

# The Nicene Church Disappeared from Nicaea(Copy)

(CT Article)

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The creed set the standard for orthodoxy for 1,700 years. But no one professes the faith today in the ancient Turkish town where it was written.



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All the Christians will be tourists.

This year people will flock to the ancient city of Nicaea in Turkey to celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the church council and creed that set the standard for orthodoxy.

One Christian group has planned a trip with professors from Beeson Divinity School, Bethel University, and Hillsdale College. Another is going with leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, Reformed Theological Seminary, and 9Marks. Smaller groups have booked scores of commercial tours to the town about 90 miles southeast of Istanbul and lots of Christians have planned private, individual trips too.

But when they get there, they will not be joined by Christians from Nicaea itself.

İznik, as the place is known today, is a town of about 44,000 people. None of them hold to the creed. None profess belief in “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages.” None gather on Sundays to worship him who “was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; And ... rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures.”

### **There is no church in İznik.**

“It is a pity,” said Behnan Konutgan, translator of the New Turkish Bible and the author of the first history of Christianity in Turkey. İznik “is the place where they wrote one of the most important documents in history for Christians. ... But there is no church there now.”

Christians are a tiny minority in Turkey. Altogether, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant believers make up less than 0.5 percent of the population, and maybe less than 0.2 percent.

Some of their neighbors say that’s still too many. Nationalists, including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, link ethnic, religious, and civic identity. They say Turkish Christians aren’t really Turkish and may actually be an “enemy within.”

The country is legally secular, with constitutional protections for freedom of religion and worship. There's a caveat, though. Turkey allows religious liberty only as long as it doesn't "violate the indivisible integrity of the State." Officials have interpreted that to mean no new Christian worship spaces, no Christian schools, no seminaries or ministry training programs, and no right for Christians to share their faith and lead people to Christ.

At the same time, the Turkish government has put a lot of energy into religious tourism. Turkey encourages Christians from all over the world to visit the seven churches of Revelation, follow the path of Paul's missionary journeys, and see the sites of the early ecumenical councils, including Nicaea.

Visitors to İznik today can look at the ruins of the 33-foot walls that once ringed the city and what's left of an ancient church, submerged in the lake. They can visit another church that was turned into a mosque, a Roman theater that was turned into a church, ancient tile and porcelain workshops, and the archaeology museum, which includes artifacts from the Christians who once lived and worshiped in the city.

## Promoting İznik

In 2011, culture minister Ertuğrul Günay said he was working to double the annual number of religious tourists. He touted investment in hotels and archaeological discoveries—especially in İznik.

"İznik really has the potential to draw a lot of interest," he told The New York Times. "So we are trying to promote İznik."

Günay also supported a waiver allowing religious services in churches that have been turned into state museums so people can join in spiritual communion with the ancient church, going back to the time of the apostles.

The first congregation in Nicaea may have actually been founded by Peter. His first epistle is addressed to “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces” (1:1) and specifically mentions the province of Bithynia. Nicaea was the capital of Bithynia. Peter could have traveled there on his way from Jerusalem to Rome, so perhaps when he mentioned “those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (v. 12), he was including himself.

A later tradition attributes the founding of the church to the apostle Andrew. The apocryphal Acts of Andrew says he drove seven demons from Nicaea in Jesus’ name after the people cried out, “We believe that Jesus Christ whom thou preachest is the Son of God.”

Historians know little about the many generations who put their trust in Christ after that. Most lived, prayed, and died in complete anonymity. But the testimony of their faith still shines through the fragments of the historical record.

Archaeologists have discovered tombs from the first century bearing the name of Christ. Ancient funerary inscriptions depict communion: a table set with bread marked with the sign of the cross.

## A Persecuted Church

Roman authorities sporadically persecuted the Nicene church. Pliny the Younger, who became governor of the province in the year 111, reported that he forced people accused of being Christian to worship an image of the Emperor Trajan and curse the name of Christ—or be killed.

Still, he said, the Christians kept meeting in secret. He tortured two enslaved women who were deaconesses to find out what happened at

their gatherings. The women said the Christians would “sing responsively a hymn to Christ” and gather to “partake of food.”

The governor thought it was obvious that all this was “depraved, excessive superstition,” but he couldn’t stamp it out. When Christians died for their faith, their deaths encouraged faith in others.

The congregation in Nicaea remembered the names of their martyrs, lifting them up as examples. There was Tryphon, a goose-herder who cast a demon out of the emperor’s daughter but was beheaded; Theodota, a devout widow who refused to marry a Roman official and was burned to death; and Neophytos, a teenager who wouldn’t stop talking about Jesus, even when the soldiers gave him 500 lashes and put salt and vinegar in his wounds.

When Emperor Constantine finally made Christianity legal in 313, the Christians in Nicaea built their first church building where Neophytos was buried, outside the city, next to the lake. The best evidence suggests it was a wooden structure, according to scholar Mark R. Fairchild, who wrote a book about the excavation of the worship site.

Researchers believe that might be where Christian leaders first assembled when they met in Nicaea to discuss the Trinity and the correct understanding of the nature of Christ, 1,700 years ago.

