



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

Council of Nicea

The **Council of Nicea** (325 CE) was an important meeting of about 300 bishops from across the Roman Empire who met to discuss theological and administrative issues. It is best known for resulting in the Nicene Creed, which is still used by most Christian denominations today as a statement of faith.

Documents and Evidence on the Council of Nicea

As the Council of Nicea was of such importance to the early church, quite a bit of information survives in ancient documents. Several church historians who lived during or shortly after the Council of Nicea documented the events of the council. In addition, writers such as Athanasius (the main defender of Nicene orthodoxy) referred to it in their letters. Following are links to English translations of these ancient sources on Nicea.

- Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3.4-23 (eyewitness account of a bishop at the council) - Athanasius, Letter to Bishops of Africa (eyewitness account) - Athanasius, Defense of the Nicene Definition (eyewitness, mainly on theology) - Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History 1.7 (early 400s AD) - Socrates Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History 1.7-9 (early 400s AD) - Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History 1.15-17 (early 400s AD)

Constantine and Arianism

The newly-converted Emperor Constantine had hoped Christianity would be the uniting force of his empire. He was thus distressed to hear of the dispute over Arianism, which held that Jesus Christ was greater than man but inferior to God. In 325, Constantine called the Council of Nicea with full confidence that the bishops could work out their differences.

The gathering must have been a moving sight to behold. After centuries of persecution, Christian bishops from across the Empire journeyed to Nicea under state protection to discuss theological problems with the help of the Emperor. Official persecution had been so recent that many of the bishops still bore its scars; Constantine himself is said to have kissed the eyeless cheek of one attendee.

The Council of Nicea condemned the teachings of Arius (pictured right) and adopted a creed outlining correct belief about the Son's relationship to the Father. The council was the first to include bishops from several different regions, and is thus considered the first "ecumenical council" of the church.

Although many other local synods were held, seven important councils were attended by representatives of churches throughout the empire, and were therefore "ecumenical." All three main branches of Christianity - Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and

Protestant - consider the decisions of these seven councils to be authoritative. Roman Catholics recognize several more.

Arius' Views

This question of the exact relationship between the Father and the Son, a part of Christology, had been raised some 50 years before Arius, when Paul of Samosata was deposed in AD 269 for his agreement with those who had used the word *omoousios* to express the relation of the Father and the Son.

The expression was at that time thought to have a Sabellian tendency, though, as events showed, this was on account of its scope not having been satisfactorily defined. In the discussion which followed, Dionysius, Patriarch of Alexandria, had used much the same language as Arius did later, and correspondence survives in which Pope Dionysius blames his brother of Alexandria for using such language.

Dionysius of Alexandria responded with an explanation, which posterity has been inclined to interpret as vacillating. So far as the earlier controversy could be said to have been decided, it was decided in favor of the opinions later championed by Arius. But this settlement was so unsatisfactory that the question would have been reopened sooner or later, especially in an atmosphere so intellectual as that of Alexandria. For the synod of Antioch which condemned Paul of Samosata had expressed its disapproval of the word *omoousios* in one sense, and Patriarch Alexander undertook its defense in another. Arius formulated the following doctrines about Jesus:

- that the Logos and the Father were not of the same essence (*ousia*); - that the Son was a created being (*ktisma* or *poiema*); and - that though He was the creator of the worlds, and must therefore have existed before them and before all time, there was - Arius refused to use such terms as *cronos* or *aion* - when He did not exist.

The subsequent controversy shows that the absence of the words *chronos* or *aion* was mere evasion, and that when defending himself he argued in just the same manner as though he had used those words. Moreover, he asserted that the Logos had a beginning; yet not only Athanasius, but Origen before him, had taught that the relation of the Son to the Father had no beginning, and that, to use Dorner's words (*Person of Christ*, ii. 115), "the generation of the Son is an eternally completed, and yet an eternally continued, act" - or in other words, the Father has, from all eternity, been communicating His Being to the Son, and is doing so still.

Arius was obviously perplexed by this doctrine, for he complains of it in his letter to the Nicomedian Eusebius, who, like himself, had studied under Lucian. It is to be regretted that so much stress should have been laid in the controversy on words which, when used in metaphysical discussions, had a tendency to confuse the eternal generation of the Son with the purely physical process of the generation of men and animals. Had the defenders of the Nicene doctrine made more general use of the term "communication of Being", or "of Essence", they would have made it clearer that they were referring to a continual and unchangeable relation between the First and Second Persons in the

Trinity, which bore a very slight analogy to the process which engenders physical creatures into existence.

The Nicene Creed

The most famous result of the council is the Nicene Creed, the statement of faith issued by the Council of Nicea. It reflects its decision (by overwhelming majority) that Jesus was divine in the same sense as God the Father, and not in the sense of a created divine being.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (homousion) with the Father, by whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion—all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them. The second part, which condemns certain views as heretical, makes it clear that the question was not whether Jesus was divine, but in what way he was divine. The "heretical" view, taught by Arius and his followers, was not that Jesus was just a mortal prophet but that he was inferior to God the Father and created by the Father.

This creed is documented in several contemporary sources, including the Acts of the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Acts of Chalcedon, in the Epistle of Eusebius of Cæsarea to his own Church, in the Ecclesiastical Histories of Theodoret and Socrates, and elsewhere.

The Canons of Nicea

In addition to the creed, the bishops at the Council of Nicea issued 20 canons, or determinations, after the conclusion of the council. Most of them are fairly mundane and deal with administrative matters. The text of each canon is online [here](#).

References

- "Christianity." *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service, 2004). - Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol 1. - Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol 1. - Philip Schaff, ed., "The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nicea" in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2 - Christian History & Biography Issue 85: Debating Jesus' Divinity - on the Council of Nicea*