

Harmony 1.6 - Controversy on the Date of Easter (325)

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Socrates	Sozomen	Theodoret
The East is divided		
	<p>[Summary of Constantine's letter to Alexander and Arius]</p> <p>1.16.1-4a After there had been many synods held in Egypt and the conflict still had continued to increase in violence, the report of the dissension reached the palace, and it troubled Constantine greatly. Just at that time when religion was beginning to be more generally accepted, many were deterred by the difference in doctrines from embracing Christianity.</p> <p>1.16.2 The emperor openly charged Arius and Alexander with initiating this disturbance. He wrote to rebuke them for making a controversy public when it was in their power to have it concealed and for having contentiously agitated a question which ought never to have been opened for discussion or upon which, at least, their opinion ought to have been given quietly. He told them that they ought not to have separated from the other because of difference of opinion concerning certain points of doctrine.</p> <p>1.16.3 For concerning God men ought to hold one and the same belief. The trivial differences in this province, especially if they do not bring people to the one opinion, must be logically kept in secret. He exhorted them to put away all loose talk about such points and to be of one mind. For he had been very grieved and on this account he had renounced his intention of visiting the cities of the East.</p> <p>1.16.4a It was in this strain that he wrote to Alexander and to Arius, reproof and exhorting them both.</p>	<p>[Arianism divides the East]</p> <p>1.6.9 And so when the blasphemous doctrine had been circulated in the churches of Egypt and of the East, disputes and contentions arose in every city and in every village concerning theological teachings.</p> <p>1.6.10 The common people looked on and became judges of what was said on either side. Some applauded one party, and some the other. These were, indeed, scenes fit for a tragic stage over which tears might have been shed. For it was not, as in days gone by, that the church was being attacked by strangers and enemies, but now natives of the same country, who dwelled under one roof and sat down at one table, fought against each other not with spears but with their tongues. And what was sadder still, those who in this way took up arms against one another were members of one another and belonged to one body.</p>

Socrates	Sozomen	Theodoret
	<p>[Division over Easter customs] 1.16.4b Constantine was also deeply grieved at the diversity of opinions concerning the celebration of the Passover. Some of the cities in the East differed on this point, although they did not withhold from communion with one another. They kept the festival more according to the manner of the Jews and, as a natural result of this divergence, detracted from the splendor of the festal sacrifice.</p>	
<p>[Constantine sends Hosius to promote unity] 1.7.1 When the emperor [Constantine] learned about these disturbances, he was very deeply grieved. He regarded the matter as a personal misfortune and immediately began trying to extinguish the conflagration which had been kindled. He also sent a letter to Alexander and Arius by a trustworthy person named Hosius, who was bishop of Cordova in Spain. The emperor greatly loved this man and held him in the highest regard.</p>	<p>[Constantine sends Hosius to promote unity] 1.16.5 The emperor zealously strove to remove both these causes of dissension from the church. Thinking that he would be able to remove the evil before it grew to greater proportions, he sent one who was honored for his faith, his virtuous life, and most approved in those former times for his confessions about this doctrine. Constantine sent him to reconcile those who were divided on account of doctrine in Egypt and those who in the East differed about the Passover. This man was Hosius, bishop of Cordova.</p>	<p>[Constantine sends Hosius to promote unity] 1.7.1 The emperor, who possessed the most profound wisdom, heard of these things and endeavored, as a first step, to stop up their fountain-head. Therefore, expecting to reconcile the two sides, he dispatched a messenger renowned for his ready wit to Alexandria with letters in an attempt to extinguish the dispute.</p>
Constantine calls a council at Nicaea		
<p>1.8.1 Such admirable and wise counsel did the emperor's letter contain [This letter can be found in 1.3]. But the evil had become too strong both for the exhortations of the emperor and the authority of him who was the bearer of his letter. Neither Alexander nor Arius were softened by this appeal 1.8.2 Moreover, another local source of trouble was working there, which served to trouble the churches: the dispute, namely, in regard to the Passover, which was carried on in the regions of the East only. This arose from some who desired to keep the Feast more in accordance with the custom of the Jews, while others preferred how it was celebrated by Christians in general throughout the world. 1.8.3 This difference, however, did not interfere with their communion, although their mutual joy was, of course,</p>	<p>1.17.1a It was found that the event did not fulfill the expectations of the emperor but that, on the contrary, the contention was too great for reconciliation, so that the one who had been sent to make peace returned without having accomplished his mission.</p>	

