

The men of the nicaea council theology religion essay



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On account of the growing Arian controversy, that was causing a rift in the church. Emperor Constantine assembled the First Council of Nicaea in the year 325 A. D. The purpose of the council was two-fold. First, the council was to discuss the teachings of Arius of Alexandria a very popular presbyter in the Alexandrian church. Arius had a problem with the deity of Jesus Christ. Second, Emperor Constantine wanted to mend the growing rift in the church and form a united church front. From this historical gathering The Council of Nicaea was able to produce a theological confession called the Nicene Creed.

The Arian conflict began because of a fundamental difference over the deity of Jesus Christ. The Church had always confessed their belief in God the Father and in His Son, Jesus Christ. The church believed that God was divine and therefore Jesus was divine. The act of water baptism was performed in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This belief spoken of in the Apostles Creed, boldly states, " We believe in God the Father, Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord." The church also spoke out against all pagan beliefs.

The Apostle's Creed appeared to be too much for the Arians, for their interpretation of the deity of Christ was much different than the views of the church. The Arians led by their leader Arius of Alexandria, simply could not get over the " philosophical difficulty that one who is man cannot be also God." The Arians believe that " Christ can be worship as the begotten Son of God, who became flesh, died and rose again, and who sits at the right hand of the Father." Arius did everything in his power to try and show the general council that Jesus could not be equal to God. Arius quoted " John 3: 15 to show that Jesus was referred as God's only begotten Son, he also referenced <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

Hebrews 1: 5-6 which speaks of Jesus being begotten of God. Finally probably out of frustration Arius stated flatly, Jesus is in no way part God” The Arians just could not support the deity of Christ because if they did it meant that Christ was God. Arius and his followers held firm to their belief that “ Jesus the Son of God, was created before the foundation of the world by God; thus Jesus is not eternal, He is but a creature.” Despite the backlash that was coming from the church and its followers the Arians continued to preach their message of heresy. Arius continued to teach to anyone that would listen that “ the dignity of being the Son of God was bestowed on Jesus as a gift from the Father; however it is the Father we must worship for He alone is God.” It was because of these teaching that Arius and his followers were excommunicated from the church.

THE PURPOSE OF THE COUNCIL

The 15th chapter of Acts gives a good example of a council coming together to discuss a problem that was causing a division within the church. In the Christian church when “ bishops and pastors and other elected leaders of the church assembled together to consider and rule on questions of doctrine, administration, disciple, and other matters,” this group is usually referred to as the general council. The Nicaea general council did not operated on any regular schedule, whenever there was a need to meet the council would assemble. The general council did not react to everything that might have come up within the church. However, “ if something was important, the issue found its way into the general council’s meeting.” According to Socrates this “ council was convened at the request of Constantine, the current emperor of Rome, because the Christian sovereign hated discord, and he therefore <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

set three tasks that he want to resolve during this gathering.” Constantine officiated the meeting and he told the bishops that were in attendance. “ You are the bishops whose jurisdiction is within the church. But I also am the bishop, ordained by God to oversee those outside the church.” The three issues Constantine wanted to resolve were the issue of the deity of Christ, establishing a date for Easter and to bring

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unity to an already fragile church body. “ The assembling of the council was a sign that Christianity had assumed a new mode of government, as well as a new position in the empire.”

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THE TRINITY

In John 10: 30-Jesus says, “ I and the Father are one.” According to the Jews, Jesus had just committed blasphemy, and for that, the Jews were ready to stone him. How could Jesus and the Father be one? This question was becoming a headache for Constantine and the general council. To this day the deity of Christ is a hot topic among many in the secular world. There are those who still have a hard time grasping this theory. To the secular world Christ was just “ a humble rabbi, or insightful teacher, or just a good man. Others go as far as to insinuate that Jesus was radical, egotistical, or even insane.” However, this growing controversy was more of a theological issue than anything. The relationship between the Father and the Son was the main issue and there was no easy way to explain this unique process. Arius, himself a Christian, now found himself at odds with Bishop, Alexander of Alexandria. Arius “ did not want to lower the person of God or to refuse him <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

worship, but to defend from the charge of polytheism (many Gods)." It was the concept of many God's that was keeping Arius and his followers from accepting the deity of Christ. Arius and his followers failed to see the spiritual significant of the Trinity. Which was " God is one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each

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member of the Trinity is completely God. As part of the Trinity, Jesus Christ who is God the Son is deity. " " This is the Christian doctrine of the trinity. God in his infinite mercy looked up his finite creatures and knew that they would have a hard time comprehending him and believing in him. So, he revealed himself to everyone in three different aspects."

