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Christian History Made Easy Participant Guide

9. Session 3: Persecuted to Preferred (AD 300–500)

This session covers how Rome went from persecuting Christians to favoring them, and the new problems that imperial favor created. It walks through the legalization of Christianity under Constantine and the fight over who Jesus really is. The central lesson: political support for the church came at a cost to doctrinal purity.

Key takeaways

- Persecution ended in stages: Galerius' deathbed decree (311), Constantine's victory under a Christian symbol (312), and the Edict of Milan legalizing all religions (313).
- Arius, an elder in Alexandria, taught that Jesus was created and lesser than God the Father — a heresy called Arianism.
- The Council of Nicaea (325), the first church-wide council, denounced Arianism and produced the Creed of Nicaea.
- Constantine's real concern was imperial unity, not truth — he later ordered Arius readmitted despite his unchanged false teaching.

- Athanasius refused to compromise, earning the name 'Athanasius against the world,' and became the symbol of the Nicene faith through repeated exiles.
- The Donatist controversy split churches over whether believers who denied Christ under persecution could be received back — Cyprian urged grace to the repentant.
- Key doctrine: Jesus had to be fully God (to have power to save) and fully man (to represent humanity as the perfect sacrifice).

Passages worth keeping

"It is we who were the cause of His taking human form, and it was for our salvation that in His great love He was born and manifested in a human body."

Athanasius on why the fully-divine Word became fully human — the heart of the Nicene stand against Arius.

How it connects

The session ties church history to a live tension: when the church is used for political ends rather than to make the gospel visible, faithfulness can mean standing 'against the world' like Athanasius.

Scripture referenced

- **John 17:22-23** -- Jesus' prayer for unity among believers, framing the Donatist debate.
- **John 13:34-35** -- The command to love one another as the mark of true disciples.
- **Hebrews 2:14-18** -- Jesus taking on flesh to represent and save humanity — full humanity of Christ.
- **Romans 3:21-31** -- Cited to explain why Jesus had to be fully God and fully man.