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hindered.		
<p>1.8.4 Therefore, when the emperor saw that the Church was agitated on account of both of these causes, he convoked a General Council, summoning all the bishops by letter to meet him at Nicaea in Bithynia. So the bishops assembled out of the various provinces and cities.</p>	<p>1.17.1b So Constantine convened a synod at Nicaea, in Bithynia, and wrote to the most important men of the churches in every country, directing them to be there on an appointed day.</p>	<p>1.7.2 But when his hopes were smashed, he summoned the celebrated council of Nicaea and pledged his word that the bishops and their officials would be furnished with donkeys, mules, and horses for their journey, at the public expense. When all those who were able to endure the exhaustion of the journey had arrived at Nicaea, he went there himself, both to see the multitude of bishops and to fulfill his desire of leading them into unity. At once, he arranged that all their wants should be liberally supplied.</p>
The Council decides to celebrate Easter at the same time in every place		
<p>1.8.55b At the same time the Council itself, with one accord, wrote the following epistle to the Alexandrian church and to believers in Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis.</p>		<p>1.9.1b A letter was written by the council to the Church of Alexandria which stated what had been decreed against his [Meletius] revolutionary practices. It was as follows:</p>
	<p>1.21.6 With the termination of this doctrinal controversy, the council decided that the Paschal feast should be celebrated at the same time in every place.</p>	
<p>[This section is also found in Socrates 1.9.1-14]</p>		<p>1.9.2 To the great church of the Alexandrians, which is holy by the grace of God, and to our beloved brothers throughout Egypt, Libya, and the Pentapolis. We bishops assembled at Nicaea, constituting the great and holy council, send greetings in the Lord.</p> <p>1.9.3 Since, by the grace of God, a great and holy council has been convened at Nicaea, after our most pious sovereign Constantine summoned us out of various cities and provinces for that purpose, we at the sacred council thought it most necessary to write you a letter, in order that you may know what subjects were considered and examined, and what was eventually decided on and decreed.</p> <p>1.9.4 In the first place, the impiety and guilt of Arius and his adherents was examined in the presence of our most pious emperor Constantine. We unanimously decided that his impious opinion should be anathematized, with all the blasphemous expressions he has uttered, namely that “the Son of God came to be out of nothing,” that “there was a</p>

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		<p>time when he was not,” and even that “the Son of God, because he possessed free will, was capable of either both evil and good.” They also call him a creature (ktisma) and a work (poiēma).</p> <p>1.9.5 The holy Council has anathematized all these ideas, barely able to endure it as we listened to such impious opinions (or rather madnesses) and such blasphemous words. You must either have been informed of the verdict of our proceedings against him already, or you will soon learn. We will omit relating our actions here, for we would not trample on a man who has already received the punishment which his crime deserved.</p> <p>1.9.6 Yet his deadly error has proved so contagious that it has dragged Theonas of Marmarica, and Secundus of Ptolemais, into destruction; for they have suffered the same condemnation as Arius.</p> <p>But after the grace of God delivered us from those detestable heresies, with all their impiety and blasphemy, and from those persons, who had dared to cause such conflict and division among a people previously at peace, the rash actions of Meletius and those who had been ordained by him still remained to be dealt with. We now state to you, beloved brothers, what resolution the Council came to on this point.</p> <p>1.9.7 The Council was moved with compassion towards Meletius, although strictly speaking he was wholly undeserving of favor, and decreed that he remain in office in his own city but exercise no authority either to ordain or nominate for ordination; and that he appear in no other district or city on this pretense, retaining no more than the normal level of authority. The Council also decided that those who had been appointed by him, after having been confirmed by a more legitimate ordination, should be admitted to communion on these conditions: that they should continue to hold their rank and ministry, but regard themselves as inferior in every respect to all those who have been ordained and established in each place and</p>

