

Imperial Unity and Ecclesial Truth: Constantine's Motives and the Council of Nicaea (325)

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Abstract: The First Council of Nicaea (325 AD) represents a decisive moment in the history of Christianity and its relationship with Roman imperial authority. Convened by Emperor Constantine I (r. 306–337), the Council was the first ecumenical assembly of bishops gathered under imperial auspices to resolve a doctrinal dispute that threatened ecclesial unity. While Nicaea is most commonly remembered for its condemnation of Arianism and the formulation of the Nicene Creed, its broader historical significance lies in the convergence of theological deliberation and imperial governance at a critical juncture in Late Antiquity. This article examines Constantine's motivations in convoking the Council, assessing whether political necessity or personal religious commitment served as the primary impetus. Through analysis of ancient sources—especially Eusebius of Caesarea and Socrates Scholasticus—alongside modern historical interpretations, this study argues that Constantine's decision cannot be reduced to a single motive. Rather, it reflects a deliberate synthesis of imperial pragmatism and sincere concern for Christian unity. Constantine perceived doctrinal discord as both a threat to imperial stability and a spiritual danger capable of alienating divine favor. His actions at Nicaea therefore reveal an emerging model of Church–State relations in which political cohesion and theological consensus were understood as mutually reinforcing objectives.

Keywords: Constantine the Great; Council of Nicaea (325); Arian Controversy; Church–State Relations; Late Antiquity; Imperial Authority; Nicene Creed

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In the year 337, in the imperial residence at Nicomedia in Asia Minor, an aging emperor lay dying. Constantine the Great (r. 306–337 AD), ruler of a reunified Roman Empire and architect of one of history’s most consequential transformations, approached the end of his life far from Rome and far from the battlefields that had secured his power. The act that would seal his legacy did not occur in war or legislation, but in the quiet gravity of his final hours. From his sickbed, Constantine requested baptism.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339 AD)¹ records that Constantine was gifted with the divine seal of baptism, and preserves the emperor’s own explanation of the act: *The time has come for me to receive the blessing of the seal—the seal that confers immortality. From this moment, I shall prescribe to myself a course of life fitting for one in service to the divine.*² In these words, Constantine interpreted baptism not as a private rite but as a public commitment, a final alignment of imperial life with divine purpose.

By the time of this sacramental act, Constantine had already reshaped the Roman world. He had founded a new capital, Constantinople, envisioned as the new Rome, *καὶνὴ Ῥώμη*.³ He had supported the construction of churches, elevated bishops to position of prominence, and extended imperial protection to a faith once subject to persecution. Yet his baptism occurred only at the threshold of death—*iusto tempore*, at the right moment. Whether this timing reflects caution, convention, or calculation remains a matter of debate, but the sacramental weight of the moment is unmistakable. The emperor who had governed the empire now placed himself within the economy of salvation he had helped to legitimize.

Constantine was baptized shortly before his death in 337. His final act thus sealed what many would regard as his greatest legacy. By the time of his death, Christianity had already taken deep root across the empire, and over the course of the fourth century its adherents would increase dramatically—by some modern

¹ Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339 AD) was a Greek historian, theologian, and Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, widely known as the “Father of Church History.” He is best known for his landmark *Ecclesiastical History*, which provides the primary account of Christianity’s first three centuries, and for being a key advisor to Emperor Constantine.

² cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 199–201.

³ The designation of Constantinople as *καὶνὴ Ῥώμη* (“New Rome”) is firmly attested in late antique Greek and conciliar sources and reflects the city’s perceived continuity with Roman imperial authority rather than a rupture with it. The title is formally articulated in Canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople (381), which accords Constantinople precedence “because it is New Rome” (*διὰ τὸ εἶναι ἀπὸ τῆν νέαν Ῥώμην*). See *The Canons of the Council of Constantinople*, canon 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 184.

estimates, Christians may have numbered in the tens of millions by the later fourth century, though figures remain debated.⁴ Many of Constantine's successors would publicly align themselves with Christianity, though their theological commitments varied, and within a generation Christianity would be proclaimed the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The legal status of Christianity within the Roman Empire developed gradually over the fourth century. The *Edict of Toleration* issued by Galerius in 311 formally ended the Great Persecution and permitted Christians to exist and worship openly, though without restoring confiscated property.⁵ Two years later, the so-called *Edict of Milan* (313), promulgated by Constantine the Great and Licinius, went further by granting full religious liberty to all religions and explicitly ordering the restitution of Christian churches and property.⁶ This policy of religious freedom marked Christianity's transition from a tolerated religion to a legally protected one within the imperial system. The process reached its culmination in 380, when Theodosius I, through the Edict of Thessalonica (*Cunctos populos*), declared Nicene Christianity the officially recognized religion.⁷ The political structure Constantine stabilized and the religious order he favored would endure for centuries, particularly in the Christian East.

This final scene, however, gestures toward a question that cannot be resolved by biography alone. Constantine's baptism at the threshold of death invites reflection on the relationship between personal faith and imperial authority—a relationship that comes into sharpest focus not at Nicomedia in 337, but twelve years earlier at the first Council of Nicaea.

In the early fourth century, Christianity underwent a profound transformation, moving from a persecuted minority to a religion favored and protected by the Roman state. Central to this transition was the reign of Emperor Constantine I, whose conversion to Christianity and subsequent patronage irrevocably altered the trajectory of Church history. The Council of Nicaea,

⁴ Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 2 (1998): 185–226: "... the greatest growth in Christian numbers took place in two distinct phases: first, during the third century, when Christians and their leaders were the victims of empire-wide and centrally organized persecutions; and then in the fourth century, after the conversion of Constantine and the alliance of the Church with the Roman state under successive emperors."

⁵ cf. Galerius, *Edict of Toleration* (311), in Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 34, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

⁶ cf. Constantine and Licinius, *Edict of Milan* (313), in Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 48; cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* X.5.

⁷ cf. Theodosius I, *Edict of Thessalonica (Cunctos populos)*, 27 February 380, *Codex Theodosianus* 16.1.2; trans. Clyde Pharr, *The Theodosian Code* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

convened in AD 325, stands as the clearest institutional expression of this shift: for the first time, a Roman emperor summoned bishops from across the empire to deliberate collectively on a theological controversy with implications for the entire Christendom.

