

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

A 1700 Year History



Athanasius

Session 2: Constantine's Life & Writings

Introduction

Watch and react to a clip from the YouTube documentary, “Creating Christ: How Rome Invented Christianity,” which sums up much of secular thought about how Emperor Constantine imposed a specific doctrine onto the early church in order to gain power and unity for himself.

A Christian Emperor Seeks to Keep the Church United

Historical Explanation

The third century was a time of crisis within the Roman Empire due in part to a succession of incompetent and short-lived emperors. The slide into chaos ended in the early fourth century shortly before the rise of Constantine. By 313, he had become the ruler of the Western Empire and also a believer in the Christian God (although he was only baptized on his deathbed in 337). After entering Rome, he met with leaders of the church and donated imperial property to the bishop. He kept the well-known Spanish bishop, Hosius of Cordoba, with him as his personal chaplain. Whenever he added more of the empire to his own rule, he immediately declared toleration for Christians and ordered the restoration of Christian property seized during the recent persecutions. Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea and a budding church historian, saw God's hand in all that Constantine did.

Constantine believed his empire and the Christian church were linked in their destinies. He became concerned after being asked to mediate disputes between the church and its breakaway groups. He was also told of disagreements about church practices, such as the wide variety of methods used for choosing the proper day to celebrate Easter. Finally, he was made aware of a growing dispute about church teaching. An Egyptian priest named Arius had openly challenged the respected bishop of Alexandria about his teachings on the divinity of Christ, and soon Arius had supporters across the empire.

Constantine tried to broker peace in this dispute by sending a letter that called for unity to the disputing parties. When this did not bear fruit, he sought to solve the problem with an examination before a panel of bishops. This was how disputes were fairly decided within Roman legal practice. A similar tradition had developed in the church since New Testament times. Constantine—perhaps at the instigation of his advisor, Bishop Hosius—decided that a small council or synod, or even a regional gathering, would not be sufficient to deal with the complex issues that had already spread so widely. Therefore, the idea was born of a great, or general, council that would include bishops from across the inhabited world (Greek, *oikoumene*). So Constantine sent invitations across the empire for bishops to come to an “ecumenical” council at the city of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

Evaluate: “The fact that Constantine was baptized on his deathbed means he was faking Christianity all along.”

How important is it for the Christian church to be outwardly united? united in its customs and practices? united in its teaching?

Agree/disagree: “It is good to have Christian political leaders, so we ought to seek and support political candidates who will make laws based on biblical teachings.”

Writing: Constantine’s “The Calling of the Council”

When the emperor, who possessed the most profound wisdom, heard about these things, he tried to stop them at their source. Therefore, he sent off a messenger well-known for his intelligence to Alexandria with letters, attempting to quell the dispute and expecting to reconcile the disputants. But matters turned out differently from what the emperor had hoped for. The disagreement was too great for reconciliation, and the one who had been sent to make peace returned without accomplishing his mission.

As for the Nicene Council, it was not a common meeting, but convened upon a pressing necessity and for a reasonable object. The Syrians, Cilicians, and Mesopotamians were out of line [with the rest of the church] in celebrating the festival, observing Easter according to the Jewish calendar. On the other hand, the Arian heresy had risen up against the catholic church,

and it had found supporters in Eusebius [of Nicomedia] and his associates who were both passionate for the heresy and led the attack upon the faithful. This provided the impetus for an ecumenical council, so that the festival should be celebrated everywhere on the same day and that the heresy which was springing up might be condemned.

Then, as if bringing a divine army against this enemy, he convened a general council and invited bishops from all over to attend with haste, sending them letters which expressed the esteem in which he held them.

[Constantine's letter, now lost, called the council to meet at Ancyra, but a second letter changed the location to Nicaea, a letter that survives only in a Syriac translation:]

I believe it is obvious to everyone that there is nothing more honorable in my sight than the fear of God. Though it was formerly decided that a council of bishops should meet at Ancyra in Galatia, it seemed to us for many reasons that it would be better for the council to assemble at Nicaea, a city of Bithynia, because the bishops from Italy and the rest of the countries of Europe are coming, because of the excellent temperature of the air, and so that I may be present as a spectator and participant in what will be done. Therefore I affirm for you, my beloved brothers, that you should all promptly assemble at the said city, that is at Nicaea. Let every one of you therefore, as I said before, keep the greater good in mind and hurry to gather without any delay, so that you may be physically present as spectators of those things which will be done.

May our God protect you, beloved brothers.

It was not just the emperor's command but also his good will which contributed substantially to its successful accomplishment. He pledged his word that the bishops and their companions would be furnished with donkeys, mules, and horses for their journey at public expense. When all those who were able to endure the fatigue of the journey had arrived at Nicaea, he went there himself, both to see the great number of bishops and to fulfill his desire of leading them into unity. At once, he arranged for all their needs to be abundantly provided for.¹

List clues in this writing that Constantine personally cared about calling a doctrinal council.

Still today, formulating doctrinal statements require a lot of work and effort—stretching over multiple years and going through multiple levels of input, writing, revising, and approving. Reflect: Why does doctrine matter that much?

¹ Accessed from Glen Thompson, "Nicaea from the Sources I: The Calling of the Council," fouthcentury.com.

Writing: Eusebius of Caesarea's "How He Ordered a Council to be Held at Nicaea"

Historical Background

Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea Maritima (in Palestine) was a key participant at the Council of Nicaea, and there he met Constantine for the first time. He had already finished writing his famous *Church History* a decade before the council, so it has nothing to say about Nicaea. However, he soon began work on a eulogistic *Life of Constantine* which included his detailed memories of the council and the emperor's role in it. This work, left unfinished at his death in 339, shows Eusebius's firm conviction that God had raised up the emperor both to bring peace to the persecuted church and to be a unifying secular leader for it, and this has caused scholars to be judicious in evaluating his version of Constantine's participation, acts and sentiments while at the council.²

Then as if to bring a divine array against this enemy, he convoked a general council, and invited the speedy attendance of bishops from all quarters, in letters expressive of the honorable estimation in which he held them. Nor was this merely the issuing of a bare command but the emperor's good will contributed much to its being carried into effect: for he allowed some the use of the public means of conveyance, while he afforded to others an ample supply of horses for their transport. The place, too, selected for the synod, the city Nicaea in Bithynia (named from "Victory"), was appropriate to the occasion. As soon then as the imperial injunction was generally made known, all with the utmost willingness hastened thither, as though they would outstrip one another in a race; for they were impelled by the anticipation of a happy result to the conference, by the hope of enjoying present peace, and the desire of beholding something new and strange in the person of so admirable an emperor. Now when they were all assembled, it appeared evident that the proceeding was the work of God, inasmuch as men who had been most widely separated, not merely in sentiment, but also personally, and by difference of country, place, and nation, were here brought together, and comprised within the walls of a single city, forming as it were a vast garland of priests, composed of a variety of the choicest flowers.³

List reasons for why Eusebius would call what Constantine did "the work of God."

Conclusion

Respond to this secular view: "Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior, because Constantine forced that view upon the early church and rooted out all the other rival views. Prior to Nicaea, there were many different doctrines about Jesus, and no one agreed. Jesus is *not* Christ; Jesus *became* Christ."

² Glen Thompson, "Nicaea from the Sources: Ancient Sources and Historical Context," fouthcentury.com.

³ Eusebius of Caesaria, VC, III.vi.