

# CONSTANTINE & MONOLITHIC CHRISTIANITY

In 325 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine took the step that forever changed Christianity; he convened the first universal council of the church at Nicaea in Asia Minor. The Council was convened to resolve a theological controversy over the nature of God and Christ. The results of the conference involving 200 to perhaps more than 300 bishops were at least four-fold:

- The adoption of a universal statement of Christian faith known today as the Nicene Creed.
- The transformation of Christianity from a colloquium of diverse viewpoints to a rigorously enforced, monolithic and doctrinaire church (evidenced by the decision that Easter would be celebrated pursuant to the Roman rather than Jewish calendar – always to be on a Sunday.)
- The marriage of church and state – a situation to remain in force throughout much of the Mediterranean and Europe for over a millennium.
- The practice of anathematizing and excommunicating leaders who would not adopt the newly established doctrine of the emperor and church at Rome.

## HOMOIOUSIOS, HOMOOUSIOS AND HOMOIOS

The central question debated by those attending the Council at Nicaea was the relationship of Jesus the Son to God the Father. A number of alternatives (as expressed in the *Greek*) were possible, each with its own adherents:

- *Anomoios* – the (extreme) viewpoint taken that the Son is “unlike” the Father.
- *Homoios* – the more generic viewpoint that the Son is “like” the Father, a term more consistent with New Testament writings, but not viewed as specific enough by the participants in the debate. As a possible compromise position, this term nonetheless was rejected at Nicaea and subsequently.
- *Homoiousios* – the more moderate viewpoint that the Son is “of like essence” with the Father.
- *Homoousios* – the prevailing Nicene formulation that the Son is “of the same essence” as the Father.

## THE NICENE FORMULATION

Reporting on the events of the Council to his church at Caesarea was the early church historian Eusebius (or Caesarea). He recounts this first of the official orthodox church creeds as adopted:

We believe in one God, the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible. And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is *from the substance of the Father*, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true

God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on earth: who for us men and for our salvation, came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens; is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit.

And those who say, "There was when he was not," and "Before he was begotten he was not," and that "He came into being from what is not," or those that allege, that the son of God is "of another substance or essence," or "created," or "changeable," or alterable," these the Catholic and Apostolic Church *anathematizes*."

The source of the dispute that had precipitated the Nicene convention was that of presbyter Arius of Alexandria. In earlier correspondence, Arius had stated that Jesus: "... is not equal to God, nor yet is he of the same substance."

Despite their protests – including the observation that the term "of the same essence" was not to be found in any of the New Testament writings, the Arian supporters lost. The Nicene Council ended by condemning the person and views of Arius, authorizing his excommunication and degradation from the presbyterate. Constantine sent Arius and three others into exile.

Subsequent to the Council, the emperor made known his views of this dissenter:

While more than three hundred bishops remarkable for their moderation and shrewdness were unanimous in their confirmation of one and the same faith, which is in accurate conformity to the truth expressed in the laws of God, Arius alone, beguiled by the *subtlety of the devil*, was discovered to be the sole disseminator of this mischief, with unhallowed purposes, first among you, and afterwards among others also.

In separate correspondence, the emperor also stated his purpose for having called the council: "My sole desire was to effect universal concord, and in particular to refute and dispose of this question which began through the madness of Arius the Alexandran ..."

In case anyone was not catching the full imperial intent, Constantine becomes more explicit: "So I decided to take action against these ungrateful individuals: I ordered them to be arrested and banished to the most distant region possible."

The strength of the emperor's disdain for those *he viewed as heretics* also is revealed by the following imperial edict:

"VICTOR CONSTANTINUS, MAXIMUS AUGUSTUS, to the heretics.

"Understand now, by this present statute, ye Novatians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Paulians, ye who are called Cataphrygians, and *all ye who devise and support heresies* by means of your private assemblies, with what a tissue of falsehood and vanity, with what

destructive and venomous errors, your doctrines are inseparably interwoven; so that through you the healthy soul is stricken with disease, and the living becomes the prey of everlasting death. Ye haters and enemies of truth and life, in league with destruction! All your counsels are opposed to the truth, but familiar with deeds of baseness; full of absurdities and fictions: and by these ye frame falsehoods, oppress the innocent, and withhold the light from them that believe.

Three months after Nicaea, Constantine found that Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis, Bishop of Nicaea, still held to Arian views. They were exiled to Gaul and a new election of bishops was ordered. At one point, the emperor wrote to denounce Eusebius and issue a personal warning about high treason.

In subsequent writing, Constantine went beyond individual sanctions, placing whole congregations viewed as being outside of the Catholic faith at risk:

And in order that this remedy may be applied with effectual power, we have commanded, as before said, that you be *positively deprived* of every gathering point for your superstitious meetings, I mean all the houses of prayer, if such be worthy of the name, which belong to heretics, and that these be made over without delay to the *catholic Church*; that any other places be confiscated to the public service, and no facility whatever be left for any future gathering; in order that from this day forward none of your unlawful assemblies may presume to appear in any public or private place. Let this edict be made public.

And later, the imperial punishment for lesser religious infractions became more severe. In an edict to eight years after the Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine stipulated:

This therefore I decree, that if any one shall be detected in concealing a book compiled by Arius, and shall not instantly bring it forward and burn it, the penalty for this offence *shall be death*; for immediately after conviction the criminal shall suffer capital punishment. May God preserve you!

So, here we have it. The wedding of church and state. And the silencing of dissenting voices pursuant to the apostolic, catholic authority of a single monolithic church – emerging to rule with full force of imperial law for over a millennium.

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This passage is adapted from the chapter “The Heresy of Constantine: Monolithic Christianity,” just one excerpt selected out of the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*.

For more information on the *12 Heresies of Christianity*, please click: [www.jesustheheresy.com](http://www.jesustheheresy.com)