



Arbeitsgemeinschaft
Christlicher Kirchen
in Deutschland

1,700 years of the Council of Nicaea in the year 2025

A declaration by the General
Assembly of the Council of Churches in
Germany (ACK)

and a statement by the Faith and Order
Commission (DÖSTA) of the Council of
Churches in Germany

Nicaea

325 ——— 2025



Imprint

Publisher

Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen
in Deutschland e.V./
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Realisation

Design: ACK in Germany
Printed by: Druckerei Lanzinger, Oberbergkirchen
1st edition, December 2024

Declaration by the General Assembly of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK) on the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 2025

The 1,700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 is seen by the General Assembly of the ACK as an opportunity to preserve and revive the memory of this important event for world Christianity in 2025.

It encourages its member churches

- to constantly rediscover and proclaim the common faith in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to make it visible, tangible and perceptible in the teaching and life of the Church.
- to search ecumenically for answers to the questions of our time by studying the Holy Scriptures, and to come closer to the mystery of God in this way.
- to see the common Easter date on 20 April 2025 as an opportunity to strengthen awareness of the Easter confession and to take further steps towards holding Easter on one date for all Christians.
- to show solidarity with Christians who are marginalised, persecuted or even killed because they confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and to offer them help and support.
- to strengthen synodal processes and joint decision-making ecumenically and denominationally.
- to develop the themes of the Council in preaching, catechesis, religious education and theological studies and to make them relevant for the present-day situation.
- to recite the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in its ecumenical version more regularly in the year 2025, whether in church services or devotions, on ecumenical occasions or in house groups, especially during the Easter season; in this way we can promote the awareness of our unity worldwide and with all our predecessors in the faith.
- to use the liturgical materials on the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea on one Sunday in the year 2025 and to recite the

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in its ecumenical version. A particularly appropriate occasion in the western liturgical calendar would be the time around Trinity Sunday, and for the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches the time around their respective days commemorating the Council of Nicaea.

There is more that unites us than divides us. Christ brings us together as members of his body in faith. The General Assembly of the Council of Churches wants to help make the words of the Apostle Paul a reality in the life of the churches:

“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Eph 4:1-6)

The following declaration of the DÖSTA develops theological insights that are recommended by the General Assembly of the ACK for reading and dissemination.

1,700 years of the Council of Nicaea (325 - 2025)

Statement of the Faith and Order Commission (DÖSTA) of the Council of Churches in Germany

In 2025, Christianity is able to celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the first Ecumenical Council in the history of the Church, which took place in 325. At that time, the main concern involved a fundamental question of the Christian understanding of God, namely the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Is Jesus Christ of divine substance, or is he one of God's creatures? The Council Fathers were convinced that it was of decisive importance for the Christian faith to clarify this question. For how could the monotheistic confession of the one God be made compatible with the testimony of Christ as the unique mediator and saviour for the world? The confession that was formulated at that time already contains a Trinitarian definition, even though it speaks in detail only of Christ, and merely makes brief reference to the Holy Spirit. To this day, it leads us to the central questions of the Christian faith; in the extended form found by the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381, it is recognised as fundamental by almost all Christian churches. The first section of the following text recalls the origins, course and content of the Council, while the second part looks into the relevance of the Council's decision for today from an ecumenical perspective.

1. Historical context of the Council

By the end of the 1st century at the latest, the man Jesus of Nazareth was described by Christians as God, because of his unique closeness to God and his work of salvation (Jn 1:1-2; 20:28; cf. Mt 28:19; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20). This designation of Jesus stood in tension with the Christian understanding of being monotheists as against the polytheists of the antique era. The crucial question was, how could the Father of Jesus, whom Christians in accordance with their Jewish origins recognised as the one and only God (monotheism), be reconciled with the divinity of Jesus (and later the Holy Spirit)? How would it be possible to refute the accusation that Christians, contrary to their claims, were not monotheists at all? This question was discussed by Christian theologians intensively and controversially for centuries, for the credibility of the Christian proclamation was dependent on the

answer. As a result, especially in the 3rd and 4th centuries, various different conceptual models and linguistic expressions emerged in order to allow Christians to confess Jesus (and increasingly also the Holy Spirit) as God, yet at the same time to hold on to the belief in a single God. The theological clarification and decision concerning this question was to be achieved in Nicaea in 325; in 381, at what was later known as the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, an analogous response was given regarding the relationship of the Holy Spirit to God the Father and God the Son – the confession of the Trinity.