The Council is best known for its condemnation of Arianism—the teaching associated with Arius of Alexandria (c. 256–336) that denied the Son’s co-eternity with the Father—and for the promulgation of the Nicene Creed, which articulated a foundational confession of Christian orthodoxy. Yet the historical importance of Nicaea extends beyond its doctrinal achievements. The Council invites closer examination of Constantine’s intentions in intervening so decisively in ecclesiastical affairs. Was the emperor motivated primarily by political exigency, seeking to preserve unity and stability within a recently reunified empire? Or did his actions reflect a genuine religious commitment to the faith he had embraced and a sincere desire to safeguard the unity of the Church?

This article addresses those questions by situating the Council of Nicaea within the broader political and religious context of Constantine’s reign. It examines the emperor’s rise to power, his conversion and evolving relationship with Christianity, and the circumstances that precipitated the Arian controversy. Drawing on contemporary ecclesiastical historians such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Socrates Scholasticus, as well as modern scholarship, the study approaches the Council of Nicaea as a moment where theology and imperial power decisively intersected. At Nicaea, the emperor intervened in an internal doctrinal dispute of the Church not merely as a patron but as a guarantor of unity. To understand Nicaea, therefore, one must understand Constantine—not as a saintly caricature or a cynical manipulator, but as a ruler shaped by the political crises and religious transformations of late antiquity. It is within this tension—between conviction and calculation, faith and power—that the meaning of Nicaea, and Constantine’s enduring legacy, must be sought.

Diocletian’s Tetrarchic Experiment

Diocletian’s Tetrarchy is often described as an “experiment” because it marked an unprecedented effort to stabilize imperial rule through formal power-sharing and planned succession—an arrangement that proved effective in the short term but ultimately failed to sustain itself. The political and religious context later inherited by Constantine was decisively shaped by this reform as a response to a deeply fractured empire. Throughout the third century, Roman governance had been undermined by repeated usurpations, rapid turnover of emperors, fiscal

instability, and sustained military pressure along multiple frontiers. Diocletian's solution was not limited to administrative reorganization; it involved a far-reaching redefinition of imperial authority and its ideological foundations.⁸

Formally established in AD 293, the Tetrarchic system divided power among four rulers: two senior emperors (*Augusti*) and two junior colleagues (*Caesares*). Diocletian governed the eastern empire alongside his co-Augustus Maximian in the West, each supported by an adopted successor—Galerius and Constantius Chlorus respectively. Although the empire remained formally unified, authority was exercised cooperatively, with each ruler responsible for specific territories and military commands. The system was intended to prevent civil war through orderly succession and shared governance, replacing dynastic competition with institutional continuity.⁹

Beyond its structural features, the Tetrarchy introduced a new ideological model of rule. Imperial authority was deliberately depersonalized and sacralized. Diocletian styled himself *Iovius*, associating his rule with Jupiter, while Maximian assumed the title *Herculius*, invoking Hercules.¹⁰ This symbolism presented the emperors as agents of cosmic order rather than charismatic individuals or dynastic monarchs. The emperor was no longer *princeps* among peers but a distant, quasi-divine figure whose authority reflected the harmony of the universe. Public ceremony, court ritual, and visual propaganda reinforced this elevation of imperial power beyond ordinary human contestation.

In the short term, the Tetrarchy achieved notable successes. Frontier defense improved, administrative efficiency increased, and internal revolts were suppressed. Yet the system rested on a fragile assumption: that emperors would voluntarily relinquish power according to its rules. This assumption collapsed following Diocletian's abdication in 305.¹¹ The planned succession unraveled almost immediately, as competing claims emerged and military loyalties reasserted themselves. Within a year, the acclamation of Constantine by his father's troops in Britain exposed the enduring force of dynastic legitimacy and the limits of institutional control.

The failure of the Tetrarchy had profound implications. It demonstrated that imperial authority could not be sustained solely through administrative design

⁸ cf. Timothy Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1-29.

⁹ cf. Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 54-58.

¹⁰ cf. Roger Rees, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 15-38.

¹¹ cf. Barnes, *New Empire*, 62-75; cf. Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 18-19.

or ideological abstraction. Military allegiance, personal loyalty, and hereditary expectation remained decisive factors in Roman political culture. Constantine's rise thus marked not merely a rejection of the Tetrarchy but its unintended consequence: the reemergence of singular imperial rule grounded in personal legitimacy.

The religious dimension of Diocletian's reforms is equally significant. The Tetrarchic emphasis on unity extended beyond politics into the religious aspect of life. Traditional cultic practice was understood as essential to maintaining divine favor and imperial stability. Christianity, by refusing participation in public sacrifice, appeared not simply as a deviant belief system but as a threat to the ideological foundations of the empire. The Great Persecution (303–311) emerged from this logic, representing the final and most systematic attempt to enforce religious conformity in the name of political order.

Christian Persecution on the Eve of Nicaea

The period preceding the First Council of Nicaea (325) was marked by profound instability within the Roman Empire and deep uncertainty within the Christian community. Politically, the late third and early fourth centuries were characterized by repeated civil conflicts, administrative fragmentation, and experiments in imperial governance. Religiously, Christianity emerged from its most violent persecution only to confront internal divisions at the very moment it began to receive imperial favor.

The final and most severe persecution of Christians occurred under Emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305), beginning in 303 and continuing intermittently until 311.¹² Intended to restore traditional Roman religious unity, the persecution sought to suppress Christianity through the destruction of churches, the confiscation of sacred scriptures, and the coercion of clergy. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the persecution unfolded through a sequence of four (4) imperial edicts issued between 303 and 304, each progressively intensifying the scope and severity of repression.¹³

The first edict, promulgated in February 303, ordered the destruction of Christian places of worship, the burning of sacred scriptures, and the legal disenfranchisement of those who persisted in professing Christianity. Although it

¹² cf. William Hugh Clifford Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), esp. Chapter XV (The Great Persecution, 303-312); see also the debate in *Past & Present* 26 (1963) and 27 (1964); and Paul Davies, "The Origin and Purpose of the Persecution of AD 303," *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1989): 66-94.

¹³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.2–17; *idem*, *Martyrs of Palestine* 3-13.

did not formally mandate capital punishment, its enforcement resulted in numerous deaths, particularly among those who refused to surrender their sacred books to imperial officials. Others, especially in North Africa, complied by handing over scriptures; these individuals became known as *traditores* (traitors), a designation that would later fuel internal Christian disputes over legitimacy, authority, and fidelity.¹⁴

Following the promulgation of the first edict, a fire broke out in the imperial palace at Nicomedia. Christian sources report that responsibility for the fire was attributed to Christians, prompting renewed hostility and a decisive escalation of repression. In this context, Anthimus (martyred c. 303 or 311–12), bishop of Nicomedia, along with other Christians, was executed.

