

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Date: May 20-June 19th, 325 AD. Held in Nicaea in Bithynia (present-day Turkey),

Organizer: Called to order by Constantine. He summoned 1800 Bishops (1000 from the east and 800 from the west—but only 318 made it.

The Landmark: The first ecumenical council of the church (Done according to the pattern of the the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 13)

The Significance: Resulted in the drafting of the first uniform Christian Doctrine: The Nicene Creed

The Controversy: Their was a theological division in Alexandria over the extent of Christ's deity

The issue to be resolved: Determining the nature of Christ's relationship to the Father, in particular whether Jesus was of the same substance as the Father or of a similar substance.

Another Significant Verdict: The establishment of Easter as the celebration of the resurrection. The resurrection was to be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, which occurred on or after March 20th. The church had been split with some celebrating the resurrection on the Sabbath.

Modern Day Example of Bad Historical Scholarship

In Dan Brown's popular novel, *The Divinci Code*, the book argues that at the Council of Nicaea the bishops were gathered by Constantine to vote on the divinity of Christ. Up until that time the book maintains, Jesus was viewed by the church as a great prophet—but a mortal one. The reason for the counsel, the book claims, was to garner political power for Constantine and the Christian faith. The best way to legitimize the Christian faith as the true faith was to understand Christ was not human but divine. The book suggests that the council was divided on the issue and the deity of Christ as Christian doctrine was passed only by two votes.

However, the deity of Christ was not the issue at Nicaea, all parties including Arius agreed that Christ was divine. The issue at hand was understanding the extent of his divinity. Was he of the same substance of God the Father, or was he a lesser deity? Furthermore. the deity of Christ was widely accepted by the apostles (Titus 2:13) and the early church fathers that preceeded this council by some 250 years. Furthermore, the final vote was not even close. Only two bishops out of the 318 were not in agreement. In short: Dan Brown is a great novalist but a terrible historical researcher.

The Crux of the Argument

1. Arius proposed that if the Father begat the Son, the latter must have had a beginning,
2. that there was a time when he was not,
3. and that his substance was from nothing like the rest of creation.
4. Key Scriptural Support:

John 14:28

You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

5. Other Scriptural Support: Matthew 24:36; John 5:19-20; John 17:4-5; Matthew 20:23
6. Open for Discussion: What would be some theological implications if Arius was right?

On the other hand, Alexander, bishop of Alexandria denounced Arius' teaching and maintained they were heretical.

Alexander and his followers believed that the Son was

1. of the *same substance* as the Father,
2. co-eternal with him.
3. Much of the debate hinged on the difference between being "born" or "created" and being "begotten." Arians saw these definitions as the same.
4. Key Scripture: John 10:30

John 10:30

I and the Father are one."

5. Other Scriptural Support: John 1:1, 14; Phillipians 2:6; Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15; John 8:58, 14:8-9; Titus 2:13
6. Open for Discussion: What would be some theological implications if Alexander was right?

The Outcome

In the end, 316 out of 318 bishops sided with Alexander and signed the church's first unified doctrinal document. Below is how it read.

The Nicene Creed 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, 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 (*homoousios*) with the Father.

By whom all things were made, both which is in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the living 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.

Conclusion: Important Theological distinctions

1. Jesus Christ is described as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God," confirming his divinity. When all light sources were natural, the essence of light was considered to be identical, regardless of its form.
2. Jesus Christ is said to be "begotten, not made," asserting his co-eternalness with God, and confirming it by stating his role in the Creation.
3. Finally, he is said to be "from the substance of the Father," in direct opposition to Arianism.

In the end, Arius was deemed a heretic and excommunicated from the church. This is how the idea of Jesus being God became a firm doctrine in the church. That my friends was the first ecumenical council of the church and an important council when it came to reaffirming Jesus Christ and God as One.

Final thoughts: Share some of your thoughts in relation to this event documented in History.