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		<p>church by our most-honored fellow-minister, Alexander. Thus they will have no authority to propose or nominate whom they please, or to do anything at all without the agreement of some bishop of the catholic church who is one of Alexander's subordinates.</p> <p>1.9.8 On the other hand, those who by the grace of God and your prayers have not been found in schism, but have continued blameless in the catholic church, shall have authority to nominate and ordain those who are worthy of the sacred office, and to act in all things according to ecclesiastical law and custom.</p> <p>1.9.9 When it happens that those holding offices in the church die, then these who have been recently admitted will be advanced to the office of the deceased, provided that they are found worthy, that they are duly elected, and that the bishop of Alexandria ratifies the decision.</p> <p>1.9.10 This right is allowed for all the others indeed, but to Meletius personally we by no means grant the same permission, on account of his former disorderly conduct, and because of the rashness and fickleness of his character. We want no authority or jurisdiction to be given to him, for he is a man liable again to create similar disturbances.</p> <p>1.9.11 These are the things which specifically affect Egypt, and the most holy church of the Alexandrians. If any other canon or ordinance has been established, our Lord and most-honored fellow-minister and brother Alexander, who is present with us, will explain the more specific details when he returns to you, since he has participated in all we have done, and has in fact been the leader.</p> <p>1.9.12 We also have good news for you that we have harmonized our opinions on the subject of the most holy feast of Easter, which has been happily settled through your prayers. All the brothers in the east who have previously kept this festival when the Jews did have agreed with the Romans, with us, and with all of you who have kept Easter with us from the beginning, to follow the same custom as</p>

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		<p>we.</p> <p>1.9.13 So rejoice in these results and in the general agreement and peace, as well as in the cleansing of all heresy. Receive our fellow-minister and your bishop Alexander with great honor and abundant love, because he has greatly delighted us by his presence. Even at his advanced age, he has undergone extraordinary efforts in order that peace might be re-established among you. Pray on behalf of us all, that the things we decided were appropriate may be maintained without violation through Almighty God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Spirit, to whom be glory forever. Amen.¹</p>
<p>1.9.15 This letter of the Council makes it plain that they not only anathematized Arius and his adherents, but also the very expressions of his beliefs. After they agreed among themselves respecting the celebration of Easter, they readmitted the arch-heretic Meletius into communion, allowing him to retain his episcopal rank, but depriving him of all authority to act as a bishop. It is for this reason I suppose that even at the present time the Meletians in Egypt are separated from the church, because the Council removed all power from Meletius.</p>		
Constantine's letter on Arianism and Easter		
		<p>1.9.14 The great emperor also wrote an account of the transactions of the council to those bishops who were unable to attend. And I consider it worthwhile to insert this epistle in my work because it clearly demonstrates the piety of the writer.</p>
<p>[This section is also found in Socrates 1.9.32-46]</p>		<p>1.10.1 Constantine Augustus, to the churches. The great grace of God's power has constantly been increasing, as is evident in the general prosperity of the empire. I therefore decided to make it my aim above all else that one faith, sincere love, and unvarying devotion to Almighty God be maintained among the most blessed</p>

¹ Translation from NPNF2 vol. 2, pp. 12-3, adapted by AJW, <http://www.fourthcentury.com/index.php/urkunde-23>.

