

The First Council of Nicaea (Outline)

Prelude – Constantine

Constantine prevailed in a battle through what he believed and told his army was a vision from God. He claimed that in his vision he saw the symbol of Christ and the words "In this sign, conquer" He claimed to have seen Christ in a vision the next night, in which Christ explained that he meant for the Army to put the sign on their shields. He did so. His Army prevailed. First, against Maxentius in 312 making him the ruler of the Western Latin speaking Roman Empire, and ultimately, in 324, against Licinius, the ruler of the Eastern Greek speaking Roman Empire.

Constantine thus became the sole Emperor of the Roman Empire. He moved his capitol to Byzantium, which he re-named New Rome. After his death it was known as Constantinople. It is today known as Istanbul. Establishing the capitol in the heart of the Eastern region of the Empire was purposed to establish that the region was not independent.

Although not yet a Christian himself, Constantine had a strong reason to promote Christianity because of the vision he claimed to have had and because he wanted religion to be a unifying influence in the Empire. Christians existed throughout and beyond the Empire, whereas the East and West regions were divided by Latin and Greek language, religion, and culture.

The problem he discovered was that the Christians were not getting along with each other. In the first two years after he issued the Edict of Milan, which declared religious tolerance toward Christians and others, the Christian Sect called Donatists appealed to him to settle a dispute with other Christians. He called two councils attempting to reconcile the opponents. Both failed and he ultimately was forced to decide the matter, in which he found against the Donatists.

I found no evidence that Constantine or the Bishops who attended the Council of Nicaea gave any thought to having Scriptural authority to hold a council where they would make decisions that would be bound on others. These were men who presumed the authority of Apostles. Modern day defenders point to the Council at Jerusalem described in Acts 15 in which the Apostle James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem were call on to decide a controversy. They issued a statement rejecting the teaching of those who said Gentiles must first become Jews before they could become Christians. But there is no evidence that this was an issue raised before or at this council.

By all historical accounts the church had degenerated into a hierarchical clergy run organization by this time. A region would have a senior Bishop, sometimes called a Patriarch, Father, or Pope. He would ordain subordinate Bishops, Priests, and Deacons to serve at his pleasure. Subordinates could usually be controlled, but human behavior being what it is, followers of different Patriarchs would clash. Often Priests and Bishops who subscribed to the opinions of one would stray into territory claimed by the followers of another. Sometimes one of the subordinates would disagree with the Bishop who ruled him and would defect to another.

Background of the dispute at hand

It was the aftermath of the persecution carried out under Diocletian, Galerius, and Licinius. Some Christians yielded to the pressure to sacrifice to the Roman gods and declare allegiance to the Empire.

Others merely "lapsed" i.e. they stopped attending worship and holding fellowship with the Saints. This avoided being challenged to show allegiance.

Still others who followed very orthodox Christian leaders who chose to stand against the persecutions even if it meant loss of life and property.

We find accounts of the existence of cults of martyrs who would turn themselves in and demand execution.

Some Roman officials who became so appalled by this that they refused to execute any more Christians.

This last group took issue with accepting those fallen Christians from the other groups back into fellowship. (Although this is not typical of our fellowship, I have seen this in the Church!)

In 312 this had been the main issue of dispute raised by the Donatists. In 325 the most outspoken person was Bishop Meletius of Lycopolis (in Egypt). He presided over the Church of the Martyrs.

Meletius was one of the key figures creating strife within the Church at that time.

His followers were called Meletians

A second influential figure was a Priest named Arius. His followers were called Arians. He was associated with Meletius. Both were in Egypt, many believe that Arius was ordained by Meletius. What we do know for certain is that Meletians and Arians held very conservative views and sided with each other in disputes. What Arius actually taught is not well known for reasons I will share later, but he is believed to have challenged the incorporation of pagan Greek and Roman practices into the church. His accusers claim that he taught that because the Scriptures said that Christ was the firstborn of Creation, this meant that Christ was a created being and thus inferior to God the Father. This teaching flirted with those who claimed that Jesus was not completely God. It flew in the face of the dogma of the Trinity.

The third influential figure was Alexander who was the Patriarch, or Father, of Alexandria. He and Arius had been rivals for this position at the death of the previous Patriarch. Arius ruled one of the most important churches in Alexander's domain. The two developed a feud over a sermon Alexander preached about the nature of Christ. Arius accused him of teaching Modalism. Modalism, or Oneness is the name for the view that there is one God, who is known to man in three ways, or "modes"; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The position Arius took certainly denied that Christ and God were one and the same. The dogma of the Trinity also denies that Christ and God are one and the same, but gets around the issue that Arius would face by declaring them to be of the "same substance"

Let me review that – since it is a complicated doctrine -

Arians – believed that Christ was not one and the same as God because Christ was created by God.

