

**“Documents of the Council of Nicaea, 325.”** *Fourth Century Christianity*. Ed. Glen L. Thompson. Wisconsin Lutheran College Department of History and Asia Lutheran Seminary, 2014. <http://www.fourthcentury.com>

These documents focus on the controversy addressed at Nicaea over the priest Arius’ and his followers’ Christological claims.

### **I. Emperor Constantine’s letter summoning the Council of Nicaea**

Spring 325

Ancient source: The original Greek does not survive; Several Syriac manuscripts survive including Paris syr. 62 and Brit. Mus. Add. 14, 526 and 528.

Modern edition used: Fredrich Schulthess, “Die syrischen Kanones der Synoden von Nicaea bis Chalcedon.” *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse* N.F. 10, no. 2 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1908) p. 1

Modern reconstruction of the Greek text E. Schwartz, “Zur Geschichte des Athanasius.” *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse* (Göttingen: Luder Horstmann, 1905) p. 289

Letter of Emperor Constantine summoning the bishops from Ancyra to Nicaea

I believe it is obvious to everyone that there is nothing more honorable in my sight than the fear of God. Though it was formerly agreed that the synod of bishops should meet at Ancyra in Galatia, it seemed to us for many reasons that it would be well for the synod to assemble at Nicaea, a city of Bithynia, both because the Bishops from Italy and the rest of the countries of Europe are coming, and because of the excellent temperature of the air, and in order that I may be present as a spectator and participator in those things which will be done. Therefore I announce to you, my beloved brothers, that all of you promptly assemble at the said city, that is at Nicaea. Let every one of you therefore, as I said before, keep the greater good in mind and be diligent, without delay in anything, to come speedily, that each may be physically present as a spectator of those things which will be done.

God keep you my beloved brothers.

Translation from A New Eusebius, Ed. J. Stevenson (London: SPCK, 1963) no. 299, adapted by Glen L. Thompson.

## II. Letter of the Council of Nicaea to the Egyptian Church

June 325

Ancient source used: Socrates, Church History 1.9

Modern edition used: W. Bright, *Socrates' ecclesiastical history*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893)

Other ancient sources: Athanasius, Defense of the Nicene Definition 36

Theodoret, Church History 1.9.2

Gelasius, Church History 2.34.2

(1.) To the great church of the Alexandrians, which is holy by the grace of God, and to our beloved brothers throughout Egypt, Libya, and the Pentapolis. We bishops assembled at Nicaea, constituting the great and holy council, send greetings in the Lord.

(2.) Since, by the grace of God, a great and holy council has been convened at Nicaea, after our most pious sovereign Constantine summoned us out of various cities and provinces for that purpose, we at the sacred council thought it most necessary to write you a letter, in order that you may know what subjects were considered and examined, and what was eventually decided on and decreed. In the first place, the impiety and guilt of Arius and his adherents was examined in the presence of our most pious emperor Constantine. (3.) We unanimously decided that his impious opinion should be anathematized, with all the blasphemous expressions he has uttered, namely that "the Son of God came to be out of nothing," that "there was a time when he was not," and even that "the Son of God, because he possessed free will, was capable of either both evil and good." They also call him a creature (*ktisma*) and a work (*poiēma*). (4.) The holy Council has anathematized all these ideas, barely able to endure it as we listened to such impious opinions (or rather madnesses) and such blasphemous words. You must either have been informed of the verdict of our proceedings against him already, or you will soon learn. We will omit relating our actions here, for we would not trample on a man who has already received the punishment which his crime deserved. (5.) Yet his deadly error has proved so contagious that it has dragged Theonas of Marmarica, and Secundus of Ptolemais, into destruction; for they have suffered the same condemnation as Arius.

But after the grace of God delivered us from those detestable heresies, with all their impiety and blasphemy, and from those persons, who had dared to cause such conflict and division among a people previously at peace, the rash actions of Meletius and those who had been ordained by him still remained to be dealt with. We now state to you, beloved brothers, what resolution the Council came to on this point. (6.) The Council was moved with compassion towards Meletius, although strictly speaking he was wholly undeserving of favor, and decreed that he remain in office in his own city but

