
**Describe the contribution and impact of
The Council of Nicea to the Church**

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Outline

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. The Council's Proceedings
4. The Creed of Nicea
5. Theological Impact of the Council
6. Political Impact of the Council
7. Nicea and the Church
8. Conclusion
9. Bibliography

1. Introduction

The Council of Nicea (also known as Nicaea) met in 325AD and is regarded as the first of the 'Ecumenical' or general councils of the church. During its history, the Church has called several such councils to deal with varying aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. Nicea dealt with one of the most fundamental aspects of the Christian faith, namely the person of Christ and his relation to God the Father. Probably its most enduring impact was the formulation of a creed, which though modified and expanded at a later council, has served Christendom as a profession of faith and touchstone of orthodox belief throughout its history.

We will examine the historical and theological background to the council and assess its impact, both in the secular and sacred realms together with its legacy.

2. Background

For many years the church had grappled with the issue of how to best explain the unique nature of Christ as the *logos* or the “Word becoming flesh” (John 1:14). Differing approaches to this issue began to emerge over time. For example, some held to views which emphasised the full humanity of Christ, while others stressed his full divinity as God the Son. The contrast between these two differing approaches to Christology was to prove problematic to the Christian church, particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries as it struggled to provide a working definition of Christ's person.

It was the writings of an Alexandrian presbyter, Arius (c.250-336) that provided the catalyst for a council to discuss and debate the issue of how best to express the mystery of Christ's person and his relationship to God the Father. The dispute began in 318 when Arius argued (against the wishes of his Bishop Alexander) that the Son was not divine, but instead was a

created being, created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). The Son was the greatest and first of all created beings and the agent through which the universe was itself created. Nevertheless in relation to the Father, the Son was neither equal nor co-eternal (“There was a time when he was not.”).

Despite finding his views condemned at several synods, Arius and his supporters did not fade away and the growing dispute proved to be a serious threat to the unity of the church. For the Roman emperor Constantine as patron of the Christian faith, Christian unity was part of the wider unity that he sought within the empire that he now controlled, but had fragmented previously. With the assistance of his theological adviser Hosius of Cordova, Constantine hoped to resolve the matter at a local level, but the turmoil caused by Arianism did not abate. Sensing the threat to unity and in an attempt to resolve the issue, Constantine summoned a general assembly of Bishops to Ancyra (Ankara), later changing it to Nicea (Iznik), closer to his own military headquarters.

As Noll comments, the doctrinal issue to be discussed was “absolutely critical because it centred not only on who Jesus was in his person but also who Jesus was in his work as saviour.”¹

3. The Council's Proceedings

The council began its work c. May/June 325. In attendance were several hundred bishops², mostly from the East, with the Pope represented by two presbyters. Constantine presided over the council as Chairman, with Hosius also in attendance. Throughout the proceedings, Constantine would act not to impose his own will nor to vote on the issues raised, but to guide all the participants present to a solution. As he stated at the outset: “I won my battles for the glory of God and to my dismay I hear there are divisions among you. We are here to fix it.”³

1 Noll, *Turning Points*, p52.

2 Estimates vary between 250 and 318.

3 <http://www.freeonlineresearchpapers.com/constantines-influence-christianity> quoting Walker, *A History of The Christian Church*, p14.

Against Arius and his followers were Bishop Alexander and his secretary Athanasius (c. 293-373) whose previous work, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (The Incarnation of the Word of God), had been written to refute the Arian position. After vigorous debate and some stalemate, the council finally voted by overwhelming majority to adopt the view that the Son was of the 'same substance' or consubstantial (Greek: *homoousios*) as the Father, being present from all eternity. To attempt to express the view the council formulated the Creed of Nicea as a summary of belief.⁴

Following the discussion on Arianism, the council also dealt with the issue of fixing the date of Easter, attempting to standardise the date as the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. The council also enacted several 'canons' or rulings, many concerning matters of church discipline and practice.

4. The Creed of Nicea

The creed represented a clear anti-Arian profession of faith, as is evidenced in the following phrases:

- i. As Lane points out, Arius took the Origenist view that only the Father was "True God". The creed also applies this term to the Son – 'True God from True God'.⁵
- ii. Christ is said to be 'begotten not made', i.e. not a creature, but the true Son of God. Further emphasising this, Christ became human for 'us men and for our salvation.'
- iii. Christ is said to be 'of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father'. Lane comments that: '...this non scriptural term was used to safeguard the scriptural truth of the deity of Christ.'⁶

4 Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263-339) had presented his own creed to the council, but whether the creed of Nicea is based on this is unclear.

5 Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, p29.

