

## The Council of Nicaea (325): The Rise of Christendom (100 - 600)

Defining Moments in Christian History

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- 1) Defining moment: The Council of Nicaea (325): called by Constantine
  - a) Question: How did we get from 12 apostles to an emperor-sponsored church council?
  
- 2) Experience of the early church
  - a) Persecution
    - i) Early, sporadic persecution; started right away with the disciples in Jerusalem; intense periods of persecution under Nero (A.D. 64), Domitian (A.D. 90), Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 177), and especially Decius and Valerian (c. A.D. 250) and climaxed under Diocletian (c. A.D. 303)
    - ii) Two famous martyrs: Polycarp (d. 155) and Perpetua (d. 203)
    - iii) Persecution quickly led to dissemination
  - b) Struggle with identity: What did it mean to be Christian? Changed each century
    - i) Conclusion: Retention of Jewish religious heritage and adaptation to surrounding culture
  - c) Formation of orthodoxy/struggling with heresy
    - i) Canon formation
      - (1) The “Bible” for the first Christians was the Hebrew Scriptures, the “Old Testament”; the books were largely agreed upon, but finalized by A.D. 90 at the Council of Jamnia
      - (2) Some of the gospels and some of Paul’s letters were widely circulated early in the first century; Very quickly, however, many other writings began to appear [Bart Ehrman’s two books: *Lost Christianities* and *Lost Scriptures*]
        - (a) Acts: around 30: The Acts of Peter; The Acts of Paul; The Acts of John
        - (b) Gospels: more than 20: The Gospel of Bartholomew; The Gospel of Peter; The Gospel of Thomas; also “infancy” gospels
        - (c) Apocalypses: around 20: The First Apocalypse of James; The Revelation of Esdras
      - (3) Various attempts to clarify canon (see overhead)
      - (4) Criteria for inclusion: Apostolicity, Antiquity, Orthodoxy, Catholicity, Traditional usage, Inspiration
      - (5) By at least A.D. 400 there was a widely-accepted (and imperially mandated) canon of scripture.
    - ii) Constructive theology: dozens of church fathers—theologians—writing on all kinds of topics
  - d) Organization and Liturgy
  - e) Tremendous growth
    - i) Geographical spread: By 300 churches spread from the Mediterranean shores of North Africa all the way to Rome
    - ii) Numerically: went from 120 people in the upper room in Jerusalem on Pentecost to around 6 million by A.D. 300 (or 10% of the population of the Roman empire in 300)
    - iii) Why? Miracles, charity, equality (slaves and women)
  
- 3) Changes that Constantine brought (over time)
  - a) End of persecution: Edict of Milan (313)
  - b) Guarded sponsorship of Christianity
  - c) Definition of orthodoxy (beginning of state-sponsored church councils)
    - i) Ecumenical Councils (other local councils called frequently): biggest question in early councils: relation of Son to the Father
      - (1) Council of Nicaea (325): Called by Constantine to deal with Arianism (belief that the son is not equal with the Father, that the son was created, not eternal); Arius excommunicated in 320
      - (2) Council of Constantinople (381): Called by Theodosius

- (3) Later councils (20 altogether): Council of Ephesus (431); Council of Chalcedon (451); Council of Constantinople II (553)
  - (4) Results:
    - (a) Basic establishment of Jesus as God, equal to God the Father, of the same substance but not the same as the Father (Nicaea and Constantinople)
    - (b) Jesus is fully human and fully divine; he was one person consisting of two natures (Chalcedon)
    - (c) Creeds established: church becomes unequivocally Trinitarian
    - ii) Clarification of biblical canon: Athanasius' Easter letter (367); Synod of Carthage (397)
  - d) Changes in worship
  - e) Movement toward distinctly Christianized empire
    - i) Emperor Theodosius (346-395):
- 4) Other changes in the Christian church as it entered the "Middle Ages"
- a) Transition from martyrdom to monasticism
    - i) St. Anthony of the Desert (c. 250 – c. 350)
    - ii) St. Benedict (c. 480 – c. 550): "Benedict's Rule"
  - b) Centralization of church authority and power; also "professionalization"
  - c) Increasing presence and eventually dominance of Christianity Belief that church and state have common cause and authority ("two swords" theory); formation of Christendom
  - d) Continuation of a strong theological tradition
    - i) Pre-Constantinian theologians
      - (1) Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> C)
      - (2) Origen (early 3<sup>rd</sup> C)
      - (3) Eusebius (4<sup>th</sup> C)
    - ii) Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
      - (1) Father of western theology; influenced Thomas Aquinas, all the Reformers, and is still a revered theologian by Catholics and Protestants alike
- 5) "Constantinianism of the church" in history and problems it presents today
- a) Basic definition (in a modern sense): alignment of church and state; implies a common goal of maintaining (and, at times, spreading) Christian belief and practice—through the arm and means of the state
  - b) The modern notion of the separation of church and state is a direct critique of Constantinianism
  - c) Eusebius of Caesarea: favored Constantine's conversion and the idea of a Christian empire
- 6) Conclusion: the church at the end of sixth century looked very different than it did at the beginning of that same century. The shape of the church for the next thousand years was due, in part, due to this crystallization of orthodoxy and the alignment of the church with empire. In many ways, we still are wrestling with problems that have their roots in this time period.

**For further reading:**

- Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils, and Christ* (1984)
- Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times* (1994)
- Mark Noll, *Turning Points* (1997)
- William G. Rusch, ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy* (1980)
- Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1997)