The decisive phase of theological clarification began at the beginning of the 4th century in Alexandria, Egypt. There, as from around 318, a presbyter named Arius advocated the idea of God's absolute transcendence and immutability. He made a sharp distinction between God the Father and God the Son. The Father alone was the true God. The Son had been created by the Father out of nothing before the beginning of time, destined by the Father to be the Son, but also as the first-born of creation the mediator and instrument to be used by God in his relationships with the created world. Arius met with both agreement and contradiction, and no understanding could be reached. In 324, Arius, his theology and his small group of followers were condemned by an Egyptian synod. Arius did not acquiesce, but established his own network, particularly in the Christian churches of the East. It was in that very year that Emperor Constantine also gained control of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The dispute over the theology of Arius, which led to division between the churches of the East, was in his eyes a threat to the religious and political unity of the empire (one emperor, one empire, one faith) that he was striving for, and he therefore grasped the initiative.

In order to restore unity in the faith, the emperor convened for the first time a General Council of all the bishops within the Roman Empire in Nicaea, now Iznik, near the imperial residence of Nicomedia. It began on 20 May 325 in the presence of the emperor and lasted around one to two months. Acts and minutes of the council have not survived, but around 300 bishops (according to Hilarius of Poitiers it was "318 fathers") probably took part, among them only three or four bishops from the West. Bishop Silvester of Rome had sent two presbyters as his representatives. At the Council, all

the theological positions were represented, but the non-Arians were clearly in the majority.

1.1 The Nicene Creed

The most important and far-reaching result of the Council was the doctrinal decision in the form of a creed (Symbolum). The Council Fathers established that Jesus Christ as the Son of God was “true God from true God, begotten, not created, of the same essence (or consubstantial, Greek: homoúsios) with the Father”.

Literally the text says: “We believe in one God, Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and became incarnate, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens and will come to judge the living and the dead, and in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say: There was a time when he [the Son] was not, and: Before being born he was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is if a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change – these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematises.”

This became the basis of the Christian creed as it was formulated later. With the term consubstance (homoúsios), which became a cipher for the anti-Arian position in the following decades, a philosophical term was introduced into the Christian creed which documents the connection between the Bible and philosophy in early church theology, even if it is still disputed today who introduced the term. Finally, statements attributed to Arius that refer to the Son as created are condemned.

The only two bishops who did not accept the Nicene Creed were banned together with Arius by Emperor Constantine. Regulatory sanctions for religious deviations were thus imposed, which had

far-reaching consequences for church history. However, the conflict was not calmed down by these sanctions, but rather differentiated into four different theological currents. It was not until the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 that the doctrine of Nicaea was confirmed, also defining the position of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity and its relationship to mankind, which had only been briefly mentioned in 325. The so-called Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed adopted in 381 finalised the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as the specifically Christian form of monotheism. It is the only creed that is still recognised in almost all Christian churches today.

1.2 Standardised Easter date and structural and disciplinary provisions within the Church

The Council of Nicaea in 325 also put an end to the dispute over the date of Easter by declaring the Sunday after the equinox to be binding, thus disregarding the Jewish festival calendar and the Antiochian tradition of celebrating Easter at the same time as the Jewish Passover. This practice, which applied to the whole of Christendom, remained unchanged until the calendar reform under Pope Gregory XIII in the 16th century. Churches that did not adopt the Gregorian calendar reform still celebrate Easter according to the Julian calendar, which also served as a model for Nicaea. In 2025, however, the churches of the East and West will be able to celebrate Easter together on the same day, 20 April – which possibly offers an opportunity, after the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, to make increased efforts once again to arrive at a common Easter date as a sign of unity.

In addition to the creed and the determination of the date of Easter, the council issued twenty resolutions (canons) on questions of church order and ecclesiastical discipline, which provide an insight into the structural and pastoral challenges facing the church in the 4th century and which were enacted by Constantine as imperial laws. They concerned the clergy (1-3, 9-10, 17-18, 20), jurisdictional conflicts (4-7), clergy's moving from a parish (15-16) and penitential discipline (including the decision that absolution may not be denied to the dying).