6 Ibid, p30.

The creed itself may have been based on a traditional Syrian or Palestinian creed, but stood out in its technical language and also the use of anathemas or denunciations against Arianism.⁷

The relationship of the Holy Spirit to both Father and Son was not explicitly mentioned in the creed, this not being fully dealt with until a revised version was issued at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

5. Theological Impact of the Council

Although the council had provided the church with a clear statement of faith, this in no way signalled the end of Arianism as some of the later emperors after Constantine (including his own son Constantius II) took a pro-Arian stance. Many were unhappy at the use of the term *homoousios* (particularly in the East)⁸, a term also used by Origen (c. 185-254), but not accurately defined by him. Others tried to steer a middle ground between Orthodoxy and Arianism by arguing that the Son is of 'like substance' (*homoiousios*) to the Father.

It was left to Athanasius to spearhead the effort in upholding doctrinal orthodoxy, suffering alternating periods of banishment and recognition, dependent on the theological views of the emperor in charge.

In many ways, Nicea marked a starting point for the church as it began to more fully explain and clarify its belief about the three persons of the trinity and their relation to one another. Further, Nicea demonstrated that doctrinal orthodoxy and fidelity to scriptural understanding of it could be established through the use of non scriptural terms.

⁷ *The History of Christianity*, p158.

⁸ Some may have felt that this term blurred the distinction between the persons of Father and Son.

As Noll points out, we can see at least three key theological statements in the creed about Christ, powerfully restated:

- i. The reality of his nature
- ii. His incarnation as a human being
- iii. The work of salvation that he accomplished.⁹

6. Political Impact of the Council

The impact of the council was also felt in the political realm, as Constantine had convoked the council and would seek to enforce its decrees throughout the empire with the power of imperial law and not just church law.

The relationship between church and state had been brought sharply into focus at Nicea. Years previously, Tertullian (c.160-220) had asked the question, "What has the emperor to do with the church?" and the proceedings at Nicea had provided an outline of some kind of answer.

Constantine's own conversion in 312 had marked the beginning of the intermingling of church and state, a relationship that would wax and wane with successive emperors seeking to exert their own degree of influence in church matters. A negative example (according to Athanasius) was that of Constantine's own son, Constantius who stated "Whatever I will, be that esteemed a Canon."

Following the council, Eusebius of Caesarea developed his own model of church/state governance. Both are images of God's kingdom and emperor a representative of God on earth in whom God himself "lets shine forth the image of his absolute power."

⁹ Noll, *Turning Points*, p59.

Eusebius' views alarmed many who sought a degree of independence of church and state. Some such as Ambrose of Milan (339-397) made their views explicit: "The emperor should be within the Church, and not above it". It was in some respects as a reaction to the political process that Nicea embodied, that later Christians felt that the church had compromised itself by being too closely aligned with imperial involvement, thus contributing to the rise of the Monastic ideal.

7. Nicea and the Church

As previously mentioned, Nicea had enacted several canons, many concerned with church discipline and organisation. They dealt with such matters as prohibiting usury (Canon 17), and the conduct of catechumens undergoing instruction in the faith (Canon 2).

Of the twenty canons enacted, perhaps the most significant was Canon 6, which refers to the ecclesiastical privileges enjoyed by the ancient sees of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, who had become known as Patriarchates. The later two were already ecclesiastical rivals and post Nicea, would continue to be so. The Nicene canon had maintained the *status quo*, but the issue of rivalry amongst the Patriarchates (which also included Jerusalem and to which Constantinople would eventually join) would continue to develop in the years following Nicea.

It was Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), who had talked of the universal nature (catholicity) of the church, being visible in the episcopate. Thus the universal church could become visible when all the Bishops would gather in council, as happened at Nicea. ¹⁰

10 Baker, Landers, *A Summary of Christian History*, p67.

8. Conclusion

The council of Nicea set many precedents: it provided Christendom with a statement of faith, a foundation stone that future councils would build upon in the struggle against heresy. It also marked an important step forward in ecclesiastical function, as through consensus and the use of non biblical language, biblical truth was set forth for all to see.

Less positively, Nicea did not end the heresy that it set out to combat, nor did the language of the creed satisfy all as theological precision on the trinity would be worked out in the future. The degree of imperial involvement in not only the council itself, but enforcement of its decrees would form part of the church/state relationship issue that the future church would have to confront.

However, perhaps the greatest legacy of Nicea however is the creed itself which has “...remained for seventeen centuries a secure foundation for the church's theology, worship and prayer.”¹¹ A monument to unchanging truth amidst turbulent waters.

11 Noll, *Turning Points*, p59.

9. Bibliography

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