

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

A 1700 Year History



Athanasius

Session 4: The Aftermath of the Council of Nicaea

Introduction

In small groups, choose one of the common church practices listed below and evaluate it. More specifically, your groups can discuss any of the following: What are the biblical principles on which it is based? Why do you think it became common practice? What are the benefits or drawbacks of practicing it? When making decisions about church practice on matters that are not commanded in Scripture, what principles should we always keep in mind?

1. Confirming young adults who are already baptized
2. Celebrating the Lord's Supper twice a month
3. Requiring pastors to learn Greek and Hebrew
4. Making congregational decisions by voting
5. Conducting multiple worship services each week in large churches
6. Having a pastor perform a baptism rather than the child's parents

Deliberations and Decisions from Nicaea

Historical Explanation

Besides dealing with the teaching of Arius, the bishops who were assembled at Nicaea discussed other topics of common interest for the church. The council sought ways to encourage pastors from the breakaway Novatian and Melitian groups to rejoin the catholic church. They also discussed the long-debated question of the celebration of Easter. Should it be celebrated on the third day after Passover as based on the Jewish calendar (which meant it might fall on any day of the week or even twice a year), or should it always be celebrated on a Sunday? Many Christians (especially in Asia Minor, Syria, and Jerusalem) did the former, while others (especially in Egypt and the Latin West) did the latter. The issue had been discussed at several synods already in the second century, but most had decided to agree to disagree. The council agreed on the latter practice. The Council of Nicaea tried to have churches follow the practice of Rome and Alexandria.

Read selections of Constantine's letter below written about the celebration of Easter. **Discuss:** What's the balance between Christians celebrating the same holidays at the same time, and yet not creating rules where God has not (cf. Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:5)?

Constantine Augustus, to the churches:

Since the general prosperity of the empire has shown how great the favor of God has been towards us, I have judged that my primary endeavor, before all else, should be that a unity of faith, a sincerity of love, and a unanimity in devotion to the worship of Almighty God, might be preserved among the most blessed assemblies of the catholic church.

At this meeting the question about our holiest day, Easter, was also discussed, and it was resolved by common consent that everyone, everywhere should celebrate it on one and the same day. For what can be more appropriate, or what more solemn, than that this festival from which we have received the hope of immortality should be observed by everyone without variation, using the same order and clear arrangement?

First of all, it seemed most unworthy that in celebrating this most holy festival we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with spiritual blindness. Since we have put aside their way of calculating the date of the festival, we can ensure that future generations can celebrate this observance at the more accurate time which we have kept from that first day when the passion occurred until the present time. Let us then have nothing in common with that detestable mass of Jews. ...

We must consider, too, that in a matter so important and of such religious significance, the slightest disagreement is most irreverent. For our Savior left us a single festival to commemorate the day of our deliverance, the day of his most holy passion. And he has willed that his catholic church should be one, the members of which, are yet cherished by one pervading spirit, that is, by the will of God. even though they are scattered in many and diverse places.

And let the good sense of your Holiness consider how grievous and scandalous it is that on the same days some should be engaged in fasting while others have festive celebrations; and again, that in the days after Easter some should be present at banquets and amusements, while others are fulfilling the appointed fasts. For this reason Divine Providence has directed us to that we carry out an appropriate correction and establish a uniformity of practice, as I suppose you are all aware. ...

To briefly sum up these matters, it has been determined by the common consent of all that the most holy festival of Easter should be observed on one and the same day. For on the one hand a discrepancy of opinion on so sacred a question is not proper, and on the other it is surely best to

adopt an option which has nothing to do with any strange errors, nor deviates from what is right.

Therefore receive with all willingness this heavenly gift and truly divine command. For whatever is decided in the holy assemblies of the bishops is to be regarded as indicative of the divine will.

