

# M I L E S T O N E S

## The Council of Constantinople

Convened some fifty-six years after the Council of Nicaea and under the influence of Emperor Theodosius I, the general Council of Constantinople (AD 381) confirmed the results of the Council of Nicaea, revised the Nicene Creed, ended the controversy regarding the Trinity, condemned Apollinarianism, and finally, affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit. Jaroslav Pelikan, echoing the general consensus of the church regarding the results of this council, notes that it articulated “more fully the place of the Holy Spirit as well as the relation between the One and the Three....This settled the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and of the Trinity” (27). Despite settling the matter of the Spirit’s deity, the Council of Constantinople said little more about the role and function of the Spirit, and while the aspect of deity is a critical component of the doctrine of the Spirit, it is by no means the only element. Nevertheless, since the Council of Constantinople in 381, the church has been seemingly content with elementary proclamations about the Spirit. Consequently, the church’s general understanding of the doctrine of the Spirit has never encompassed the broad scope of the divine revelation.

Following the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), which merely confessed a belief “in the Holy Ghost” (Percival 3), the Council of Constantinople affirmed that the Son was “incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary.” It also declared, “[We believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets” (Percival 63). More than just confessing His existence, the attendants at Constantinople recognized the Spirit’s role in the birth of Christ and acknowledged Him as Lord, thus confirming His deity. They also titled Him “Giver-of-Life,” who proceeds from the Father—worthy, with the Father and Son, to be worshipped and glorified—which was a further confirmation of His deity. Finally, they noted that He was the One

who formerly spoke through the prophets. This was an improvement over the rudiments of the Nicene Creed.

However, in the light of the revelation of God’s economy in the New Testament, the adequacy of this Council’s statements concerning the Spirit must be examined. As the other articles in this issue make clear, the truth concerning the Spirit ultimately has great bearing on our experience of the Triune God.

In fact, the Spirit is profoundly crucial and central to what the New Testament reveals, being at the very crux of the practical carrying-out of God’s divine economy. The “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45b), as the very consummation of the Triune God, is how God reaches us and indwells us as our life and all-inclusive life supply. The procession of the Triune God to man in-

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involved the Logos of God becoming incarnate as a man, and then this incarnate Logos, the last Adam, becoming the life-giving Spirit. Everything that God desired and purposed and everything that Christ attained and obtained is wrapped up in this Spirit. Furthermore, the Spirit is the sevenfold intensified Spirit to burn, search, refine, and supply the Lord’s earnest seekers in the midst of a dark and degraded situation. As such, He has been “sent forth into all the earth” (Rev. 5:6). In this verse He is even identified as the “seven eyes” of the Lamb. The life-giving Spirit and the sevenfold Spirit are not only crucial aspects of the biblical revelation regarding the Spirit, but they are also critical in and for the spiritual experience of the believers. Yet they are either not presented in an adequate way or not mentioned by the Council of Constantinople. This omission can be explained in part by the influence of imperial politics and partly by the early and progressive deviation from the central line of the New Testament revelation.

### Political Influences

Presiding over the first council at Nicaea, Constantine was concerned mainly for peace and stability in his realm. He

attempted to achieve this unity in large part through the establishment of religious unity. The Nicene Creed, produced through a process of compromise, fulfilled the emperor's expectations, albeit in a limited way. Even though this creed has become a primary test of orthodoxy (beyond even the original intent of its framers), it is narrow in scope. Constantine's involvement set a precedent at Nicaea. Thereafter, emperors were involved in the councils, and personal interests and the interests of the realm were often brought to bear on final pronouncements. Other concerns, including faithfulness to the pure Word of God, tended to be subservient to such priorities. When Constantine established Constantinople as his capital in the east, for example, he supported the building of Christian churches, but he also did not level the pagan temples. Thus, the dictates of the emperor in civil matters took precedence over the truth. This precedence, however, was not limited to matters of civil dispute. When Constantius II, the son and successor of Constantine, assumed power, his Arian sympathies emboldened a minor council in the eastern capital (AD 360) to reaffirm the decisions of the recent pro-Arian councils of Rimini and Seleucia. Church leaders who opposed the emperor's preference were either banned from their positions or, as in the case of Athanasius, exiled (Ferguson 228).

Constantius II was succeeded by Theodosius I, who had more orthodox inclinations. When Gregory of Nazianzus, a Nicene adherent and powerful preacher, was summoned to Constantinople to pastor the diminished flock of orthodox believers, the stage was set for an orthodox counterthrust. When the general council convened in AD 381, Gregory presided. But soon jealousies, accusations, and rivalries (e.g., Alexandria vs. Constantinople) caused him to step down. The conciliar declaration that the bishop of Constantinople was second only to the bishop of Rome not only caused further inflammation, but also illustrates how political considerations were even incorporated into the creeds. Considering the diversity of theological camps present at this council (orthodox, neo-Arian, pneumatomachian) and the influence of political maneuverings, it is not surprising that the council's eventual creed would be so straitened. It only expanded the scope of the Nicene Creed in a limited way, being a product of the council's efforts to satisfy the most and disappoint the fewest.

### Scriptural Deviations

It certainly would have been much better if, from the beginning, Christians had been content to abide in the pure Word of God, continuing "steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles...with one accord" (Acts 2:42; 46a). However, even while the apostles were still alive, there was a tendency to deviate. John warned, "Everyone who goes beyond and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the teaching,

he has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). Paul cautioned Timothy about those who "teach different things...rather than God's economy, which is in faith" (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Peter identified some who "twist...the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16). Certain ones began to turn away from or "go beyond" what the apostles had taught, emphasizing things such as godly behavior, correct and even scriptural teachings, and a powerful, hierarchical church government.

**I**n contrast to this, the apostles stressed God's economy to dispense Himself into His people, beginning with their spirit (John 3:6) to become one spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:17), and, by such an organic union, to transform them and build them into His glorious corporate expression for eternity. For this purpose, God became a man to accomplish redemption, dealing with sin and all the negative things. Then in resurrection this One—God incarnate to be our Redeemer—became "a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45b), able to enter, indwell, and transform the believers into His own image (2 Cor. 3:17-18). After the church became degraded, this life-giving One was intensified sevenfold to overcome the degradation of the church.

We need to recognize that the Spirit is central and vital for our Christian life. This realization and sensitivity, however, are lacking among many Christians today. To a great extent, the proper view, the view presented in the apostles' teaching, has been lost and abandoned in favor of other things. By the time church councils began to meet, formulate creeds, and exercise influence among Christians, this crucial revelation had all but disappeared. What emerged in its place was the emperor's preference, the espoused theology of the majority as the *right* doctrine, and something which satisfied certain important, political interests of high-ranking churchmen. By the time of the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), doctrine had deviated from the New Testament revelation, and as a result of the Council of Constantinople, truth was displaced further by political considerations.

*by Paul Onica*

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