

The First Council of Nicaea

325

Roman leadership was in shambles. From 307 to 324, four out five Roman Emperors were murdered or committed suicide. The Christian community was besieged by dissension and rioting regarding treatment of Christians who, under persecution, apostatized themselves by burning incense to the Roman Gods. A contentious issue arose for the entire church when Arius, an eastern monk, defined Christ as changeable, not one with God. Emperor Constantine I (The Great) called the Council of Nicaea to resolve these controversies.

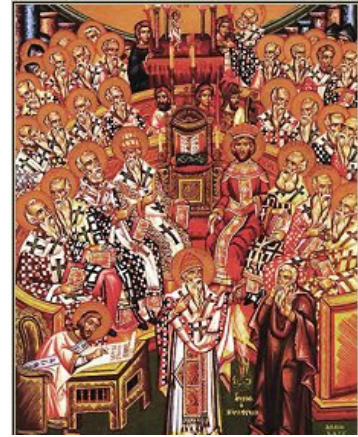
Constantine, the Great (247 – 337)



This first Christian Roman Emperor proclaimed public recognition of the church. This brought blessings (ended persecution) and curses. The blessings would not be worth the curses that put the church in an inferior position. Emperors introduced regal and triumphant tones and exerted significant influences over the church that would negatively affect it for at least the next 1500 years!

Nicaea I is known mainly for writing the first Creed. The Council dealt directly with the controversial issues and also set precedent for future Councils in dealing with doctrinal questions as well as institutional needs.

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Nicaea I defined the nature of Jesus Christ:

Christ had two natures, one human and one divine, and was in fact, God, but there were not two Gods.

There was a delicate balance between the oneness of God and Christ's divinity.

The Father and the Son were one in substance but distinct in person.

Icon: Emperor Constantine and Church Fathers holding the Nicene Creed.

Nicaea I put these definitions into a Creed:

We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten from the Father that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came to be, both those in heaven and those in earth; for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became human, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit. And those who say "there was once when he was not," and "before he was begotten he was not," and that he came to be from things that were not, or from another hypostasis or substance, affirming that the son of God is subject to change or alteration-these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.

The Creed was: *"A brilliant miniature, it distills the reflections and prayers of the early church" **



Nicaea I also dealt with other questions such as:

- Validity of baptism by heretics
- Ordinations by a Meletian schismatic Bishop (Meletius of Lycopolis)
- Status of church members who, under threat, had paid homage to Roman Gods
- Setting the date for Easter (the fullness of life from the spring equinox and the full moon)

* Norman Tanner, "Ecumenical Councils of the Church" ISU Lib: BR200 T36 2001