Scripture references:

Colossians 1:15 ¹⁵And He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

John 14:28 ²⁸“You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

Modalists – believed that Christ and God were one and the same

Scripture reference:

John 14:7-10 ⁷“If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.” ⁸Philip said* to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” ⁹Jesus said* to him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” ¹⁰“Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works.

John 17: 11 ¹¹“I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are.

Colossians 2:9 ⁹For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,

Hebrews 1:1-3 ¹God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ²in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

Trinitarians – believed that Christ was not one and the same with God, but that they co-existed being of the same substance.

Scriptural reference: None.

However, there is a controversial passage that scholars call the Comma Johanneum that could be used as a proof text for the Trinity. This text appears in the Latin Vulgate, the later 1622 revision of the Textus Receptus, and English translations that are derived from these works. Three well known translations are: The Tyndale Bible of 1526, Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible of 1582, and the King James Bible of 1611

1 John 5:7-8 ⁷For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. ⁸And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

The problem with this text is that it was an error not found in the early Greek texts of the New Testament. Modern translations that are based on Majority Texts or any of the Greek Codex Texts , e.g. NAS, ESV, NIV, NAB (the only approved Bible by the Catholic Church for America) render the text as it appears in the original Greek

1 John 5:7-8 ⁷So there are three that testify, ⁸the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord.

So to recap – Constantine’s new religion had two big conflicts going that were brought into focus by the personal conflicts between Meletius, Arius, and Alexander over the nature of Christ and over forgiving fallen away Christians so that they could be admitted back into the Church

He had a third dispute over the date for the annual celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection. The account we have in Scripture tells us that he was killed on a Friday and raised on the following Sunday. This occurred at the time of the Jewish Passover. Passover was ordained by God to remember the blood sacrifice that spared the Jews from the death of their Firstborn and ultimately, through the death of the Firstborn of all Egypt, delivered them from bondage.

The problem was that the celebration of Christ’s resurrection was close to the date of a pagan festival that celebrated the female goddess of Fertility and Sexuality. The name of the goddess depending on language was “Eostre”, “Eastre” - “Astarte” i.e. Easter. The Hebrew word for this goddess was “Ashtaroth”, or “Ashtoreth”. I will not go into detail, but the pagan celebration included all the celebration of Spring & Fertility practices you and I are familiar with in the celebration of Easter today. The Bishops wanted to make the celebration include a celebration of Christ since it happened near the same time.

The problem was that Easter was celebrated according to the Spring Equinox and the Passover was celebrated according to the Jewish calendar – which made the date vary relative to the Equinox.

Scripture directed the Jews to celebrate the Passover annually according to the Jewish calendar. Nowhere do the Scriptures give direction or example of an annual celebration of the Resurrection. Jesus did direct them to remember him in the Lord’s Supper which we do have example that they did weekly.

The Hebrew Scriptures also mention the worship of the Ashtaroth 8 times (Judges 2:13, 10:6, 1 Samuel 7:3-4, 12:10, 1 Kings 11:5, 11:33, 2 Kings 23:13) declaring it to be an abomination to God.

So the Council of Nicaea was debating when to celebrate a pagan festival that was described as an abomination.

Remember that bringing pagan practices into the church was one of the things Arius opposed.

Constantine sent out an invitation to all the Bishops throughout the Empire; 1800 in all. He offered to pay for them to travel and protect them. Because it was an Empire wide invitation, the council was referred to as “Ecumenical” a Greek word that meant “from the whole world”. And thus you have the first Ecumenical Council. Accounts vary but by most counts 318 Bishops attended.

I told you in the previous message that my view of Constantine changed as a result of studying for this series. Constantine was instinctively encouraging the Bishops to do what they should have known to do by Scriptural direction. i.e. be unified, be of one accord. He got them together hoping they would settle their differences. But that was not what happened.

Here are the 5 issues that were on the published agenda for the Council.

1. The Arian controversy
2. Easter celebration
3. The Meletian schism
4. The validity of baptism by heretics
5. The status of the lapsed in the persecution under Licinius

The Arian controversy

In the heated debate on the nature of Christ, Arius lost. Many of the Bishops supported him going in, but when it became clear that the majority did not and that they had to choose between signing the majority opinion or face excommunication and exile, all but 2 yielded. The Nicene Creed was a statement of the majority opinion. It took the Trinitarian position that God and Christ were not the same but were still one because they were of the same substance. The Creed was later revised to include the Holy Spirit as well. The original creed pronounced an anathema (pronouncement of damnation) on Arius and any of his supporters. All were required to surrender any and all of his writings and they were burned. This is why we have so few documents from which to understand what his position really was.