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		<p>assemblies of the catholic church.</p> <p>1.10.2 But I perceived that this could only be established firmly and permanently when all of the bishops, or at least the greatest part, were convened in the same place for a council where they could discuss every point of our most holy religion. So we assembled as many as possible, and I myself was also present as one of you; for I will not deny what I especially rejoice in, that I am your fellow-servant. All points were then minutely investigated, until a decision was brought to light which was found acceptable to him who is the inspector of all things, and brought a unified agreement, leaving nothing which could cause dissension or controversy in matters of faith.</p> <p>1.10.3 At the council we also considered the issue of our holiest day, Easter, and it was determined by common consent that everyone, everywhere should celebrate it on one and the same day. For what can be more appropriate, or what more solemn, than that this feast from which we have received the hope of immortality, should be kept by all without variation, using the same order and a clear arrangement? And in the first place, it seemed very unworthy for us to keep this most sacred feast following the custom of the Jews, a people who have soiled their hands in a most terrible outrage, and have thus polluted their souls, and are now deservedly blind. Since we have cast aside their way of calculating the date of the festival, we can ensure that future generations can celebrate this observance at the more accurate time which we have kept from the first day of the passion until the present time.</p> <p>1.10.4 Therefore have nothing in common with that most hostile people, the Jews. We have received another way from the Savior. In our holy religion we have set before us a course which is both valid and accurate. Let us unanimously pursue this. Let us, most honored brothers, withdraw ourselves from that detestable association.</p> <p>1.10.5 It is truly most absurd for them to boast that we are incapable of rightly observing these things without their</p>

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		<p>instruction. On what subject are they competent to form a correct judgment, who, after that murder of their Lord lost their senses, and are led not by any rational motive, but by an uncontrollable impulsiveness to wherever their innate fury may drive them? This is why even in this matter they do not perceive the truth, so that they constantly err in the utmost degree, and will celebrate the Feast of Passover a second time in the same year instead of making a suitable correction.</p> <p>1.10.6 Why then should we follow the example of those who are acknowledged to be infected with serious error? Surely we should never allow Easter to be kept twice in one and the same year! But even if these considerations were not laid before you, you should still be careful, both by diligence and prayer, that your pure souls should have nothing in common, or even seem to do so, with the customs of men so utterly depraved.</p> <p>1.10.7 This should also be considered: In a matter so important and of such religious significance, the slightest disagreement is most irreverent.</p> <p>1.10.8 For our Savior left us only one day to be observed in remembrance of our deliverance, that is the day of his most holy passion. He also wished his catholic church to be one; the members of which are still cared for by one Spirit, that is by the will of God, however much they may be scattered in various places.</p> <p>1.10.9 Let the good sense consistent with your sacred character consider how grievous and inappropriate it is, that on the same days some should be observing fasts, while others are celebrating feasts; and after the days of Easter some should celebrate festivities and enjoyments, while others submit to appointed fastings. For this reason Divine Providence directed that we put into effect an appropriate correction and establish uniformity of practice, as I suppose you are all aware.</p> <p>1.10.10 So first, it was desirable to change the situation so that we have nothing in common with that nation of</p>

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		<p>father-killers who slew their Lord. Second, the order which is observed by all the churches of the western, southern, and northern parts, and by some also in the eastern is quite suitable. Therefore, at the current time, we all thought it was proper that you, intelligent as you are, would also cheerfully accept what is observed with such general unanimity of sentiment in the city of Rome, throughout Italy, Africa, all Egypt, Spain, France, Britain, Libya, the whole of Greece, and the dioceses of Asia, Pontus, and Cilicia. I pledged myself that this solution would satisfy you after you carefully examined it, especially as I considered that not only are the majority of congregations located in the places just mentioned, but also that we all have a most sacred obligation, to unite in desiring whatever common sense seems to demand, and what has no association with the perjury of the Jews.</p> <p>1.10.11 But to sum up matters briefly, it was determined by common consent that the most holy festival of Easter should be solemnized on one and the same day; for it is not at all decent that there should be in such a sacred serious matter any difference. It is quite commendable to adopt this option which has nothing to do with any strange errors, nor deviates from what is right.</p> <p>1.10.12 Since these things are consistent, gladly receive this heavenly and truly divine command. For whatever is done in the sacred assemblies of the bishops can be traced to Divine will. Therefore, once you have demonstrated the things which have been prescribed to all our beloved brothers, it would be good for you to make public the above written statements and to accept the reasoning which has proved itself to be sound, and to establish this observance of the most holy day. In this way, when I arrive to check on your condition, which I have desired earnestly for some time, I will be able to celebrate the sacred festival with you on one and the same day, and will rejoice with you for all things, as I see that through our efforts divine power is frustrating Satan's cruelty, and that your faith,</p>