2. The Council of Nicaea and its significance for the churches today

The Council of Nicaea marked a historic turning point in the development of Christianity: for the first time, bishops came together as representatives of Christian communities from the entire territory of the Roman Empire in order to reach an understanding on central questions of faith and church life and find common solutions. The confession of Christ as the “true God from true God” of “one substance” with the Father paved the way to a Trinitarian understanding of Christian monotheism. Nicaea also set a signal for a fundamental change in the position of Christians in the state: whereas 20 years earlier Emperor Diocletian had attempted to eliminate Christianity by comprehensive and extremely harsh persecution, Emperor Constantine now actively promoted the Church which he hoped to integrate as a stabilising factor in the unity of society and the state.

In many respects, Christianity is in a different position today from 1,700 years ago. It is true that even then there was no single, homogeneous church. Nevertheless, Nicaea in particular demonstrates the normative ideal of a single universal church, organisationally united, unified in doctrine and practice and in this sense ecumenical: a church outside of which – in the words of Cyprian from the 3rd century – “there is no salvation”. In contrast to that, Christianity exists today in a multitude of ecclesial communities which differ considerably in doctrine, piety and practice. Ecumenism now means recognising, cultivating and deepening the bonds between these different forms of realisation of the one Church of Jesus Christ. What significance can the commemoration of Nicaea have in this context? In DÖSTA’s view, at least four aspects need to be mentioned and considered.

2.1 Nicaea as a model and impulse for the responsibility for unity and the search for forms of “visible unity”

The Council of Nicaea was based on the conception that there are questions in the Church that are so essential that they must be clarified clearly and unambiguously. The form of the Council also reveals an awareness of the need to resolve these issues in a participatory manner involving all the regions (in this case local churches). The issues that need to be addressed must be dealt with in dialogue and cannot be decided unilaterally or by mere appeal to

authority. Although not all churches have adopted the concrete form of an episcopal assembly for such discursive decision-making processes, the model of synodal consultation has become exemplary. Today, all churches have developed instances of discursive participation at different levels and in different forms, be it at the level of the individual congregation, the region or even the worldwide denominational community. This applies regardless of serious differences, for example with regard to the participation of non-ordained church members (not only, but also as consultants) in binding decisions, or the authority of supra-regional bodies. Even in churches that restrict decision-making authority to the community of bishops, there is nowadays an increasing interest in the involvement of all baptised church members in decision-making. Conversely, churches that base their ecclesial self-understanding primarily on the local congregation are increasingly looking for signs and forms of supra-regional solidarity.

Nicaea reminds us that the Christian faith deals with essential questions: it concerns us human beings and our salvation, which depends on the relationship of Jesus Christ both to God the Father and to us. Nicaea reminds us that clarity must be sought in the confession of Jesus Christ, which can lead to painful demarcation and exclusion.

In the 20th century, there has been a growing awareness among the denominations that they should not define themselves by demarcation from other churches, nor should they be content with the status quo of unconnected coexistence; they should rather look to what unites them and seek to make this visible. The World Council of Churches offers a wide-ranging interdenominational forum for this. At a regional level, national church councils have been formed – in Germany it is the Council of Churches (ACK). Bilateral or multilateral doctrinal dialogues serve to clarify the extent to which differences in doctrine, liturgy and lifestyle must still divide the churches or whether they can be regarded as distinctive variations of what unites them. In respect to the Nicene Creed, inner-Christian ecumenism is faced with the task of seeking dialogue with all people who are keeping the question of God alive and working towards a humane society on this basis.

2.2 “True God from true God”: Nicaea as a milestone in the Trinitarian understanding of God

In contrast to Arius, who – as mentioned above – was concerned about Christian monotheism and only wanted to recognise Christ as a creature (albeit a unique, perfect one), the Council of Nicaea took a great risk in professing the full divinity of Jesus, thus setting a decisive milestone on the path to a fully evolved Trinitarian understanding of God. The Council regarded Arius as dangerous, because the reliability of revelation would be lost if Christ were only a created counterpart to God. The dogma of the Trinity from 381, founded on the decision taken in Nicaea, upholds this conviction that the revelation of Christ mediated by the Holy Spirit makes the true God present and recognisable. In the course of Christian history, there have been repeated attempts to develop the concept of Trinitarian understanding of God and interpret it theologically; some of the results have also been criticised as overly speculative and a hindrance to the concrete practice of faith.

However, the leitmotifs for the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity are still fundamental to Christian faith, piety and theological reflection today. It is therefore appropriate that the basis of the World Council of Churches designates the confession of the triune God as common to the fellowship of all its member churches. Nonetheless, it is naturally still necessary to translate this explication of monotheism into the diverse cultural contexts of contemporary Christianity.