exercise no authority either to ordain or nominate for ordination; and that he appear in no other district or city on this pretense, retaining no more than the normal level of authority. (7.) The Council also decided that those who had been appointed by him, after having been confirmed by a more legitimate ordination, should be admitted to communion on these conditions: that they should continue to hold their rank and ministry, but regard themselves as inferior in every respect to all those who have been ordained and established in each place and church by our most-honored fellow-minister, Alexander. Thus they will have no authority to propose or nominate whom they please, or to do anything at all without the agreement of some bishop of the catholic church who is one of Alexander's subordinates. (8.) On the other hand, those who by the grace of God and your prayers have not been found in schism, but have continued blameless in the catholic church, shall have authority to nominate and ordain those who are worthy of the sacred office, and to act in all things according to ecclesiastical law and custom. (9.) When it happens that those holding offices in the church die, then these who have been recently admitted will be advanced to the office of the deceased, provided that they are found worthy, that they are duly elected, and that the bishop of Alexandria ratifies the decision. (10.) This right is allowed for all the others indeed, but to Meletius personally we by no means grant the same permission, on account of his former disorderly conduct, and because of the rashness and fickleness of his character. We want no authority or jurisdiction to be given to him, for he is a man liable again to create similar disturbances. (11.) These are the things which specifically affect Egypt, and the most holy church of the Alexandrians. If any other canon or ordinance has been established, our Lord and most-honored fellow-minister and brother Alexander, who is present with us, will explain the more specific details when he returns to you, since he has participated in all we have done, and has in fact been the leader.

(12.) We also have good news for you that we have harmonized our opinions on the subject of the most holy feast of Easter, which has been happily settled through your prayers. All the brothers in the east who have previously kept this festival when the Jews did have agreed with the Romans, with us, and with all of you who have kept Easter with us from the beginning, to follow the same custom as we. (13.) So rejoice in these results and in the general agreement and peace, as well as in the cleansing of all heresy. Receive our fellow-minister and your bishop Alexander with great honor and abundant love, because he has greatly delighted us by his presence. Even at his advanced age, he has undergone extraordinary efforts in order that peace might be re-established among you. Pray on behalf of us all, that the things we decided were appropriate may be maintained without violation through Almighty God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Spirit, to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

Translation from NPNF2 vol. 2, pp. 12-3, adapted by Aaron J. West.

### **III. Emperor Constantine to the church of Alexandria**

Date: 25th June 325

Ancient source used: Socrates, Church History 1.9.17

Modern edition used: W. Bright, *Socrates' ecclesiastical history*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893)

Other ancient sources: Athanasius, Defense of the Nicene Definition 38

Gelasius, Church History 2.37

Constantine Augustus, to the catholic church of the Alexandrians.

(1.) Greetings, my beloved brothers! We have received a complete blessing from Divine Providence, namely, we have been relieved from all error and been united in a common confession of one and the same faith. (2.) The devil will no longer have any power against us, since all the schemes he in his hatred had devised for our destruction, have been entirely overthrown from their foundations. At the command of God, the splendor of truth has dissolved all the poisons so deadly to unity: dissensions, schisms, commotions, and the like. We all now worship the One by name, and continue to believe that he is the One God. (3.) In order to accomplish all of this, at God's summoning I assembled a large number of bishops at the city of Nicaea, and I joined them in investigating the truth, though I am only one of you, who rejoices exceedingly in being your fellow-servant. (4.) All points which seemed ambiguous or could possibly lead to dissension have been discussed and accurately examined. May the Divine Majesty forgive the unfortunately huge number of the blasphemies which some were shamelessly uttering against the mighty Savior, our life and hope, as they declared and confessed things contrary to the divinely inspired Scriptures.

(5.) More than three hundred bishops, remarkable for their moderation and intellectual keenness, were unanimous in their confirmation of one and the same faith, a faith which has arisen in agreement with the truths of the Law of God. Arius alone had been misled by the devil, and was found to be the only one set on promoting this unholy mischief, first among you, and afterwards among others as well. (6.) Let us therefore embrace that teaching which the Almighty has presented to us. Let us return to our beloved brothers from whom we have been separated by an irreverent servant of the devil. Let us eagerly come together as one common body with those who are our fellow members. (7.) This is fitting for such discernment, faith and holiness as yours, that you return to divine favor, since it has been proved that this error comes from a man who is an enemy of the truth.

(8.) This ruling, made by the collective judgment of three hundred bishops, cannot be other than the doctrine of God, especially where the Holy Spirit has illuminated the divine will by placing it upon the minds of so many dignified persons. (9.) Therefore let no one sit on the fence or delay, but let everyone quickly return to the unquestionable path of duty, so that when I arrive among you (which will be as soon as possible), I may together with you return due thanks to God, who closely watches all things, for having revealed the pure faith, and for restoring to you that love for which you have prayed.

May God protect you, beloved brothers.

Translation from Socrates (NPNF2 vol. 2, pp. 13-4), adapted by Aaron J. West.

#### **IV. Emperor Constantine to Arius**

27 November 327

Ancient source: Socrates, HE 1.25.7

Modern edition used: W. Bright, *Socrates' ecclesiastical history*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893)

Constantine the Great Augustus, to Arius.

It was made known to you in your stubbornness some time ago, that you might want to come to our headquarters, so that perhaps you could enjoy the privilege of seeing us. We are quite amazed that you did not do so immediately. Therefore, now board a public (official) vehicle, and hasten to come to our court. This way, once you have been in our company and obtained favor from us, you may be able to return to your own country. May God protect you, beloved.

Dated the twenty-seventh of November.

Translation by Aaron J. West.