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		peace, and unity are flourishing everywhere. May God preserve you, beloved brothers. 1.11.1a Thus did the emperor write to the absent. ²
Constantine reprimands Acesius, bishops of the Novatians		
<p>1.10.1 The emperor's diligence prompts me to mention another circumstance that expresses his mind and serves to show how much he desired peace. For aiming at ecclesiastical harmony, he summoned to the council Acesius also, a bishop of the sect of Novatians.</p> <p>1.10.2 Now, when the declaration of faith had been written out and subscribed to by the Synod, the emperor asked Acesius whether he would also agree to this creed and to the settlement of the day on which Easter should be observed. He replied, 'The Synod has determined nothing new, my prince: for now, and even from the beginning, from the times of the apostles, I traditionally received the definition of the faith and the time of the celebration of Easter.'</p>	<p>1.22.1 It is said that the emperor, under the impulse of a zealous desire to see harmony re-established among Christians, summoned Acesius, bishop of the church of the Novatians, to the council. He placed before Acesius the definition of the faith and of the feast which had already been confirmed by the signatures of the bishops and asked whether he could agree to it. Acesius answered that their exposition defined no new doctrine, that he agreed in opinion with the Synod, and that he had from the beginning held these beliefs with respect both to the faith and to the feast.</p>	
<p>1.10.3 Then the emperor questioned him further, 'For what reason then do you separate yourself from communion with the rest of the Church?' He related what had taken place during the persecution under Decius and referred to the rigidness of that sacred canon which declares that it is not right for people, who after baptism have committed a sin which the sacred Scriptures call 'a sin unto death,' to be considered worthy of participation in the sacraments. The canon also declares that they should indeed be exhorted to repentance, but were not to expect remission from the priest, but from God, who is able and has authority to forgive sins.</p> <p>1.10.4 When Acesius had thus spoken, the emperor said to him, 'Take a ladder, Acesius, and climb alone into heaven.'</p>	<p>1.22.2 'Why, then,' said the emperor, 'do you stay removed from communion with others if you are of one mind with them?' He replied that the dissension first broke out under Decius, between Novatius and Cornelius, and that he considered such persons unworthy of communion who, after baptism, had fallen into those sins which the Scriptures declare to be unto death. For the remission of those sins, he thought, depended on the authority of God only and not on the priests. The emperor replied, saying, 'O Acesius, take a ladder and ascend alone to heaven.'</p>	
<p>1.10.5 Neither Eusebius Pamphilus nor any other has</p>	<p>1.22.3 By this speech I do not imagine the emperor</p>	

² This translation from NPNF2 vol. 2, p. 14-16, adapted by AJW, <http://www.fourthcentury.com/index.php/urkunde-26>.

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<p>ever mentioned these things, but I heard them from a man not prone to falsehood, who was very old. He simply stated what had taken place in the council in the course of a narrative. From this I conjecture that those who have passed by this occurrence in silence were driven by motives which have influenced many other historians, for they frequently suppress important facts, either from prejudice against some or partiality towards others. So far concerning Acesius.</p>	<p>intended to praise Acesius, but rather to convict him because, although he was a man, he fancied himself exempt from sin.</p>	
Constantine writes letters enforcing the Council		
	<p>1.25.4 He [Constantine] wrote to the churches in every city s that he might make it clear to those who had not been present what had been corrected by the Synod. Especially to the Church of Alexandria he wrote more than this, urging them to lay aside all dissent and to be harmonious in the faith issued by the Synod. For this could be nothing else than the judgment of God, since it was established by the Holy Spirit from the agreement of so many and such illustrious high priests and approved after accurate study and testing of all the doubtful points.</p>	