THE NICENE CREED

" A Creed, or Rule of Faith, or Symbol is a confession of faith for public use, or a form of words setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church." The creed may cover the whole area of the Christian doctrine and process, or embrace only such points as believed to be essential and acceptable. Creeds are generally used at baptisms, or used for instructional purposes; they can be more elaborate and theological, for ministers and teachers. Creeds give everyone a chance to speak out with a loud voice what they believe. The Nicene Creed would go on to become one of the most important Christian texts ever to be produced. The Nicene Creeds goes as follows.....

“ We believe in God the Father almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only- begotten of the Father, that is, begotten of the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true, begotten God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made, in heaven and earth; who for us humans and our salvation came down, took flesh, and was made human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit.”

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By citing the Nicene Creed the general council and the followers of the Christian faith were affirming their belief in the deity of Jesus Christ.

THE MEN OF THE COUNCIL

At the invitation of Emperor Constantine three hundred and eighteen bishops assembled for what would become the first official gathering of the Nicaea Council. The council “ lasted for two months and twelve days. It was held in the spring of AD 325 in what is now northwest Turkey.” “ The church had waited for over “ three centuries to officially call its first general council meeting, because Christianity was still officially outlawed.” This moment has been declared the first ecumenical council of the Christian church and “ historically it marked the end of early church history and the dawning of the middle Ages.” The Council of Nicaea was held during the first year of the reign of Constantine the Great. Out of all the men in attendance at the council there were few men who stood out.

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EMPEROR CONSTANTINE

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Besides being called Constantine the Great, the emperor was also known as the first Christian Emperor. There have been some debates by historians whether Constantine was even a Christian at all. He was born in Illyria, a region around the Balkans in A. D. 280. His father Constantius Chlorus, was already a Roman official who was moving up the ranks. His mother was Helena, the daughter of an innkeeper. Constantine was in line to become emperor of the western empire by the time he was 31. Spring of 311 Constantine and his army of 40, 000 soldiers rode toward Rome to confront an enemy who had four times the men he did. The battle was for supremacy in the west. " While riding into battle it is said that Constantine saw a vision in the sky: a bright cross with the words By This Sign Conquer. Constantine believes that this was a sign from God telling him to take the cross into battle so he ordered his men to mark their shield with the now famous cross which became known as the Chi-Rio " With renewed hope Constantine was victorious over his enemy. He would enter Rome as the new ruler of the west; Constantine became the first Roman emperor with a cross in his crown. Once Constantine had established himself as emperor " he met Licinius, the ruler of the Balkan provinces, and he issued the now famous Edict of Milan that gave Christians the freedom to worship." " The reign of Constantine the Great marks the transition of the Christian religion from under persecution by the secular government to union with the same; the beginning of the state-church system." For fourteen years Christians under the rule of

Constantine enjoyed the freedom of worship however Constantine wavered back and forth with his faith, because he was considered a friend of the

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Christians, and because his Christian convictions grow over the years

Constantine now proclaimed himself a Christian. Nevertheless, all good things must come to an end, and it ended with a resounding thud.

Controversy had to rear its ugly head around A. D. 325. A fundamental issue regarding the deity of Christ was threatening to divide the church, after Constantine had worked so hard to establish unity. To settle the matter Constantine, called together a council of bishops at Nicaea to discuss the matter. Constantine told the bishops that " division in the church is worse than war."

ATHANASIUS

" Athanasius of Alexandria was born in the last decade of the third century AD and he died in May of 373. He lived during a period where considerable change was happening in the Christian church." Athanasius grew up in a fatherless home, his mother a very rich woman; was a worshipper of idols. Once Athanasius had become an adult his mother's desire was that he would marry, Athanasius had no desire to get marry. As with most mothers she continued to press her son to get married even suggesting that he get with a young lady that was a sinner so maybe she would be able to convince to get married. Again Athanasius refused " for the Lord was keeping him for great." His mother didn't give up for she found different women to send her son's way but each time he would refuse them. She finally stopped trying to get <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

him to marry someone after a magician told her that her son might be a Christian. Maybe it was hearing that