Easter celebration

They decided to shun the Jewish connection and go with the goddess of Fertility. That is why it is called Easter and why it is sometimes near the Passover and sometimes not.

The Meletian schism, The validity of baptism by heretics, and the status of the lapsed in the persecution under Licinius

These were all related to Meletius. The council condemned Meletius himself, but because they hoped his followers would re-join the church, they made a compromise. He was allowed to retain his office but was restricted not to go outside his city. He was not permitted to ordain any more Priests. The Priests he ordained had to be reconfirmed by someone else, and many of his followers had to be baptized by someone else who was not a declared heretic.

Those who had lapsed in their faith were re-admitted to the church, but required to go through a process that lasted at least 3 years for those not yet baptized and 12 years for those who were.

Several other issues came up at the Council for which Canons (new laws handed down by the Council) were issued. Some of the noteworthy ones are these:

No one who had himself castrated could become a Priest.

No Priest or Bishop could live in a house with any woman other than his Mother, Aunt, or Sister. This meant no housekeepers. (note that the Scriptural qualifications for officers of the Church require them to be married. This rule was only needed because they were not following this requirement.)

No one expelled from one parish or diocese could be accepted by another one.

The Bishops of other regions were not required to submit to the authority of the Bishop of Rome (i.e. each region had its own independent Pope)

Members of the Clergy were forbidden to loan money at interest.

After all was said and done. Arius and two others were declared heretics and exiled. One of his supporters who was forced to sign the confession against him was a man named Eusebius of Nicomedia. He gained influence in the Empire while Arius was in Exile. He became the Bishop of Constantinople and was the person who actually baptized Constantine. Meletius died 2 years after the Council and his followers never made peace with those who had condemned him. Eusebius arranged for Arius to return from exile only for him to die suddenly. He was believed to have been poisoned. Arians and Meletians gained the support of the Constantine's son who succeeded him as Emperor. The decisions of the council were reversed and those who pronounced judgment against Arius and Meletius were declared heretics and exiled.

This lasted until 381 when the tables again turned and the Nicene Creed was re-issued with the Holy Spirit included and the anathema against Arius deleted.

There have been a total of 20 Ecumenical Councils held since this first one. Roman Catholics recognize all 21. The Greek (Eastern Orthodox) Church recognizes only the first 7, those called by the Roman Emperor and not the Pope or Bishop of Rome. Some religious groups recognize the first 4.

<http://www.piar.hu/councils/>

The councils often revised and sometimes reversed the decisions of previous councils. If you want to know what the Roman Catholic Church believes today, it is published by the Vatican Catechism of the Catholic Church (English, see the link)

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

We read in the Scriptures in many places that false teachers would arise and seek to convert the church into an organization to profit themselves rather than do the will of God.

(Acts 20:29, Rom. 16:18, 2 Cor. 11:13-15, Eph. 4:14; Col. 2:8-23, Philipians 3:17-19, 1 Tim. 4:1-3, 2 Tim. 3:1-9, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Titus 1:10-16, 2 Pet. 2:1, Jude 1:17-19)

I contend that these councils represent just that. You will find examples where they concluded something that is obviously correct when measured against the Scriptures, but since we have the Scriptures, the council was unnecessary. In many more instances, they were obviously wrong, or they were binding opinion on others and demonstrating exactly the apostasy prophesied by Paul in Col 2:8-23.

I use as examples the councils held by Catholics only because this council is the next chapter in the history of the Church. Other religious organizations may not call them Ecumenical Councils, but they have events that are equivalent. Government & Religion joining forces is a bad thing as evidenced by the

history of Europe where nations and individuals who claimed to be Christian slaughtered each other in the name of God for most of the last 2000 years.

That is why the US Constitution forbids the government from establishing a state religion.

Most members of churches of Christ claim to reject the authority of these councils, but adhere to some of the Dogma endorsed by them without realizing it.

The history may be interesting, but here is the real point of telling the story.

You and I may believe things that came out of these councils, that have no authority except that which was presumed by their participants.

How can we know? How do we sort out why we believe what we do?

Do we believe because someone told we should?

Do we believe because we think it is common knowledge?

(Easter Bunny lays eggs made of sugar & food coloring)

Do we believe because we think that intelligent people are expected to believe?

I am afraid that the answer is "Yes" far more often than any of us would like to admit.