The second edict soon followed, ordering the arrest and imprisonment of Christian clergy throughout the empire and mandating that bishops, priests, and deacons be coerced—by torture if necessary—into offering sacrifice to the traditional gods. Although the edict itself did not prescribe execution, its enforcement involved severe physical punishment. Eusebius of Caesarea recounts a dramatic incident in Nicomedia, in which a Christian named Euethius publicly tore down the posted edict in an act of defiance while both Diocletian and Galerius (r. 305 to 311) were present in the city; he was executed the same day.¹⁵ Reports of unrest in Cappadocia and Syria were likewise attributed to Christians, further hardening imperial resolve.

The third edict intensified coercive measures by ordering that imprisoned clergy be compelled through torture to sacrifice, subjecting those who refused were subjected to extreme punishment. As a result, martyrdoms multiplied across the empire. Enforcement, however, varied regionally. In the western provinces governed by Constantius Chlorus (r. 293–306), father of Constantine, persecution was comparatively restrained, while churches were destroyed in his territories, Christians were generally not executed, as Constantius limited enforcement largely to the provisions of the first edict.¹⁶

The fourth edict, issued in 304 and attested by Eusebius of Caesarea in his account of the Palestinian martyrs, extended compulsory sacrifice to all Christians without distinction. Magistrates were instructed to compel universal participation in public sacrifice and libation, transforming the persecution into a mass phenomenon. Prisons overflowed, penal labor sites were exhausted,

¹⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.2–17.

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.2–17.

¹⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.

and widespread revulsion reportedly grew among the population at the scale of executions. Later tradition records Constantine remarking before the bishops at Nicaea that, had the Romans slaughtered as many barbarians as Christians during the persecution, no enemies would have remained to threaten the empire.¹⁷

Constantius Chlorus remained largely detached from the persecution and restrained his subjects from acts of violence or excessive severity. He neither pursued systematic executions nor devised new measures against the Christian community. Eusebius presents his death as exemplary: Constantius alone among the emperors, he claims, died peacefully while still in office and was succeeded lawfully by his son Constantine, whom the army immediately proclaimed Augustus. Constantine, in turn, is depicted as consciously imitating his father's benevolence and favorable disposition toward Christianity from the outset of his reign.¹⁸

In parts of Egypt, executions reportedly occurred daily for over a year, with dozens of victims killed at a time. In Phrygia, an entire Christian town was allegedly burned along with its inhabitants after collectively refusing to sacrifice. While precise figures cannot be verified, such accounts attest to the intensity and uneven geographical impact of the persecution. Numerous martyrs from this period became enduring figures of Christian memory—including Sebastian, Agnes, Lucy, Vincent, and Cosmas and Damian—yet the vast majority of victims remain unnamed, underscoring both the scale of the repression and the limits of our sources.¹⁹

Rather than eradicating Christianity, however, these measures exposed the limits of imperial control over religious belief and intensified internal debates among Christians regarding authority, orthodoxy, and communal boundaries.²⁰ The failure of persecution to achieve religious cohesion would have lasting consequences for imperial policy, shaping the context in which Constantine would later seek unity through patronage, legislation, and conciliar intervention.

¹⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 3.1.

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 1.13-14.

¹⁹ The martyrdoms of Sebastian, Agnes of Rome, Lucy of Syracuse, Vincent of Saragossa, and the physician-martyrs Cosmas and Damian are attested in early martyrological, liturgical, and literary sources associated with the Diocletianic persecution, including the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* (13 December; 22 January; 26 September), Prudentius, *Peristephanon* V, XIV, and early patristic witnesses such as Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus* I.2.5-9, and Augustine, *Sermon* 276. For critical assessment of their cultic and historical significance, see Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 57-104; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 480-487.

²⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.2-17; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 10-15.

From Tetrarchy to Christian Empire: Constantine's Rise and Religious Policy

The Tetrarchic legacy formed the essential backdrop to Constantine's policies. He inherited not only the political debris of a failed system of collective rule, but also its core assumption: that religious unity was indispensable to imperial stability. Where Diocletian had sought to preserve unity through the enforcement of traditional religion, Constantine pursued the same objective through the consolidation of Christianity. The mechanisms of imperial intervention—convening assemblies, enforcing consensus, suppressing dissent—remained largely unchanged. What changed was the religious framework within which they operated.

The first Council of Nicaea must therefore be understood not as a rupture with Diocletianic policy but as its transformation. Constantine's convocation of an ecumenical council reflected a reorientation of imperial ideology rather than its abandonment. The failure of persecution had revealed the limits of coercion alone; Constantine's approach combined patronage, persuasion, and selective enforcement in pursuit of unity. In this sense, Nicaea represents the culmination of a political evolution begun under the Tetrarchy, reframed within a Christian theological horizon.

It was within this volatile post-Tetrarchic landscape that Constantine's path to sole rule unfolded. Born around 272, the son of Constantius Chlorus and Helena (c. 246/248-330), Constantine was proclaimed Augustus by his troops in Britain in 306 following his father's death. His elevation, though customary by military acclamation, placed him in immediate conflict with rival claimants to imperial authority.

Constantine's path to sole rule was prolonged and violent. Over nearly two decades, he systematically eliminated rival claimants to imperial power, a process that culminated in his victory over Maxentius (r. 306-312) at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. According to later Christian accounts, this battle acquired decisive religious significance, becoming associated with a visionary experience in which Constantine perceived a Christian symbol as a divine sign of victory. Constantine entered the battlefield as a ruler still shaped by the religious world of Roman imperial paganism; he emerged from it convinced that his victory had been granted by the Christian God, setting him on the path to becoming the most consequential Christian emperor in history. While the precise nature and chronology of this experience remain historically contested, its importance lies not so much in its phenomenological details as in Constantine's own interpretation of

the event: he attributed his triumph to the favor of the Christian God and thereafter aligned his imperial identity with Christian symbolism.²¹

Constantine's personal conversion to Christianity has long been a subject of considerable historical discussion, shaped both by legendary narratives and by the apologetic aims of Christian authors like Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea. The surviving evidence suggests not a sudden transformation but a gradual process that accelerated after AD 312. According to Eusebius of Caesarea—who claims to report the emperor's own testimony—Constantine saw a cross of light in the sky at midday bearing the words *In hoc signo, vinces* (By this sign, conquer), followed by a dream in which Christ explained the meaning of the sign. In response, Constantine ordered the construction of the *labarum*, a military standard bearing the *Chi-Rho* monogram,²² which henceforth accompanied his army to victory.²³ Whether understood as a genuine religious experience or as a later theological framing, the episode reflects Constantine's conviction that his military success was secured under the protection of the Christian God.