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her son might be a Christian that changed her heart. She immediately took Athanasius to see Alexander, once there she told Alexander everything that she had done to get her son to marry and how he refused. That day Alexander baptized both mother and son. Athanasius lived during the period of pagan worship nevertheless; over time he saw how Christianity was having a major effect on the Roman Empire, mainly due to the conversion of Constantine the Great. While under the rule of Constantine the Roman Empire increased in size, wealth and the Christian church increased in popularity. However, during this time of prosperity for the church there were some significant changes taking place. The fourth century saw the redefining of Christianity, church architecture, liturgy, clerical hierarchies, doctrinal creeds, and the canon of Scripture." With these changes came some resistant which eventually led to divisions within the church. Through all these changes Athanasius saw himself suddenly being thrust into the spotlight when he became bishop of Alexandria in 328. " It was during his time as Bishop of Alexandria that he would fight for his vision of Christianity, his conception of correct Christian belief and practice, and his leadership of the Egyptian Church." Athanasius did not know what trouble was until Arius, a presbyter from Libya started to speak out against the deity of Christ. Arius announced, " If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not" The argument caused a fundamental split to rise up within the <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

church. Athanasius spoke out against Arius and his belief, by saying that it would deny the Trinity. Athanasius was not going to stand for this

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type of heresy; there was no reason to question the deity of Christ. When you see Christ you see God because they are of the same substance. Arius's view began to catch on and soon he had followers and soon word got to Constantine about the growing divide in the church. It was at the council that Alexander and Athanasius signed a letter attacking Arius's statement regarding the deity of Christ. While at the Council of Nicaea, Arius was exiled from the church and it was a major offense if anyone was found in possession of his writing. After few months Arius's exile was lifted. While everyone was still at the council a statement of faith called The Nicene Creed was written and everyone in attendance agreed to sign the creed even Arius. Athanasius was ordered by Constantine to restore Arius to full fellowship, however Athanasius refused and because of his refusal false rumors started to spread around the empire. These rumors eventually made their way to the emperor and because of the rumor of treason Athanasius was sent into exile. When in exile the Constantine died and Arianism had taken over.

ARIUS

" Arius, the North African priest who gave his name to one of Christianity's most troublesome schisms, was born ca. 250, apparently in Libya." He was a pupil of Lucien of Antioch. Under the bishopric of Peter of Alexandria, he was made deacon. However, Arius's path up the ranks of the Christian ladder was a rocky one. It started off with him being excommunicated for his involved <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

with Melitians (a self-proclaimed movement with no church authority), being restored back to the fellowship by Bishop Achillas of Alexandria and given

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priestly orders in the church of Baucalis. It appeared that things may have been going well until Arius decided to speak out against Bishop Alexander over the deity of Christ. In deciding to speak out against the theology of the church Arius took to the streets and he started teaching his views to those who would listen. Now the church had just gone through some major transitions, the Christians were no longer being persecuted; they were allowed to worship freely, the emperor himself proclaimed to be a Christian, was considered a friend of the Christians. The church was seeing some of the best times it had ever seen. Well this did not sit well with the Bishop Alexander and he started to speak out against the teaching of Arius. What was Arius teaching that was causing this big of a divide in the church? The church had decided that Jesus and God was one, Arius said this cannot be true because the Son was the begotten Son of God. The debate went on for a while with each side gaining support the longer it went on. " Bishop Alexander enlisted support of various bishops throughout Palestine and Syria. For his part Arius gained the backing of several high-placed churchmen, including Eusebius of Nicomedia." As the debate grew Arius's teachings became known as Arianism and his followers became known as Arians. This debate went back and forth until it made it was to the ears of the emperor. A meeting of the general council was called to address this heresy. At the council Arius stated his case and to no avail he was exiled. During the meeting of the council Eusebius of Caesarea, whose name means faithful, <https://assignbuster.com/the-men-of-the-nicaea-council-theology-religion-essay/>

attempted to mediate of behalf of Arius. It did not matter because the council had already made its decision and Arius was anathematized. Eusebius was not too happy with this decision and he even had some reservations about signing the statement of faith document that the council had drawn up. In the end Eusebius signed the document because

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The council said “ Peace is the object which we set before us.”

CONCLUSION

It is really amazing how something as trivial as the interpretation of a Scripture can cause so much chaos in the church. The word of God does not produce confusion. Confusion comes about because people refuse to accept the Word as being true. There is nothing wrong with a person having a different view, however when it brings confusion and chaos into the house of God it is wrong. Confusion is what the Emperor Constantine was trying to avoid by assembling together the general council. With prayer, faith and patience the council was able to over this confusion and bring peace once again to the church body

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