Each of us should consider the doctrines we believe and measure them against the Scriptures.

Do you believe that Mary was the Mother of God and therefore should be worshiped? (Luke 11:27-28, Matt 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, Luke 8:20-21, John 19:25-26)

Do you believe that Jesus Christ was a man just like you and I, completely human in every way? (Jesus called himself the Son of Man 80 times in the gospels, Hebrews, especially 2:14-17, Phil 2:5-8)

Do you believe the Jesus Christ always was and is God? (John 5:18, , Mark 14:62 Luke 22:69 John 8:58{I AM – the name of God; Ex 3:14}, John 18:6,34

Do you believe as Paul did

Colossians 2:9 ⁹For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,

What about the three doctrines that the Council of Nicaea debated and which I outlined:

Do you believe that Jesus Christ was a created being as Arians infer from **Colossians 1:15**

Do you believe that he and the Father and the Spirit are One, known to us in three ways as Modalists infer from **John 14:7-10**

Do you believe in the dogma of the Trinity based on the authority of the first and second Ecumenical Councils?

Or do you believe any one of the other explanations that were being put forward as to the nature of Christ?

Please understand – The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was as human as you and I; they tell us he was God. How he can be both is a mystery that is not fully explained in the Scripture. People have opinions that attempt to explain something that is beyond our ability to understand. Men have been fighting over it since at least the second century. They did terrible un-godly things to each other over their opinions.

That is all they are; Opinions ! Shall we refuse fellowship or harshly treat each other over matters of Opinion? No, No, No, No ! Never !

The persecution of Christians did not begin in earnest until Constantine gave these Bishops the power of the Roman Empire to punish other Christians who did not share their opinions.

Jesus said "you will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:15-20)

The fruits of the Holy Roman Empire were a period of history that is called "The Dark Ages" when men tied men to poles and set them on fire over matters of opinion – that were really only matters of petty human rivalry.

I hope you accept this message as a challenge to examine your faith – why do you believe what you do?

Start with the decrees of The Ecumenical Councils. Look at the doctrines of others who established religions, such as those of Luther, Tyndale, Calvin, Wesley, Smith, and Russell.

Look in the statements of faith published by them or their followers.

Ask yourself first "Do I believe this?" If you do, examine the arguments put forth for and against.

Use the Bible as your guide to weigh the arguments.

If you don't find it in God's word... **do not believe it !**

(Note links to the statements of belief and practice of some of these other religions are added at the end of this document)

If you need the prayers of the church, or if you wish to begin your walk of faith by putting on Christ in Baptism, won't you come?

Original Nicene Creed of 325

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, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on 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, ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

[But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]

First Council of Constantinople (381)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;

from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead;

whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Links to belief statements of other religions, whenever possible links as published by the religion itself. Note that all of these may be searched at Wikipedia <http://www.wikipedia.org/> Wikipedia cannot be trusted as an objective sources in matters of religion or politics, but it is generally a good starting place that will lead to websites where individual religions can speak for themselves.

(Note in particular the problems Wikipedia has posed for churches of Christ. Early postings provided by members were challenged by antagonists because the Church has no written statement of faith and practice other than the Bible. The information posted went through a process of having content replaced by the posts of non-members for a long time until some members took on the task of finding external references to support. This is interesting in light of this particular sermon because it makes clear the problem that Constantine was trying to solve. He was trying to get the Church to agree on what they believed. In this case, members of churches of Christ were trying to get Wikipedia to accurately portray the Church, and had trouble doing so because our only creed/Statement of Faith/Statement of Practice is the Bible. Currently a search for 'church of christ' or 'churches of christ' will lead to one of two pages that will lead to lists of other groups where the link you are looking for is buried in a long list of other groups (sigh) . to find the link you seek go here.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Churches_of_Christ So here is the word of caution – Wikipedia is not a very reliable source to find information about the church you know – it might not be a very good source for others either – let each group speak for itself.)

United Methodists (Wesley)

<http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.1707359/>

Calvinist:

Presbyterian

<http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/101/>

Baptist – note there are many variations of Baptists, not all of which are Calvinist
Southern Baptist

<http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp>

A summary of General Baptist beliefs and history published by one church.

<http://www.baptiststart.com/doctrine.htm>

American Baptist

<http://www.abc-usa.org/WhoWeAre/Identity/IdentityStatement/tabid/78/Default.aspx>

Jehovah's Witnesses (Russell)

http://www.towerwatch.com/Witnesses/Beliefs/their_beliefs.htm

At the time of this posting – the Author is adding more links. Please come back later to find an update.