Following this shift, Constantine's policies became distinctively pro-Christian. He helped consolidate and expand the legal protection of Christians, recalled exiles, and restored confiscated properties with great zeal. These actions demonstrate Constantine's immediate commitment to fostering the Christian community post-conversion.²⁴ In the words of the fifth-century historian Socrates Scholasticus, Constantine, "having thus embraced Christianity, conducted himself as a Christian, rebuilding the churches, enriching them with imperial patronage, and, in some cases, closing or repurposing pagan temples."²⁵ Together, these actions marked a decisive reorientation of imperial policy and laid the groundwork

²¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 1.28–32; Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.2. Eusebius reports the Greek phrase usually rendered in Latin as "*In hoc signo vinces*".

²² The Chi-Rho (☩), formed from the Greek letters *Chi* and *Rho*, the first two letters of the word ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (*Christos*) in Greek, served as both a Christological symbol and an emblem of imperial authority under Constantine.

²³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Church History* 1.2. Socrates describes Constantine's deliberation before battle and the miraculous vision: "he saw a pillar of light in the heavens, in the form of a cross... inscribed [with] 'By This Conquer,'" witnessed by his army, followed by a dream of Christ instructing him to make a standard after the heavenly sign. This account aligns with Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* (who gives a similar report in 1.28-31), highlighting the role of the Christian God in Constantine's military success and conversion.

²⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, *Church History* 1.3.

²⁵ *ibid.*, "Constantine, having embraced Christianity, conducted himself as a Christian: rebuilding the churches, enriching them with gifts; he also either closed or destroyed pagan temples, and exposed the idols to public mockery." Socrates contrasts Constantine's pro-Christian policies with his co-emperor Licinius' continued paganism and renewed persecution, setting the stage for Constantine's sole rule.

for the more direct involvement of the emperor in ecclesiastical affairs that would follow.

The following year, Constantine and his eastern counterpart Licinius (r. 308-324) issued what is conventionally known as the *Edict of Milan* (313), a joint proclamation granting legal toleration to Christianity and restoring confiscated ecclesiastical property. This act did not establish Christianity as the official religion of the empire, but it decisively ended state-sponsored persecution and placed the Church under imperial protection. For the first time, Christian communities were able to organize openly, acquire property, and participate fully in civic life.²⁶

It is important to note that Constantine's personal faith may not have conformed to later orthodox standards in every respect. As earlier discussed, he was not baptized until AD 337, shortly before his death, a fact often cited by those questioning the depth of his devotion. However, the postponement of baptism was not uncommon at the time, as many catechumens delayed baptism to ensure forgiveness of sins as late as possible in life.²⁷ Constantine's delay, therefore, does not necessarily indicate impiety; indeed, some contemporaries interpreted it as reverence for the sacrament of baptism.

Throughout his life, Constantine openly identified himself as a Christian and sought divine guidance. He engaged in prayer, wrote letters invoking Scripture and Christian principles, and convened gatherings of bishops—actions that suggest he took his role as a Christian emperor seriously. Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* portrays the emperor as a “friend of God” and even depicts him delivering speeches extolling God's providence in front of the bishops. While Eusebius is undoubtedly laudatory—at times likening Constantine to a new Moses or apostle—such accounts underscore that Constantine wanted to be seen as a champion of the Christian Church.²⁸

By 324, Constantine had defeated Licinius and emerged as sole ruler of a reunified empire. This consolidation of power enabled him to implement a uniform religious policy across both eastern and western provinces. Although

²⁶ Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 48; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.

²⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 857–876.

²⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*. In this hagiographic biography, Eusebius often likens Constantine to biblical figures. For example, VC 1.12 casts Constantine as a new Moses leading his people out of the bondage of persecution. VC 4.24 famously has Constantine call himself “a bishop, ordained by God to oversee those outside the Church” (ἐπίσκοπος τῶν ἔκτορος), reflecting his self-conception as a divinely appointed guardian of the Church in secular matters. Eusebius's work must be read critically, but it reveals how Constantine's contemporaries in Christian circles perceived and promoted his pious image.

Christianity now enjoyed unprecedented imperial favor, the empire remained religiously pluralistic. Pagan cults continued to function legally, and Constantine himself retained the traditional imperial title *pontifex maximus*. This apparent contradiction reflects not indecision but pragmatism: Constantine pursued a gradual transformation of religious life rather than abrupt suppression of traditional practices.²⁹

At the same time, Constantine's patronage of Christianity was unmistakable. He endowed the Church with legal privileges, supported large-scale construction of Christian basilicas, and elevated bishops to positions of social prominence. More significantly, he began to view the internal unity of the Church as a matter of imperial concern. In Roman political thought, religious concord was inseparable from civic stability; divine favor was believed to secure the prosperity of the state. Constantine adopted this logic within a Christian framework, interpreting doctrinal conflict not merely as a theological problem but as a potential threat to imperial order.³⁰

Thus, the Roman Empire stood at a critical juncture. Christianity had transitioned from a persecuted minority to an imperially favored institution, yet it lacked doctrinal cohesion. Constantine, having unified the empire through military and political means, now confronted the challenge of fostering unity within the Church doctrinally. The conditions were therefore set for unprecedented imperial intervention in ecclesiastical affairs—an intervention that would culminate in the convocation of the first Council of Nicaea.

The Arian Controversy and the Road to Nicaea

The immediate catalyst for the Council of Nicaea was the Arian controversy, a theological dispute that emerged in Alexandria around 318 and rapidly escalated into an empire-wide crisis. At issue was the identity of Christ and, more specifically, the relationship between the Son and the Father. Although debates concerning Christ's nature had circulated within Christian theology for generations, the Arian controversy distinguished itself by its intensity, public reach, and capacity to fracture ecclesial communion across multiple regions.

Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, advanced a Christological position that emphasized the transcendence and uniqueness of God the Father. In doing so, he argued that the Son, though pre-existent and exalted, was nevertheless a created being and therefore not co-eternal with the Father. Arius' teaching is commonly

²⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 48-52.

³⁰ Harold Arthur Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 193-201.

summarized by the formula attributed to him: *there was a time when he was not*. This assertion implied a hierarchical relationship within the Godhead and challenged emerging theological convictions regarding the full divinity of Christ.³¹

Opposition to Arius arose quickly, led by Alexander (d. 326), bishop of Alexandria, who maintained that the Son was eternally begotten and shared fully in the divine being of the Father. For Alexander and his supporters, Arius' position undermined both the salvific efficacy of Christ and the coherence of Christian worship. The conflict intensified as each side sought support from bishops beyond Egypt. Arius found allies among influential eastern churchmen, including Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341), while Alexander's position gained defenders who would later shape Nicene orthodoxy, most notably Athanasius (d. 373), then a deacon.³²

The controversy soon spilled beyond episcopal correspondence into public life. Contemporary sources describe congregations divided, liturgical gatherings disrupted, and theological slogans circulating in popular songs and pamphlets. What had begun as a dispute among clergy became a matter of widespread agitation. The unity of the Church—recently legalized and increasingly favored by imperial authority—was visibly threatened.³³

When Constantine emerged as sole ruler of the empire in 324, he inherited this ecclesiastical conflict in the eastern provinces. Initially, the emperor appears to have regarded the dispute as a regrettable but minor quarrel, rooted more in verbal subtlety than substantive difference. In an effort to restore peace, Constantine dispatched Hosius of Córdoba (257-359) to Alexandria with a letter urging reconciliation. Preserved by Socrates Scholasticus, the letter rebukes both Arius and Alexander for engaging in what Constantine termed “foolish and insignificant disputes about words,” and implores them to preserve unity for the sake of the Church and the empire.³⁴

This correspondence reveals Constantine's early priorities. His overriding concern was concord, not doctrinal precision. Drawing on philosophical analogies, he argued that disagreement over abstract matters need not disrupt communal harmony. The emperor's tone is paternal and urgent; he frames the conflict as a personal burden, lamenting that Christian division deprived him of peace of mind and obstructed his ability to govern effectively.³⁵ Constantine's intervention at this stage reflects a ruler who understood religious unity as a political necessity but had yet to grasp the theological stakes involved.

³¹ Richard Patrick Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 3–6.

³² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14-18.

³³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.6–7.

³⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7.

³⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7.

Neither Arius nor Alexander was willing to compromise on a matter each considered essential to the Christian faith. As the controversy deepened, Constantine became increasingly aware that local reconciliation was insufficient. The dispute had already spread beyond Alexandria, and its continuation threatened to undermine the coherence of the Church across the eastern empire. Compounding the situation was a separate but related issue: disagreement over the calculation of the date of Easter. Divergent regional practices highlighted the absence of liturgical uniformity and reinforced Constantine's perception that Christian disunity posed a structural problem requiring imperial resolution.³⁶

By late 324 or early 325, Constantine concluded that a broader, collective solution was required. Drawing on precedents from earlier synods—most notably those convened to address the Donatist controversy—he determined that only a council representing the entire Christian world could resolve the crisis with lasting authority. Donatism, a rigorist movement that had emerged in early fourth-century North Africa after the Diocletianic persecution, centered on the status of clergy who had lapsed under pressure (*traditores*), whom its adherents judged incapable of validly administering the sacraments.³⁷ Although Donatist communities persisted despite conciliar condemnation and imperial decrees, the controversy proved formative: Constantine's intervention established a precedent for imperial arbitration of ecclesiastical disputes through councils of bishops. This experience would directly inform his response to the more theologically complex Arian controversy.

Accordingly, Constantine issued invitations to bishops across the empire to assemble at Nicaea, a city in Bithynia chosen primarily for logistical and administrative reasons. Situated near the imperial residence at Nicomedia,³⁸ Constantine's principal eastern residence prior to the founding of Constantinople, Nicaea enabled the emperor to remain personally involved in the conciliar proceedings while minimizing disruption to imperial governance.³⁹ Its position within the eastern provinces—where the Arian controversy was most acute—also ensured accessibility for the majority of bishops, most of whom came from the Greek-speaking East.⁴⁰

³⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.18–20.

³⁷ For Donatism as a rigorist North African movement, cf. *Optatus of Milevis, Against the Donatists* I.1–7; and Augustine of Hippo, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* I.10–15; The Church rejected Donatism, and emphasized unity and the primacy of divine grace over human perfection. St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) articulated the decisive theological response, arguing that sacramental validity depends on Christ rather than the moral character of the minister (*ex opere operato*).

³⁸ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 212–218.

³⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214–216.

⁴⁰ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.8.

Equally significant was Nicaea's capacity to accommodate a large international assembly. As a well-established imperial city, it possessed adequate infrastructure, including imperial residences and public facilities suitable for housing and hosting several hundred bishops and their entourages. Ancient sources indicate that Constantine extended imperial hospitality to the participants, providing lodging, travel support, and provisions at state expense.⁴¹ This generosity was not merely practical but symbolic, underscoring the emperor's role as patron and protector of the Church. The Council's timing further reinforced this symbolism. Nicaea coincided with the celebration of Constantine's *vicennalia*, the twentieth anniversary of his reign. Eusebius records that Constantine hosted the bishops at a lavish imperial banquet, deliberately aligning the unity of the Church with the stability and beneficence of his rule.⁴² The setting thus framed the Council as both an ecclesiastical assembly and an imperial event, reinforcing the message that doctrinal unity and imperial order were mutually sustaining.

By this point, Constantine had already set in motion a series of initiatives that aligned imperial policy with Christian interests. He legislated against certain traditional practices—such as crucifixion and gladiatorial games—made Sunday a public day of rest, and granted clergy privileges including exemptions from some civic obligations. He also undertook an ambitious program of church construction, commissioning basilicas in major centers such as Rome, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. Most significantly, Constantine increasingly involved himself in the resolution of internal Christian disputes, regarding ecclesial harmony as a matter of imperial responsibility. His earlier interventions in the Donatist schism—through councils at Rome (313) and Arles (314)—had already established the model he would now apply on an empire-wide scale. The convocation of the Council of Nicaea thus represented not a departure from Constantine's earlier policy, but its fullest expression.