2.3 Confession and creed

The Council of Nicaea did not draw up a liturgical creed, but it did express the common doctrine in a binding formula. This the Council Fathers in Constantinople were then able to use as a basis when composing the confession that was in the long term to prevail as official creed in both Eastern and Western churches and which is still used liturgically in many denominations and denominational families, e.g. at services of baptism or baptismal commemoration. However, the denominations differ when it comes to the question whether the common faith must be professed in certain mandatory formulations or whether such formulations can remain variable as long as the mandatory meaning remains recognisable. This question also gave rise to a controversy that burdened the relationship between the Orthodox churches and the churches of the West for

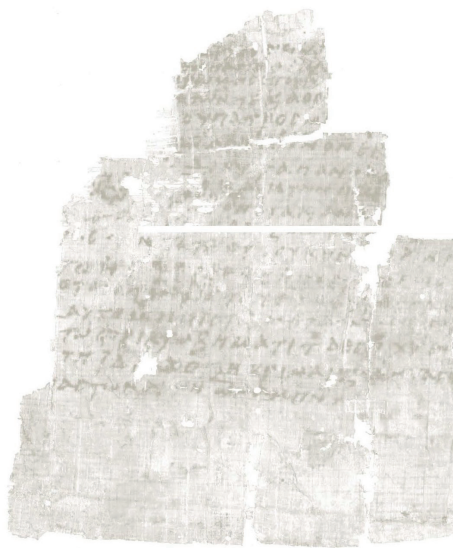
many centuries, the so-called “filioque” controversy. It came about because the Nicene-Constantinopolitanum has been handed down in the Latin West since around the 8th century with the wording that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son (Latin: filioque)”, while Orthodox Christianity adheres to the original Greek text (“which proceeds from the Father”), partly because it rejects any change to the confession adopted by a Council. After long and intensive doctrinal discussions, it seems today that an understanding may be possible. The Old Catholic Church has returned to the original version, and both the Roman Catholic and many Protestant churches agree to the use of the original version, at least in ecumenical services.

Churches that do not recognise binding creeds often justify this by saying that they do not want to place a binding doctrinal standard between the Holy Scriptures and the current faith, which threatens to hinder direct access to the Word of God. They also see the danger that pre-formulated creeds standardise individual faith too strongly or, in the opposite sense, that believers simply recite the creed in compliance with externalised obedience. However, the majority of these churches expressly recognise the theological content of the traditional creeds, such as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and also agree to the necessity of communicating the core content of the Christian faith in compact terms.

2.4 Position of the church(es) in the world

The Council of Nicaea was convened and initially chaired by Emperor Constantine; he subsequently made the Council’s resolutions binding in the form of imperial laws. With his commitment to the unity of the Church, he was undoubtedly pursuing not only religious, but also political goals. For the bishops, on the other hand, it was a new experience to find support from the secular ruler – liberation after long persecution. Today, the effect of the so-called “Constantinian shift” for the church is often criticised as having led to a secularising amalgamation of church and state, exposing the church to instrumentalisation by the state and also contributing to a trivialisation of the serious matter of faith. The desire for a secure existence is naturally not reprehensible as such, and the new freedom also provided the church with much greater opportunities for missionary preaching and pastoral care, thereby serving as an important factor in the

further spread of Christianity. However, state recognition presented the church with the challenge of maintaining the independence of its religious mission as well as the autonomy of its organisational decision-making processes in a positively conducive environment. In the subsequent course of Christian church history, this succeeded to greater and lesser degrees. Different denominations and denominational families have set varying emphases when it came to proximity or distance to the secular order. There is no doubt that Christian churches have repeatedly misused their closeness to state power to ostracise and suppress dissenting positions or groups that were deemed “heretical”. Particularly in the present-day situation of rapidly changing constellations of religious sociology and politics, the commemoration of Nicaea can encourage the churches to reflect on their own position within and in relation to the political order and, in doing so, to seek dialogue with church traditions that balance proximity and distance to the “world” differently to themselves.



Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople

(Ecumenical version)

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit he became
incarnate from the Virgin Mary
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried;
on the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven.
He is seated at the right hand of the Father,
he will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father;
who with the Father and the Son
is worshipped and glorified;
who has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.