Therefore as soon as you have communicated what is written above to all our beloved brothers, you are bound from that time forward to adopt them for yourselves and to lead others to adopt the arrangement mentioned above, and the due observance of this most sacred day. In this way, when I come into the presence of your love (which I have long desired to do), I will be able to celebrate the holy festival with you on the same day, and I may rejoice with you on all matters, as I see that the cruel power of Satan has been removed through divine power and through our efforts, while your faith, and peace, and concord are flourishing everywhere. God preserve you, beloved brothers!¹

Just as in many church meetings today, an ancient equivalent of Robert's Rules of Order was followed, with resolutions (or canons) being circulated to the various congregations. Twenty canons were passed at Nicaea and have been preserved. A summary of some of them are:

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| Canon 2 | Recently baptized men should not be promoted to pastor or bishop too quickly. |
| Canon 3 | A member of the clergy cannot have a woman living with him (except a mother, sister, or aunt), so that there is no suspicion of impropriety. |
| Canon 5 | A person who is excommunicated from a congregation must not be allowed to join elsewhere until he has repented and been readmitted by his original congregation. |
| Canon 9 | Those being ordained as priests should first be examined to make sure they have lived godly lives. |
| Canon 13 | Dying persons who had been removed from membership should be allowed to confess their sins and receive the sacrament. |
| Canon 15 | Pastors and bishops should not move from church to church seeking a more lucrative position. |

¹ Aaron West, Austin Claflin, and Glen Thompson, "Emperor Constantine to all the churches concerning the date of Easter," fourthcentury.com.

In small groups, choose one of the canons from the Council of Nicaea and evaluate it (much like you did in the introduction).

The Aftermath of the Council from A.D. 325 to 381

Historical Explanation

Unfortunately, the council did not end the problem of Arius' teaching. The emperor and the council both sent out letters announcing the decisions and the new creed. Arius was exiled and his writings were burned. However, even after his death in 336, those influenced by his teachings continued to seek legitimacy within the church by constructing new doctrinal formulations. For the next half century, Athanasius (bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373) wrote numerous tracts to explain and defend the Christology of the Nicene Creed. Yet, especially in the Eastern Empire, Arius' supporters continued to promote variations of his teachings. They held numerous councils and constantly wrote and presented new creeds.

A typical example was the council held at Sirmium (in present-day Serbia) in 357. It produced a new creed that contained the following paragraphs about the use of the terms *ousios* (Greek) and *substantia* (Latin), which the orthodox church was using to describe Christ's essence in relation to the Father:

But since many persons are disturbed by questions concerning what is called in Latin substantia, but in Greek ousia (or, to put in more clearly, 'co-essential', or 'of the same essence'), these terms should not be used at all, nor should they be expounded on in the Church. And here are the reasons: nothing is written about them in Holy Scripture; they are beyond mankind's knowledge and understanding; and no one can declare the Son's generation, as it is written, 'Who shall declare His generation?' (Isaiah 53:8) For it is clear that only the Father knows how He generated the Son, and again the Son how He has been generated by the Father.

No one can question that the Father is greater, for no one can doubt that the Father is greater in honor and dignity and Godhead, and in the very name of Father. The Son Himself testifies, 'The Father that sent me is greater than I' (John 10:29, 14:28) And no one is ignorant that it is catholic doctrine that there are two persons—Father and Son; that the Father is greater, and the Son is subordinated to the Father together with all things which the Father has subordinated to Him; that the Father has no beginning, is invisible, and immortal, and impassible. But the Son has been generated from the Father, God from God, light from light, and His origin (as stated previously), no one knows except the Father.²

² Shannon Turner and Glen Thompson, "Second Creed of Sirmium or 'The Blasphemy of Sirmium,'" fourthcentury.com.

Identify and evaluate some of the statements about Christ in the creed above. How logical or biblical are they?

Agree/disagree with the Council of Sirmium: "When we discuss doctrine, we shouldn't use any words that are not found in Scripture."

Conclusion

Churches in our synod have been known for their "rugged individualism." Respond: "We are going to do things here the way we want. The synod can't tell us what to do."