The decision to convene an ecumenical council marked a decisive escalation of imperial involvement in ecclesiastical affairs. Unlike earlier synods, the gathering at Nicaea was conceived on an empire-wide scale, both in its representation and in its ambition. An ecumenical council brought together bishops from across the Christian world to represent the whole Christian world (*οἰκουμένη*, *oikoumenē*, “the inhabited world”) to address doctrinal and disciplinary questions with authority binding upon the whole Church. Although Constantine did not present himself as a theologian, he assumed responsibility for creating the conditions under which theological consensus could be achieved. In doing so, he implicitly acknowledged that doctrinal unity was no longer a matter internal to the Church alone but one with direct consequences for imperial cohesion and stability.

⁴¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.6–7.

⁴² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.15–16.

Thus, the road to Nicaea was shaped by a convergence of theological urgency and imperial necessity. The Arian controversy exposed fault lines within Christian theology that demanded resolution, while Constantine's vision of a unified empire compelled him to act. The first Council of Nicaea would become the arena in which these forces met, setting a precedent for the relationship between doctrinal authority and imperial power in Late Antiquity.

The First Council of Nicaea

The Council met at Nicaea in Asia Minor in the early summer of 325 and was convened under the authority of Constantine, who presided at least at its opening session. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the emperor appeared in imperial regalia yet displayed marked deference toward the bishops, even venerating those who bore physical scars from the recent persecutions.⁴³ Estimates of attendance vary in the sources, ranging from approximately 250 to 318 bishops, the vast majority drawn from the eastern provinces of the empire, with only a small contingent representing the Latin West.⁴⁴ Pope Sylvester I (285-335), advanced in age, did not attend personally and instead sent legates, a circumstance that further underscored Constantine's prominence within the conciliar proceedings.⁴⁵ Notably, Constantine himself remained unbaptized at this time, still formally a catechumen, highlighting the unprecedented nature of a Roman emperor guiding bishops in the process of defining Christian doctrine.⁴⁶

The council's principal concern was the Arian controversy, although other matters—including the date of Easter and various disciplinary canons—were also addressed. It soon became evident that vague compromise or ambiguous formulation would not resolve the dispute. The theological divide exposed by the controversy was substantial. Arius, supported by a minority of bishops such as Eusebius of Nicomedia, maintained that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father, but was brought into being before the ages; later Nicene polemic would characterize such a view as implying that the Son was *heteroousios* (ἑτεροούσιος; “of a different substance”) from the Father, and therefore a creature, albeit the highest and most exalted of creatures.⁴⁷ Opposing this view, the Alexandrian position—represented by Bishop Alexander and articulated most forcefully by Athanasius of Alexandria, then present as a deacon—affirmed that the Son is

⁴³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.10–13.

⁴⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.8–9; Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.8.

⁴⁵ Liber Pontificalis, ed. Louis Duchesne, vol. 1 (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1886), 170–171.

⁴⁶ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 210–215.

⁴⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* 19–20, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

homoousios (ὁμοούσιος; “of the same substance”) with the Father and thus fully divine.

Between these positions stood a sizeable group of bishops who initially resisted both extremes. While rejecting Arius’ explicit subordinationism, they hesitated to embrace *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος), a term viewed by some as non-scriptural and potentially compromised by earlier heretical usage. Alternative formulations such as *homoios* (ὅμοιος; “similar”) or *homoiousios* (ὁμοιούσιος; “of similar substance”) were proposed in an effort to affirm the Son’s divinity without asserting identity of essence.⁴⁸ As debate progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that only an unambiguous formula could decisively exclude the Arian position.

At this critical juncture, Constantine intervened decisively. Advised by Hosius of Cordoba, and likely influenced by Western theological usage, the emperor strongly supported the inclusion of the term *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) in the creed. Later sources, particularly Athanasius, credit Constantine with insisting upon *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) as the only formulation capable of clearly excluding the Arian understanding of Christ. Although Constantine did not vote—lacking episcopal status—his moral authority and political influence proved pivotal in securing consensus.

The Council ultimately condemned Arius’ teaching and promulgated what is now known as the Nicene Creed. The creed confessed the Son as “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance, *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος), with the Father,” and anathematized those who asserted that “there was a time when he was not,” or who claimed that the Son was created or mutable.⁴⁹ With this formulation, the council formally affirmed the full divinity of Christ, declaring that whatever it means to be God, the Son possesses that reality entirely, though as Son he is personally distinct from the Father.

The theological significance of Nicaea cannot be overstated. For the first time, an ecumenical council employed philosophical terminology not drawn verbatim from Scripture in order to safeguard apostolic faith. The frequently cited claim that the controversy turned on a single letter is literally accurate: the difference between *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος; “same substance”) and *homoiousios* (ὁμοιούσιος; “similar substance”) is one iota (ι).⁵⁰ Yet that minute distinction carried

⁴⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86–92.

⁴⁹ Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 5–6.

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 72–75.

decisive doctrinal weight, marking the boundary between Nicene orthodoxy and Arian subordinationism.

The outcome appeared, at least initially, to be a decisive triumph for Nicene theology. Only two bishops refused to sign the creed and its anathemas, and Arius himself, as a presbyter, was not entitled to vote. Constantine soon ordered the exile of Arius and the remaining dissenters.⁵¹ Most bishops, including many who had earlier hesitated, ultimately subscribed to the creed, whether out of theological conviction, imperial pressure, or a desire for ecclesial unity. In addition to the creed, the Council issued twenty disciplinary canons and attempted to establish a uniform date for Easter.⁵²

The first Council of Nicaea also established a lasting precedent for imperial involvement in doctrinal affairs. Constantine's role inaugurated a model in which emperors convened councils and enforced their decisions, effectively intertwining ecclesiastical authority with the coercive power of the state. This development produced ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, imperial backing enabled conciliar definitions—most notably the Nicene Creed—to circulate widely and acquire normative force across the empire. On the other, it rendered theological disagreement inseparable from imperial politics, a dynamic evident in the turbulent decades that followed, when successive emperors alternately supported or opposed Nicene theology.

