

# THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

## Overview

1. The creed we say every Sunday
2. Had there been councils before?
3. Who called the Council and why?
4. Who was present?
5. Who were the chief protagonists?
6. The main issues
7. The Nicene and Constantinopolitan Creeds
8. The Nicene Canons
9. Was the Council a success?

## 1. The Creed we say every Sunday

- The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.
- It is the fruit of a series of deliberations.
- Nicaea 325
- Constantinople 381
- Ephesus 431
- Chalcedon 451
- Our creed began in Nicaea, as follows:

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 from the Father, only-begotten,  
 that is, from the substance of the Father,  
 God from God, light from light,  
 true God from true God,  
 begotten not made,  
 of one substance with the Father,  
 through Whom all things came into being,  
 things in heaven and things on earth,  
 Who because of us men  
 and because of our salvation came down,  
 and became incarnate and became man,  
 and suffered, and rose again on the third day,  
 and ascended to the heavens,  
 and will come to judge the living and dead,  
 And in the Holy Spirit.

*But as for those who say, There was when He was not,  
 and, Before being born He was not,  
 and that He came into existence out of nothing,  
 or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created,  
 or is subject to alteration or change – these the Catholic and apostolic Church  
 anathematizes.*

- Any observations or questions?

## 2. Had there been councils before?

- Yes, local and regional councils had been held, e.g. Arles, Antioch and Alexandria.
- Council = *synodos*, lit. the road together.
- Ecumenical = *oikumenē*, lit. the inhabited world (i.e. the Roman Empire).
- This was the world “worldwide”, ecumenical council.

## 3. Who called the council and why?

- The emperor Constantine called the council and paid all the expenses of travel and residence.
- Constantine began the process of making the Roman Empire a Christian empire.
- He personally welcome everyone, even embracing those bearing the marks of persecution.
- Initially, Constantine wanted to exile all those who did not agree with whatever the conclusions of the council might be.
- Gradually, he became more tolerant.
- His biggest concern was the unity of the empire.
- He tried to make Arius feel welcome and resisted rigourists, such as Athanasius of Alexandria.

## 4. Who was present?

- The numbers vary a little but are surprisingly large.
- 250 to 300, with the figure of 318 given by Athanasius of Antioch becoming traditionally accepted. 318 is also the number of members of Abraham's household given in the Book of Genesis, so it may be more symbolic than anything else.
- Lists of signatories to the final decisions of the council contain 200-220 names.
- With presbyters and deacons attending each bishop, the total attendance may have been between 1200 and 1900.
- Most of the bishops were eastern.
- The council was held in Nicaea's imperial palace.
- The bishops most likely assembled in a rectangular basilica hall based on Eusebius of Caesarea's description.

## 5. Who were the chief protagonists?

- Alexander of Alexandria
- Arius
- Athanasius of Alexandria
- Eusebius of Caesarea
- Hosius of Córdoba

## 6. The main issue

- Arian: subordinationist (like Origen); there was a time when the Son was not; he is not, therefore, eternally generated.
- In this way, Arius wanted to protect the transcendence of the creator over against the created. The Word is some kind of lower god.
- Arius: against the idea of “of the same substance” because the original Monad must be indivisible. The “ousia” or being of God cannot be divided.
- Anti-Arians: The Preexistent Word always existed; in this way God was always a father; the creator is “ingenerate”.
- The Son is generated, but eternally. There never was “a time” when he was not.
- To capture this evolution of doctrine, Nicaea adopted the word “homoousios” meaning of the same (homo) substance or being (ousia).
- Old translation: “one in being with the Father”.

- Not everyone was happy with the introduction of a non-biblical neologism.
- Many would have preferred homoiousios, which means of like being not the same being. A great deal hung on the diphthong!

## 7. Nicene and Constantinopolitan Creeds

### 3a. 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,  
 begotten from the Father, only-begotten,  
 that is, from the substance of the Father,  
 God from God, light from light,  
 true God from true God,  
 begotten not made,  
 of one substance with the Father,  
 through Whom all things came into being,  
 things in heaven and things on earth,  
 Who because of us men  
 and because of our salvation came down,  
 and became incarnate and became man, and suffered,  
 and rose again on the third day,  
 and ascended to the heavens,  
 and will come to judge the living and dead,  
 And in the Holy Spirit.

*But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change - these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes*

### 3b. The Nicene Creed in Greek

Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὀρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητὴν· καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν τὸν Υἱὸν Θεοῦ, **γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς** [μονογενῆ, τούτέστιν **ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς**, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ,] Φῶς ἐκ Φωτὸς, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, **γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί**, δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, [τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῆ,] τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς. Καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.

## 4. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (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,  
 consubstantial 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 Spirit and 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 sits on the right hand of the Father;  
 from thence he shall come again,  
 with glory, to judge the living and the dead;  
 And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life,  
 who proceeds from the Father,  
 who with the Father and the Son together  
 is worshiped and glorified,  
 who spoke 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.

## 8. The Nicene Canons

- The Council promulgated twenty new church laws, called canons (though the exact number is subject to debate), that is, rules of discipline.
- *Quartodecimans* i.e. “fourteeners” the same day as the Jewish Passover.
- Nicaea: independence from the Jewish calendar and Empire-wide uniformity.
- According to the *Computus Paschalis*: on the first Sunday after the Paschal Full Moon, based on the March equinox. Eastern churches: Julian calendar; Western churches: Gregorian calendar.

## 9. Was the Council a success?

- (i) Eventually!
- There were bishops who were Arian in Alexandria, Constantinople, Rome and Ravenna.
- There were Emperors who were also Arian.
- Large swathes of the Empire were Arian for long periods.
- (ii) Eventually: Constantinople (381); Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), led to greater agreement and the adoption of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.
- It was a protracted struggle.
- To be honest, parts of the Christian world today are still Arian.
- The date of Easter is currently under discussion.