of these things but because of them. Firstly, because there is something so beautifully human about their messiness. People traveling for months to have metaphysical arguments and fight about the rules is something that only humans have figured out how to do. The fact that even thousands

of years ago they had boring meetings and recorded the minutes means that it's a quintessential part of the human experience. Think about that the next time you get the email with the board meeting's minutes. That's a historical artifact.

But in addition to being a demonstration of what it means to be human, these church councils show the importance of our fifth principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. It was not easy to get bishops from around the Mediterranean into one place and for them to get along long enough to have some semblance of a reasonable debate. I would not call these councils aspirational. Just to start, women were not allowed to be bishops and thus were not represented, and violent rhetoric was very present. But these councils still represented a great effort to get a diverse set of inputs on the questions that would define thousands of years of thought. And I think that decisions made by hundreds of people in bitter debate seem more real than if bishops had quietly and unanimously decided the will of God.

And this is why we still do it today: General Assembly is our very own church council, where people from all across the UU world gather to argue about things that may seem inconsequential. That timeless human ritual is a necessary part of having a representative faith.

So these councils were incredibly important in the history of Christianity. But they were also incredibly pedantic. The theological debate at the heart of the council of Chalcedon, which caused a split in the church that still exists today, was: does Jesus have two natures, one human and one divine, or one nature, both human and divine? (The council decided on two, for the record. Those who lost the debate split off into the

Oriental Orthodox church, a “non-Chalcedonian” branch that still exists today in the churches of Egypt, Armenia, Ethiopia, among others.)

The council of Nicaea was called to settle a debate so contested that it got the attention of the Roman emperor Constantine himself. The debate was, in some ways, about a single letter. The question was, is Jesus “of one nature” or “of similar nature” with the Father. In Greek, that is the distinction between “homoousion” and “homoiousion.” The difference is the presence or absence of the letter “i”, quite literally an iota of difference. In fact some people claim that the council of Nicaea may have been the origin of the phrase “an iota of difference,” though it may have its origins in the Gospel according to Matthew (but that’s the subject of a different sermon). The seeming absurdity of this did not escape the notice of the bishops at these councils, in fact there is record of someone present lamenting that they were so stuck on this one letter, and an iota, being the smallest Greek letter, was already used as a metaphor for tiny things. The irony was not lost on them.

But of course, these debates weren’t trivial, despite the minutiae that they focused on. The Roman emperor Constantine called the first council because these arguments had grown until they were a threat to order in the Roman empire, despite Christians making up a relatively small minority at the time. Bishops traveled for months to get to them. Which brings us to the first lesson we can learn from the church councils: pedantic arguments are often the tip of the iceberg of some larger issue.

For one, while the two sides of the debates represented different theological positions, those positions were closely aligned with political and cultural groups as well as theological. In both Nicaea and Chalcedon, one side of the debate was closely

aligned with Antioch and Rome, the seats of Imperial power and traditional sources of church authority. On the other was Egypt, which was at the time the up and coming center for new thought, especially in Christianity. The battle over one letter was also a battle about whether old or new cultural groups had a say in the decision making.

And of course, the one letter difference had a huge theological distinction. The difference between homoousion and homoiousion is the difference between whether Jesus is “the same substance” as God or “similar substance.” If that distinction doesn’t make sense to you either, know that I took a 10 week graduate level course on this and I’m not sure I get it either.

But whether or not it makes sense or matters to us isn’t necessarily important, because it did make sense and matter to hundreds of bishops, the Roman emperor, and billions of people today. And I’m willing to put my faith in the fact that even if I don’t understand why, the fact that it matters to so many people means that it is important.

If we look at the homoousion homoiousion debate and say “what does it matter? It’s just one letter” we will never understand the true depth of the subject of the argument. And this is always the case! If someone is upset about something we consider small, and we write it off because we can’t see what’s behind it, we will never understand and never make progress. Let’s look at an example that is very relevant today: using peoples’ preferred pronouns. I remember during the 2020 GA, our very own church council, there was some discourse about pronoun usage in one of the zoom chat rooms, and someone said that using they/them pronouns to refer to a single person was difficult for them because they had a firm classical grammatical upbringing. This person saw pronouns as a simple grammatical thing. To them, it was just words.

And on the very surface level, they're correct. The difference between he, she, and they is just a couple letters.

But to others, the use of their preferred pronoun means so much more. Using someone's preferred pronoun isn't just the difference between 3 letters and 4, but between respecting or ignoring fundamental truths about someone's identity. Those few letters represent so much more than they seem to on the surface.

Which is why it is so important, when faced with an argument we may consider pedantic, to investigate beyond that surface level. If someone is making a big deal about whether or not there is an iota in one word of the Nicene creed, they aren't considering it the difference between orthodoxy and heresy for no reason. They consider it important for some reason, and it won't be possible to have a conversation, to understand that person, or to respect them and their inherent worthiness, unless we listen to what that is.

Here's another example from the most recent of our very own church councils, UUA General Assembly 2024. This year UUs discussed a proposed amendment to Article two of the bylaws, our "purposes and covenant." The proposed amendment changed "We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness" to "We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion." It sounds like a minor change, but a lot of people put a lot of thought into it. They gave three main reasons. First, that the revision sounds more poetic and memorable. Second, that it highlights love as a priority of our purposes. And third, that using "inherently worthy" instead of "inherent worthiness" removed harmful language referring to the "worth" of human beings.

During the debate, someone spoke against the proposed amendment, claiming that it was unnecessary language policing and that one would have to be looking to be offended to care. And I admit, when I first read the proposed change, I also didn't see the point. It seemed like a lot of hassle to go through just to change worth into worthy. They mean basically the same thing, right? It's just one letter.

But then I asked myself, "why do the people who wrote this proposed change care?" And I educated myself on their arguments. I realized that clearly it did matter to some if they went through the effort to bring this to GA, and that while I may not have seen the point in the change, it wasn't as if I was particularly attached to the old language. If it matters to some people, and doesn't matter to me, then one of the simplest ways to do good, to live my principles, is to support that change. I had a knee-jerk, reactionary response that told me "this is tiny and pointless," but by letting that immediate reaction pass, and instead listening to find out why people were making a big deal about something that seemed inconsequential to me, I could make a positive change with no consequence to myself. There are many ways that we go about fighting for our principles. Sometimes that means marching in visible protests, or letter writing campaigns. But sometimes it means arguing the minutiae, the iotas. Making sure that things, especially our own written beliefs, align exactly with our principles.

Maybe one letter is just one letter, and in the grand scheme of things it won't matter. But maybe one letter is just one letter that will be talked about for millenia. Just in case, it's worth our time to make sure we get it right.

Adapted from Constantine's speech dismissing the bishops at Nicaea

Closing Words - Perfection is always a rarity. Therefore let us be tolerant with each other when we offend in minor matters, and be generous and forgive human weaknesses, all regarding harmonious concord as precious.

Benediction

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.