Despite these tensions, the eventual consolidation of Nicene orthodoxy by the late fourth century marked a decisive turning point in Christian history. By 381, with the Council of Constantinople, the doctrine of the Trinity—affirming the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct yet co-equal persons sharing one divine essence—was formally articulated and received as normative within the imperial Church. The Nicene Creed, received and developed at Constantinople in 381, continues to be professed in Christian liturgy worldwide and stands as the most enduring credal legacy of Constantine's council at Nicaea, affirming Our Lord Jesus Christ as “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”⁵³

Constantine's Political and Religious Motivations: An Integrated Analysis

Assessing Constantine's motives for convening the first Council of Nicaea requires moving beyond a binary opposition between political calculation and

⁵¹ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.9; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.21.

⁵² Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1993), 129–133.

⁵³ *Symbolum Nicaenum* (325), in *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927), vol. I, pt. 1, 24–26; Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* 20–21, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 4.

religious devotion. The extant evidence—imperial correspondence, contemporary ecclesiastical histories, and Constantine's own conduct—suggests that these motivations were neither mutually exclusive nor in tension. Rather, Constantine operated within a conceptual framework in which political stability, divine favor, and ecclesial unity were understood as interdependent realities and mutually reinforcing objectives.

From a political perspective, Constantine had compelling reasons to intervene decisively in the Arian controversy. By 325, he had only recently secured sole control of the Roman Empire after nearly two decades of civil conflict. The empire he inherited was geographically vast, culturally diverse, and administratively fragile. Christianity, though still a minority religion in absolute numbers, had become a significant social force, particularly in urban centers of the eastern provinces. Its internal fragmentation posed a risk not merely to ecclesiastical harmony but to civic order itself. In Roman political thought, religious discord was traditionally understood as a threat to public stability, capable of undermining the favor of the divine powers upon which imperial prosperity depended. Constantine inherited this worldview and reinterpreted it within a Christian theological horizon.⁵⁴

This perspective is evident in Constantine's correspondence prior to Nicaea. His letter to Arius and Alexander, preserved by Socrates Scholasticus, expresses less concern for doctrinal nuance than for the scandal of division. Constantine portrays ecclesiastical conflict as a source of personal anguish and an impediment to effective governance, pleading for reconciliation so that peace might be restored both to the Church and to himself as emperor.⁵⁵ The emotional tenor of the letter should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. It reflects a ruler who understood unity as a precondition for political order and who regarded religious dissension as an imperial problem demanding resolution.

At the same time, Constantine's actions at and after Nicaea demonstrate that his involvement was not limited to procedural arbitration. Once he became convinced that the Arian controversy touched the core of Christian belief, he aligned himself firmly with the council's doctrinal conclusions. The Nicene Creed, particularly its affirmation that the Son is ὁμοούσιος (*homoousios*) ("of the same substance") with the Father, represented a decisive rejection of Arian subordinationism. Constantine endorsed this formulation and treated the Council's decision as authoritative, enforcing its decrees through exile and imperial edict.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 193–201.

⁵⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7.

⁵⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.6–7; Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.9.

Such measures reflect political resolve, but they also indicate a conviction that doctrinal unity was not negotiable once defined.

The enforcement of Nicene orthodoxy reveals the convergence of Constantine's political instincts and religious commitments. By exiling Arius and bishops who refused to sign the creed, Constantine acted to eliminate a source of division within the Church. Yet the severity of these measures—particularly the burning of Arian writings and the stigmatization of Arius as a subversive figure—suggests more than pragmatic governance. Constantine framed heresy as an offense not only against ecclesial order but against divine truth itself. His rhetoric in post-Nicene letters portrays doctrinal error as a spiritual contagion capable of provoking divine displeasure and threatening the well-being of the empire.⁵⁷

Constantine's religious devotion, however, must be understood on its own terms. He was not a theologian, nor did he possess a systematic grasp of Christian doctrine prior to the Arian controversy. His delayed baptism, retention of traditional imperial titles, and early use of ambiguous religious imagery have often been cited as evidence of superficial or opportunistic belief. Yet such features were not unusual for a fourth-century ruler navigating a religiously plural environment. More telling are Constantine's sustained patterns of behavior: his patronage of Christian worship, his engagement with bishops as moral authorities, and his repeated appeals to divine guidance in matters of governance.⁵⁸

At Nicaea, Constantine presented himself not as a doctrinal arbiter but as a facilitator of episcopal consensus. Eusebius of Caesarea describes the emperor addressing the bishops with deference, urging them to set aside personal animosities and seek unity in truth. While Eusebius' account is undeniably laudatory, it preserves an essential feature of Constantine's self-understanding: he conceived his role as external to the sacramental life of the Church yet responsible for safeguarding its peace. His later characterization of himself as *episkopos tōn ektos* ("bishop of those outside") encapsulates this conception.⁵⁹

This self-conception helps explain the apparent tensions in Constantine's post-Nicene policies. In subsequent years, he exhibited greater leniency toward certain Arian-leaning bishops and even permitted Arius' return from exile under conditions of reconciliation. Such actions have often been interpreted as political inconsistency or theological confusion. Yet they may also reflect Constantine's persistent prioritization of unity over precision. Having secured a formal doctrinal

⁵⁷ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.9.

⁵⁸ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 48–56.

⁵⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 4.24.

settlement at Nicaea, he appears to have hoped that reconciliation and forgiveness might heal lingering divisions without reopening theological conflict. His willingness to discipline even staunch defenders of Nicene orthodoxy, such as Athanasius of Alexandria, underscores that Constantine valued ecclesial peace as much as doctrinal clarity.⁶⁰

Modern historiography increasingly recognizes this synthesis of motives. Earlier interpretations that depicted Constantine as either a cynical manipulator of religion or a saintly champion of orthodoxy fail to account for the integrated nature of his worldview. Scholars such as H. A. Drake have emphasized that Constantine's approach evolved over time: initially tolerant and conciliatory, he resorted to coercion only when persuasion failed to produce unity. This shift does not indicate insincerity but rather the limits of imperial mediation in the face of entrenched theological disagreement.⁶¹

In this light, the first Council of Nicaea emerges not simply as a political maneuver or a devotional act, but as a manifestation of Constantine's conviction that the unity of the Church and the unity of the empire were inseparable. His political authority provided the mechanism for assembling the council, while his religious commitments shaped his insistence on a definitive resolution. The integration of these motives explains both the success of Nicaea in establishing a normative creed and the enduring tensions that followed, as subsequent emperors grappled with the precedent Constantine had set.

