From Synagogues to Councils

Trace how ideas and imperial power shaped early Christianity

AWH.C.7.7 "Examine the early expansion of Christianity, including the relationship of early Christians, Jews, and officials of the Roman Empire, the relationship of Christianity to Greek thought (logos), the effects of state persecution..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one interaction Christians had with Jews, Greek thought, and Roman officials, then circle one effect of persecution and one effect of the Council of Nicaea.

A Movement Across an Empire

1. Christianity began within Judaism in the first century CE. Jesus and his earliest followers were Jews, and they read Jewish scriptures. After Jesus' death, followers preached in synagogues and across Roman cities. Some Jews joined them, while others rejected their claims about Jesus. As more non-Jews joined, disputes grew over whether these converts must follow Jewish law. Roman officials sometimes viewed Christian gatherings with suspicion, especially when Christians refused to honor Roman gods.

2. In Greek-speaking cities, Christians also explained their beliefs with ideas familiar to educated neighbors. The Gospel of John called Jesus the *logos*, or Word. Greek philosophers had used *logos* for reason or an ordering principle in the universe. Christians gave the term a particular meaning: God's Word became human in Jesus. Such language helped some listeners understand Christian claims, though it did not erase disagreements. Christian communities spread through travel, letters, and local networks.

3. Persecution varied by place and time. Some officials punished Christians who would not sacrifice to Roman gods; empire-wide crackdowns later led to imprisonment and executions. Fear disrupted communities, yet accounts of martyrs strengthened some believers' commitment and circulated beyond their cities. In 313, Constantine and Licinius proclaimed religious toleration. Constantine later called the Council of Nicaea in 325 to address a dispute about Jesus' relationship to God the Father. Its bishops affirmed that the Son shared the Father's divine being, giving that position powerful imperial support.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Christianity's Jewish roots and the arrival of non-Jewish converts create a new dispute?

2. How did Christians use the Greek idea of *logos* while giving it a distinct meaning?

3. What two different effects of persecution does the passage describe?

4. How did imperial power affect the position affirmed at Nicaea?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence museum caption explaining how Christianity's place in the Roman Empire changed. Use one detail about its Jewish roots or Greek thought and one about Nicaea, then explain how imperial power shaped the change.

ANSWER KEY

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one interaction Christians had with Jews, Greek thought, and Roman officials, then circle one effect of persecution and one effect of the Council of Nicaea. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Christianity's Jewish roots and the arrival of non-Jewish converts create a new dispute?	**Jesus and his earliest followers were Jews, but as non-Jews joined, people disputed whether the converts had to follow Jewish law.**
2	How did Christians use the Greek idea of *logos* while giving it a distinct meaning?	**Greek philosophers used *logos* for reason or an ordering principle. The Gospel of John called Jesus the Word, and Christians taught that God's Word became human in Jesus.**
3	What two different effects of persecution does the passage describe?	**Punishment and fear disrupted Christian communities, while accounts of martyrs strengthened some believers' commitment and circulated to other cities.**
4	How did imperial power affect the position affirmed at Nicaea?	**Constantine called the council, and imperial support gave the bishops' position about the Son and the Father greater influence.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Christianity began as a Jewish movement, and its followers debated how non-Jews should join. Early Christians could face punishment from Roman officials for refusing to honor Roman gods. Later, Constantine called bishops to Nicaea to address a dispute about Jesus and God the Father. The bishops affirmed a position about the Son, and imperial support gave it influence that early Christian groups had not held.

Accept responses that distinguish the bishops' decision from Constantine's role in calling the council and supporting its outcome. Students should describe change over time without suggesting that all Roman officials persecuted Christians or that Nicaea ended every disagreement.