

The Church of the Nicene Creed

Christological Controversy

Virtually every Christian in the world has spoken the Nicene Creed. It is a familiar feature in church services, where it is often recited in unison. Yet few could find its location or identify the church where it was formulated. Archaeology provides the answer and the momentous circumstances in which the dignitaries who created it met together in AD 325.

A bit of theology is necessary to understand the background. The Christian faith had been growing and was to become a majority religion in the Roman Empire in the late 4th century AD (c. 380). It was only made a legal religion in the empire in AD 313 by edict of the first Christian Emperor Constantine the Great (the Edict of Milan).

Now a dispute had developed in the church over something called **Arianism**, which rejected the Trinity and taught that Jesus was created or made by God, was distinct from Him, and therefore was not coeternal with Him. The early Christians took centuries to work out the doctrines of the church that we now take for granted. But this controversy threatened the unity of the church at just the moment it had finally achieved official sanction and was no longer persecuted.

It was for this purpose that Emperor Constantine called the first ecumenical (meaning “unified”) council in church history, which included over 300 bishops from across the empire. They met for two months, first in a church, and then “the innermost hall of [Constantine’s] palace,” evidently because the church could not accommodate all the attendees.



The creed to which the bishops agreed declared Arian beliefs as heresy. What Nicaea did was to affirm that the Son was “begotten, not made,” was “true God from true God” and was “of one substance with the Father” (Greek *homoousios*, meaning “of the same substance”). All the bishops except two signed the new formula. But the controversy continued long after Nicaea, and

required two more councils (Constantinople AD 381 and Chalcedon AD 451) to finally eradicate. This was the context of the meeting called by Constantine. All churches to this day; Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant affirm the Nicene Creed.

Rediscovery of the Church of Nicea

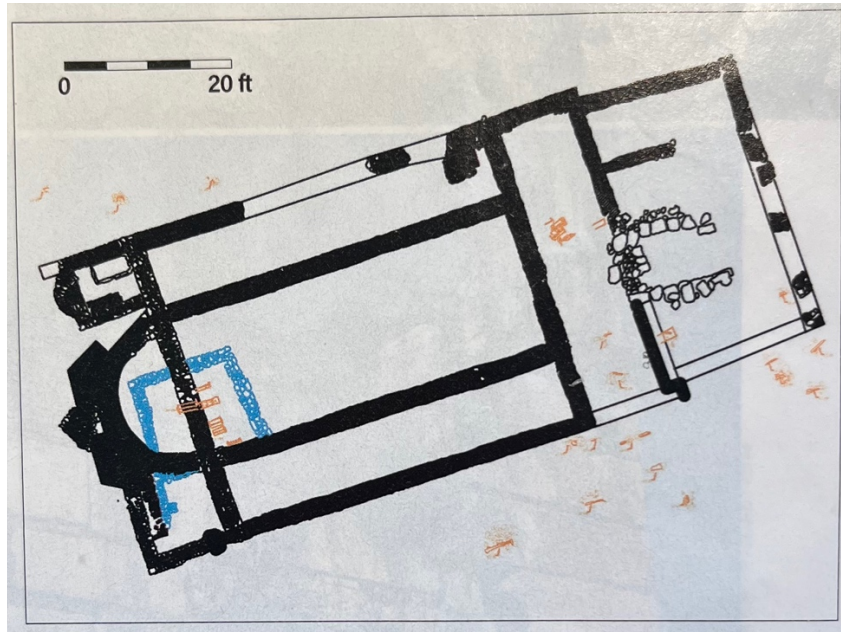
In 2014 aerial photography revealed a structure beneath the surface of Lake Iznik (ancient Nicea, now in modern Turkey). Subsequent excavations uncovered a basilica church from the 4th century, once on the bank of the lake, but subsequently submerged by earthquakes and seismic activity centuries later.

What they discovered was strong evidence that this was the church described by Eusebius (AD 265-339), Bishop of Caesarea, who attended the council himself. First, it is the oldest and only 4th century church amongst 14 other Byzantine churches found in ancient Nicea (modern Iznik). It is also the only one outside the ancient city walls, which is highly significant.

This ties into the Byzantine tradition of a Christian martyr named Neophytos, who as a devout young believer publicly denounced Nicea's governor of the time, during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian in AD 303, ten years before Constantine legalized the faith. A 10th century parchment depicts Neophytos of Nicea being slain by a Roman soldier on the shores of Lake Iznik.



The excavations revealed a small square structure beneath the church, which may well have been a shrine erected on the spot of his execution (see the blue structure that underlies the apse of the church below). Many martyrs of the Diocletian persecution were commemorated by shrines built on the site of their execution. After the Edict of Milan some of these became martyrion churches (dedicated to the martyr). The 2nd phase was the original church built over the shrine, likely constructed of wood, as indicated by large wood beams found beneath the marble floor of the later church, and large numbers of iron nails recovered in the ruins (see underwater photo and collection of nails).



This wood church was likely the meeting place of the Council in AD 325, which Eusebius wrote “was enlarged by God,” meaning it was filled to capacity. Evidently, this forced the selection of Constantine’s palace in the city as a more suitable venue to continue the meetings.

Archaeologists discerned a 3rd and final phase of the church, built of stone in the middle of the 4th century (c. 350). This structure is the one most visible today and was long recognized as the scene of the council. That church endured until it was finally devastated by an earthquake in the 11th century.



According to a contemporary historian who felt the earthquake in Constantinople 60 miles away, the church “was shaken and collapsed, as did the walls of the city” (It took place in AD 1064). Subsequent seismic activity led to the lake encroaching and submerging the church, and the location of the famous church was forgotten until now. It should also be mentioned that the Ottoman Turks conquered the Byzantine Empire and finally the great Christian city of Constantinople in AD 1453. The land became Islamized and the native Christians became a minority population over time, such that today they make up less than 1% of modern Turkey.

We should be inspired by the faith of the ancient Byzantines, Christian successors to the Roman Empire in the East, who built a holy place to honor the martyrdom of Neophytos, clarified the faith through the Arian controversy, and sustained a church on the site that lasted for over 700 years. Modern archaeology has revealed the surviving physical testimony of those great events. As Jesus once said, “if these become silent, the stones will cry out!” (Luke 19:40).