Historiographical Perspectives on Constantine's Motives

Historiographical interpretation of Constantine's role in convening the first Council of Nicaea has tended to oscillate between two explanatory poles: political expediency and religious devotion. Earlier historiography, influenced by Enlightenment skepticism toward imperial Christianity, frequently portrayed Constantine as a calculating opportunist who exploited the Church to consolidate power. In this view, Nicaea functioned primarily as an instrument of imperial control, imposing doctrinal uniformity to secure political stability.⁶²

More recent scholarship has challenged the reductionism of this interpretation. While acknowledging Constantine's political acumen, contemporary historians increasingly emphasize the sincerity—if not always the theological sophistication—of his Christian commitment. The emperor's sustained

⁶⁰ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 105–112.

⁶¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 218–226.

⁶² Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Pantheon, 1949), 292–310.

patronage of the Church, his public identification with Christian symbols, and his repeated invocation of divine guidance in governance suggest that Christianity was not merely a convenient ideology but a genuine framework through which he interpreted his vocation as ruler.⁶³

A strictly dichotomous approach, however, obscures the historical reality of Late Antiquity. Constantine did not operate within modern categories that sharply distinguish religion from politics. Roman imperial ideology had long assumed that the ruler bore responsibility for maintaining harmony between the divine and human realms. Constantine inherited this expectation and reconfigured it within a Christian worldview. Consequently, political unity and theological unity were not competing goals but mutually reinforcing imperatives.⁶⁴

The first Council of Nicaea exemplifies this convergence. Politically, the Council addressed a destabilizing conflict that threatened cohesion within a rapidly expanding and increasingly influential Christian population. Religiously, it responded to a doctrinal controversy that struck at the heart of Christian confession and worship. Constantine's role as convener and enforcer of the council's decisions cannot be adequately explained by reference to only one of these dimensions. His actions reveal a ruler who believed that safeguarding doctrinal truth was essential to securing divine favor, and that divine favor was indispensable to imperial prosperity.⁶⁵

The apparent inconsistencies in Constantine's later policies—his occasional leniency toward Arian-leaning bishops, his exile of staunch Nicene defenders such as Athanasius, and his delayed baptism—should therefore be interpreted within this integrative framework. These actions do not necessarily indicate insincerity or confusion, but rather the tensions inherent in governing a religiously diverse empire while attempting to preserve ecclesial unity. Constantine consistently prioritized concord, even when it required pragmatic compromise, reflecting a belief that unity itself possessed theological as well as political value.⁶⁶

From a historiographical perspective, the charge of “Caesaropapism”⁶⁷

⁶³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 47-60.

⁶⁴ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 193–201.

⁶⁵ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 90–112.

⁶⁶ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 233–245.

⁶⁷ The term *caesaropapism* is a modern analytical category used to describe the close entanglement of imperial authority and ecclesiastical governance, especially in the Byzantine context. It suggests significant imperial influence over church affairs, though not sacramental or episcopal authority. Because the term can oversimplify the more complex relationship

often leveled against Constantine must be treated with caution. While later Byzantine emperors would indeed exert heavy-handed control over ecclesiastical affairs, Constantine's intervention at Nicaea was not an attempt to dictate doctrine unilaterally. He relied on episcopal consensus and presented the council's decisions as the judgment of the Church guided by the Holy Spirit. Imperial authority served to convene, support, and enforce the council, but doctrinal formulation remained, at least formally, an episcopal responsibility.⁶⁸

Thus, Constantine emerges neither as a secular manipulator of religion nor as a proto-cleric wielding unchecked power, but as a Christian emperor navigating unprecedented circumstances. His actions at Nicaea established a model—fraught with long-term consequences—in which imperial authority and ecclesiastical decision-making became structurally intertwined.

Conclusion

The question of why Constantine convoked the Council of Nicaea admits no simple answer. The evidence instead points to a ruler whose political responsibilities and religious convictions were inseparably bound. Constantine convened the Council because he believed that the unity of the Church was essential to the unity of the empire, and that both were necessary to secure divine favor and human stability.

Political exigency provided the immediate impetus. A divided Church threatened social cohesion and undermined the moral authority of a religion that Constantine increasingly regarded as foundational to imperial order. By employing the mechanisms of imperial power—summoning bishops, providing resources, and enforcing decisions—Constantine acted as a pragmatic statesman intent on preserving unity within his dominion.

Yet political calculation alone cannot account for the depth of Constantine's engagement. His correspondence, patronage, and post-conciliar actions reveal a

between emperor and Church, it must be used with caution. For critical discussion of the concept and its limits—especially in relation to Constantine and later Byzantine emperors—cf. Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire, AD 284–430* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68–73; Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 283–320; and Harold Arthur Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 7–14. These studies emphasize that while emperors exercised decisive influence over church affairs, they did not claim sacramental or episcopal authority.

⁶⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* 3.10; 4.24.

ruler who understood himself as accountable to God for the spiritual health of the Christian community. Constantine's endorsement of the Nicene Creed, his willingness to sanction dissenters, and his framing of doctrinal unity as a matter of divine truth all attest to a genuine, if imperially inflected, religious commitment.

The first Council of Nicaea thus stands as a watershed not only in doctrinal history but also in the evolution of church–state relations. It marked the emergence of a new paradigm in which imperial authority assumed responsibility for facilitating ecclesial unity, while the Church increasingly relied on imperial structures to enforce doctrinal decisions. This symbiosis would shape the Christian Roman Empire for centuries, yielding both stabilizing achievements and enduring tensions.

In Constantine's own lifetime, the settlement achieved at Nicaea proved fragile, as subsequent controversies revealed the limits of coercive unity. Nevertheless, the council's creed endured, becoming a normative expression of Christian orthodoxy that transcended imperial politics. Constantine's legacy, therefore, is not reducible to either political opportunism or pious devotion. It lies instead in the unprecedented convergence of faith and power that he embodied—a convergence that irrevocably transformed both the Roman Empire and the Christian Church.

In the religious culture of late antiquity, baptism was no mere ceremonial formality. It marked a decisive rupture with one's former life, understood as the remission of sins and the beginning of a new moral existence. Precisely because of this gravity, many early Christians delayed baptism until the end of life, fearing that post-baptismal sin would imperil salvation. Constantine followed this widely attested practice. For a ruler who had ordered executions, waged civil wars, and reshaped the empire through force, baptism represented not simply absolution but final transformation. In this sense, the emperor's last act stands as a fitting conclusion to a life lived at the intersection of power and belief—a moment in which imperial authority yielded, at last, to the claims of Christian faith.^{PS}

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