



Lesson 6. Nicaea and its aftermath through 381

Introduction

- Evaluate the following common church practices. What are the biblical principles on which they are based? Why do you think it became common practice? What are the benefits or drawbacks of practicing it?
 1. Confirming young adults who are already baptized
 2. Celebrating the Lord's Supper twice a month
 3. Requiring pastors to learn Greek and Hebrew
- When making decisions about church practice on matters that are not commanded in Scripture, what principles should we always keep in mind?

6.1 Deliberations and Decisions From Nicaea

Besides dealing with the teaching of Arius, the bishops who were assembled at Nicaea discussed other topics of common interest for the church. The council sought ways to encourage pastors from the breakaway Novatian and Melitian groups¹ to rejoin the catholic church. They also discussed the long-debated question of the celebration of Easter. Should it be celebrated on the third day after Passover as based on the Jewish calendar (which meant it might fall on any day of the week or even twice a year), or should it always be celebrated on a Sunday? The council agreed on the latter practice.

1. What benefit is there if Christians universally celebrate the same holidays at the same times?
2. How can we avoid creating rules where God has not?

¹ Who taught that the *lapsi* should not be so easily allowed to receive the Sacrament.

Colossians 2:16-17 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Romans 14:5-6a One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord.

3. Just as in our present-day church meetings, an ancient equivalent of Robert's Rules of Order was followed, with resolutions, or canons, being circulated to the various congregations. Twenty canons were passed at Nicaea and have been preserved. As we consider the following canons let's briefly evaluate them using the following questions: What are the biblical principles on which it was based? Do you think this decision was long-lasting in the church? Is there anything similar in our present-day church practices?

Canon 2. Recently baptized men should not be promoted to pastor or bishop too quickly.

Canon 5. A person who is excommunicated from a congregation must not be allowed to join elsewhere until he has repented and been readmitted by his original congregation.

Canon 9. Those being ordained as priests should first be examined to make sure they have lived godly lives.

Canon 15. Pastors and bishops should not move from church to church seeking a more lucrative position.

6.2 The Aftermath of the Council

Unfortunately, the council did not end the problem of Arius' teaching. The emperor and the council both sent out letters announcing the decisions and the new creed. Arius was exiled and his writings were burned. However, even after his death in 336, those influenced by his teachings continued to seek legitimacy within the church by constructing new doctrinal formulations. For the next half century, Athanasius (bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373) wrote numerous tracts to explain and defend the Christology of the Nicene Creed. Yet, especially in the Eastern Empire, Arius' supporters continued to promote variations of his teachings. They held numerous councils and constantly wrote and presented new creeds.

4. A typical example was the council held at Sirmium (in present-day Serbia) in 357. It produced a new creed that criticized the use of the terms *ousios* (Greek) and *substantia* (Latin), which the orthodox church was using to describe Christ's essence in relation to the Father. Are these statements logical? Are they Biblical?
- But since many persons are disturbed by questions concerning what is called in Latin *substantia*, but in Greek *ousia*, these terms should not be used at all, nor should they be expounded on in the Church. And here are the reasons: nothing is written about them in Holy Scripture; they are

beyond mankind's knowledge and understanding; and no one can declare the Son's generation, as it is written, 'Who shall declare His generation?' (Isaiah 53:8)

- No one can question that the Father is greater, for no one can doubt that the Father is greater in honor and dignity and Godhead, and in the very name of Father. The Son Himself testifies, 'The Father that sent me is greater than I' (John 10:29, 14:28).
 - No one is ignorant that it is catholic doctrine that there are two persons—Father and Son; that the Father is greater, and the Son is subordinated to the Father together with all things which the Father has subordinated to Him.
 - The Father has no beginning, is invisible, and immortal, and impassible. But the Son has been generated from the Father, God from God, light from light, and His origin (as stated previously), no one knows except the Father.
5. Evaluate: We should not regularly use any terms that are not found in Scripture when we discuss doctrine. Can you think of some examples of words we use in church that are not found in Scripture?

6.3 A "Second" Ecumenical Council

For a while it seemed that the Arian term *homoiousios* ("of similar being/essence") would replace the Nicene word *homoousios* ("of the same being/essence"). However, Athanasius and others continued to champion the creed of 325. Those who supported alternative theologies gained influence with some of the emperors who succeeded Constantine. As a result, Athanasius was exiled several times, as were numerous other bishops. Even Liberius, the bishop of Rome, was kidnapped and exiled in 355 until he was willing to sign a new, more Arian creed.

6. How does this subsequent history demonstrate the dangers of mingling church authority with secular government? What lessons can we learn from this for our own age?

During this period, a controversy also arose over the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed of 325 simply state belief in "the Holy Spirit." Apparently, there was no major debate about the third member of the Trinity when these creeds were composed. But by the 360s, some men began teaching that the Holy Spirit was not eternal or equal to the other two members of the Trinity. Rather, they said he was created by the Son to be a servant of the Father and the Son. Those who held this new teaching were called *Pneumatomachi* ("Spirit-fighters). Athanasius was joined by two bishops from Cappadocia (in present-day Turkey), Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, in writing tracts to show that this teaching was false and that the Spirit is an equal member of the Trinity.

Shortly after coming to the throne in 379, Emperor Theodosius I (died in 395) determined that another ecumenical council was needed to deal with the false teachings that continued to plague

the church. He called this council for mid-381 to meet in the eastern capital city of Constantinople. This time about two hundred bishops were present. Another famous theologian from nearby Cappadocia, Gregory of Nazianzus, played a key role in the deliberations.

7. How do the following passages teach that the Holy Spirit is true God?

Matthew 28:19 “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Acts 5:3-4 Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ...You have not lied to men but to God.”

6.4 The Nicene Creed of 381

In addition to defending the faith against a variety of semi-Arian beliefs, the council also spoke out strongly on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Rather than writing a new creed, however, the council made some additions and modifications to the Nicene Creed of 325. Compare the two texts below, and you will see that what we today refer to and recite as the Nicene Creed is actually the modified version from 381.

8. As we compare the two creeds (and read the updated creed), note how the following passages substantiated the person and work of the Holy Spirit:

John 6:63 “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”

John 15:26 “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”

2 Peter 1:21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed of 325	The Nicene Creed of 381
We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of all things seen and unseen.	We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

<p>And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made, the things in heaven and on earth. For us and for our salvation he came down and was incarnate, and became truly human.</p> <p>He suffered; on the third day he rose again;</p> <p>He ascended into heaven;</p> <p>He will come to judge the living and the dead.</p>	<p>And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.</p> <p>For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.</p> <p>He suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.</p>
<p>And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.</p>	<p>And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [<i>and the Son</i>], who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.</p>
	<p>We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.</p>
<p>The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was a time when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence or a creation or changeable or alterable.</p>	

9. Let's note some other phrases that were added to the creed of 381 to clarify the church's position against false teaching. Do any stand out to you?
10. Why do you think the final paragraph of anathemas ("The catholic and apostolic church condemns . . .") was dropped in the creed of 381?

Closing Thought and Prayer

NEXT TIME: The Use of the Creed After 381