Constantine had a palace by the lake. He summoned the bishops of the church and told them to settle their theological differences. He had united the Roman Empire at the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324. Now he would unite the church—making it a universal or catholic church—in 325. Bishops came from as far away as Cordoba, Rome, and Athens in the West, and Alexandria, Antioch, and even Persia in the East. There

were about 300 of them in a church that was 60 feet wide and a bit more than 130 feet long.

“Suffice it to say,” Fairchild writes, “the place would have been crowded.”

Eusebius, a bishop who was there from the province of Syria-Palaestina, wrote that the Nicene worship space seemed to grow, “as if extended by God,” until it “took them in all together.”

The bishops debated for a little more than two months. Then they gathered at Constantine’s palace and declared it official orthodoxy that Christ was, in fact, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same being as the Father, by whom all things were made.”

And then the bishops left. The Christians in Nicaea returned to their regular lives. They prayed their prayers, sang hymns, heard the Word, and took communion. Christians everywhere would call themselves Nicene Christians after that, but the Christians in Nicaea were mostly unknown, quietly faithful, going about their days putting their faith in Christ.

The wooden church was rebuilt with stone, and there were other churches—14 total in the town. A new Christian emperor named Justinian built one in honor of the council and called it Hagia Sophia, which means “holy wisdom.” Another council was held there, the seventh, to settle a debate about icons and their use in prayer. In the city’s Roman theater, someone painted a fresco of Jesus’ mother Mary on a throne, holding the infant Son of God, which historians say may be the first of its kind.

## Empires Rise and Fall and Change

History moved on. There were some hard times. An earthquake destroyed the church where Neophytos was buried, and the lake rose to cover the ruins. A Turkish Muslim prince conquered the city in 1075, taking a big bite out of the Byzantine Empire and founding his own, a Sunni Muslim state that he called “the Sultanate of Rome.”

Crusaders took Nicaea back for Christendom a few decades later. But then Western Christians fought Eastern Christians, and one of the Eastern Christians allied with another Sultan of Rome to set up a new empire, the Empire of Nicaea. That lasted three generations before it fell apart.

When the Ottomans seized Nicaea in 1331, they changed its name to İznik. They took the Hagia Sophia and turned it into a mosque.

“O Lord, help,” one of the Christians wrote on a wall in the city, where it is preserved today. “There is no other name.”

Christians in İznik continued to gather, though. The Ottoman Empire allowed them some latitude as a minority religion. So, in the city whose old name was synonymous with orthodoxy, they would come together on Sundays and confess again their Nicene faith.

Then came the 20th century and disaster.

The Ottoman government collapsed with the conclusion of World War I, and the Greeks sent an army to reclaim the territory of the Byzantine Empire. Turkish nationalists rose up to stop them. And as they fought back, the Young Turks also started driving out Christians. The nationalists said it was time to cleanse the land.

In İznik, in August 1920, they killed the Christians.

## Corpses Found Mutilated

The Greek army arrived three weeks later. One soldier wrote in his diary that when they went through the city, the Christian neighborhood was “terrifyingly quiet.” Then they found the corpses.

“We saw heads, hands, legs and other body parts scattered all over the place,” the soldier wrote. “We saw three wells filled with bodies from top to bottom. Then finally we found the cave where we saw roughly 400 bodies of varying ages, piled up, slaughtered in different ways. We couldn’t stay even a single minute as we began feeling dizzy and on the verge of being sick.”

The Christians who survived the massacre fled. The writer Ernest Hemingway, who reported on the conflict for the *Toronto Star*, recalled that the country seemed to be full of refugees. At the end of the war in 1923, the new Turkish state deported 1.2 million Christians to Greece. İznik has not had a church since then.

Today, Turkey has around 300,000 Christians. The largest group is Eastern Orthodox. There are only 8,000 to 10,000 evangelicals. None of them are in İznik.

The Turkish church-planting network Kurtulus (Salvation) has started more than 50 evangelical congregations across the country in the last 30 years, director İhsan Özbek told Christianity Today. But as far as Özbek can recall, no one has ever discussed trying to plant one in İznik. “It would be difficult,” Özbek said. “İznik is a very conservative small town. People are hostile against Christians. People have heard anti-Christian propaganda for many years—‘Christians are Westerners,’ ‘they want to hurt this country,’ and things like that.”



Evangelicals in Turkey nevertheless look to İznik with affection, Özbek said. That's where the creed was written. And the creed is all about Jesus—who he is and how he's God.

## Jesus Still Faithful

Turkey's evangelicals know Jesus continues to seek and find the lost, even in their country, even in places where the church has ceased to exist.

Özbek himself had an encounter with God on a public bus in 1982, when he saw a light and heard a voice saying, "I am God, and I exist." He went and found a Bible, and when he read it, he was surprised to find that same voice speaking in the New Testament. He wrote a letter to the Turkish Bible society with a million questions, he said, and later learned about the Light from Light, begotten not made.

He is delighted that Christians from around the world will remember the Nicene council and creed after 1,700 years. Turkish people are hospitable, he said, and will be eager to show tourists their culture, art, food, and history. Özbek hopes, though, that visiting Christians will notice the church that isn't there—and pray for the one that is.

"Thank you for thinking about Turkey," he said. "Pray for us to be bold enough to share our faith."