

Did the Council of Nicea Invent the Deity of Christ?

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Can I be honest with you? Some statements get me frustrated. I can usually keep my cool when people say things I disagree with, but this statement puts me over the top. I am sick and tired of people claiming that the Council of Nicea (c. AD 325) *made* Jesus into God.

This is a claim that you will hear from both cultists and skeptics. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are famous for making this claim. In their publication *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* they write, "Constantine's role was crucial. After two months of furious religious debate, this pagan politician intervened and decided in favor of those who said that Jesus was God."^[1] On this view, Emperor Constantine *invented* the deity of Christ in the fourth century.

This view was also propagated to millions of people in the bestselling book *The Da Vinci Code*: "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.... By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable."^[2] Given the enormous popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, this belief has become fully ingrained into the consciousness of the rank-and-file.

How should we respond to this claim? I have a two-pronged approach. First, I ask a question: How did you come to that conclusion? This is the second Columbo question in Greg Koukl's book *Tactics*. It is one thing to make a historical claim, but it is another thing to back it up with historical facts. And this often-recited claim *lacks* any kind of historical support.

At this point, don't be surprised if the person who raised the challenge cannot answer your question. The fact is, most people in our culture make claims they are not equipped to defend. This is *not* the time to insult; this is the time to inform. The person who made the claim is deeply misinformed, and you now have the opportunity to correct him. This leads to the second prong of your response.

Second, I look at the facts. This is the *Just the Facts Ma'am* tactic. Quite often we can correct a person's false beliefs by appealing to the facts. When answering questions about what happened in the past, it is a good idea to consult reputable historians. In his book *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*, agnostic historian Bart Ehrman writes,

Constantine did call the Council of Nicea, and one of the issues involved Jesus' divinity. But this was not a council that met to decide whether or not Jesus was divine.... Quite the contrary: everyone at the Council—in fact, just about every Christian everywhere—already agreed that Jesus was divine, the Son of God. The question being debated was how to *understand* Jesus' divinity in light of the circumstance that he was also human. Moreover, how could both Jesus and God be God if there is only one God? *Those* were the issues that were addressed at Nicea, not whether or not Jesus was divine. And there certainly was no vote to determine Jesus' divinity: this was already a matter of common knowledge among Christians, *and had been from the early years of the religion.* [Emphasis added.][3]

So belief in the deity of Jesus existed since “the early years of the religion.” Just how early? The New Testament is full of references to the deity of Christ. Certainly Paul (Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Phil. 2:5-8), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1), and John (John 1:1; 8:58; 20:28) believed that Jesus is God.

However, to show that Christians believed in the deity of Christ *before* the Council of Nicea, you can also consult the early church fathers. The person claiming that Nicea invented the deity of Jesus will be surprised to learn that the earliest church fathers *explicitly* affirmed the deity of Christ. Here is a small sample.

Polycarp (AD 69-155) was the bishop at the church in Smyrna and a disciple of John the Apostle. In his Letter to the Philippians, he writes,

Now may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal high priest himself, the Son of God Jesus Christ, build you up in faith and truth...and to us with you, and to all those under heaven **who will yet believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ** and in his Father who raised him from the dead.[4]

Ignatius (AD 50-117) was the bishop at the church in Antioch and another disciple of John. He wrote a series of letters to various churches on his way to Rome, where he was to be martyred. He writes,

There is only one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, **God in man**, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering and then beyond it, Jesus Christ our Lord.[5]

For **our God, Jesus the Christ**, was conceived by Mary according to God's plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit.[6]

Justin Martyr (AD 100–165) was a Christian apologist of the second century. He boldly states,

And that **Christ being Lord, and God the Son of God**, and appearing formerly in power as Man, and Angel, and in the glory of fire as at the bush, so also was manifested at the judgment executed on Sodom, has been demonstrated fully by what has been said.[7]

Permit me first to recount the prophecies, which I wish to do in order **to prove that Christ is called both God and Lord of hosts**. [8]

Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130–202) was bishop of what is now known as Lyons, France. Irenaeus studied under bishop Polycarp, who in turn had been a disciple of John the Apostle. He writes,

He received testimony from all that He was very man, and that **He was very God**, from the Father, from the Spirit, from angels, from the creation itself, from men, from apostate spirits and demons.[9]

...**Christ Jesus our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King**, according to the will of the invisible Father.[10]

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215) was another early church father. He wrote around AD 200. He writes,

This Word, then, the Christ, the cause of both our being at first (for He was in God) and of our well-being, this very Word has now appeared as man, **He alone being both, both God and man**....[11]

Tertullian (AD 150-225) was an early Christian apologist writing around a century after John. He said,

For God alone is without sin; and the only man without sin is Christ, since **Christ is also God**.[12]

Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170-235) was a third century theologian. He was a disciple of Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John. He writes,

The Logos alone of this God is from God himself; wherefore also **the Logos is God, being the substance of God**. [13]

For all, the righteous and the unrighteous alike, shall be brought before **God the Word**.[14]

All of these church fathers wrote over a century *before* the Council of Nicea supposedly invented the deity of Jesus. So here is my question: If the early church fathers explicitly affirmed Jesus' deity before Nicea, then how can anyone claim that it was an invention at Nicea?

The facts overwhelmingly confirm that the deity of Christ was *not* invented at Nicea. In fact, this belief was birthed out of the original disciples' close interaction with Jesus. Consequently, Jesus' words and actions led the disciples to the only reasonable conclusion: *Jesus is God*. And this belief was passed down through church history.

[1] Watch Tower, *Should You Believe in the Trinity?*, (Halton Hills, ON: Watch Tower Bible And Tract Society, 1989), 8.

[2] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 253.

[3] Bart Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know About Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine*, 14-15.

[4] Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 12:2.

[5] Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 7.2.

[6] Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 18.2.

[7] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 128.

[8] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 36.

[9] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.6.7.

[10] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1.

[11] Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 1.

[12] Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, 41.

[13] Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.29.

[14] Hippolytus, *Against Plato, Section 3*

