

“The 2025 Nicaea Centenary”

By

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2025 marks 1700 years since the historic Council of Nicaea that convened in 325 CE. Given the loosely woven structure of the Pentecostal World Fellowship and the historical rejection of the Council of Nicaea as Empire by some member churches, there is limited interest among Classical Pentecostal churches in funding jubilee celebrations without cosponsors. Some of these Pentecostal churches were initially non-creedal, and perhaps few acknowledge the canon law tradition in their evolving ecclesiastical experiments. Some prominent Pentecostal leaders, international churches, and scholars have firm plans to collaborate with and partner with other initiatives, including the 2025 Faith & Order World Conference in Egypt and a wide spectrum of local, national, regional, and international events, including bilaterals and multilaterals, along with various publications.



Possible site of the Council of Nicaea 325 after the earthquake

I have been a part of more than one centenary celebration of Nicaea 2025, both as a speaker and a contributor to various publications. My exposure to this conversation was

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enhanced when in 2010 I visited the actual site of the 325 CE Council of Nicaea in a city now known as Iznik in Turkey. Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had invited me to bring a team of Pentecostal scholars to Constantinople for conversations about global Pentecostalism. During this week together, a guide took us to Iznik, and we saw for ourselves Emperor Constantine's Summer Palace, which housed the original event, perhaps in a basilica.

I was moved to tears as I knew that many of the bishops and church leaders who made their way to Nicaea bore the marks of persecution on their bodies. In the meantime, a teaching had emerged about some Christian thinkers that diminished the divinity of Christ (Arianism). The Nicene Creed sought to clarify the teaching of scripture by introducing a word not found in a biblical text (homousis). By affirming the biblical teaching that Jesus is of the same "substance" as the Father, it affirmed that Jesus is God with the Father (John 1:1). That formula remains the standard by which historic Christianity affirms the nature of God.

Pentecostals will be quick to note that the original Nicene creed has a simple affirmation about the Holy Spirit. The reality is that many of those assembled for the 325 CE Council of Nicaea had a diminished view of the deity of the Holy Spirit, despite the influence of a figure like Tertullian, who embraced a form of Montanism. This is reminiscent of the impact of Pentecostalism in the USA when articles were published in the 1960s about the 'forgotten Holy Spirit.' Obviously, the existence of global Pentecostalism was a rebuke to magisterial Christianity that marginalized their pneumatologies.

International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) founder JH King started as a Methodist Church Episcopal North minister and attended Grant University in Chattanooga, TN. He got caught up in the radical Fire-Baptized Holiness Association (FBHA) becoming the top leader of the FBHA and later the Pentecostal Holiness Church (PHC). King learned Greek well enough to write biblical passages in Greek and consult commentaries that required a basic knowledge of Greek. King's leadership of the PHC strongly supported not the canons but the creeds of the first four ecumenical councils starting with the 325 CE Council of Nicaea, a view echoed in other Pentecostal churches.

IPHC embodies an ecclesiology where one can easily appropriate its foundation for various forms of reconciliation. IPHC uses the Apostles' Creed in public readings but not the Nicene Creed, although their quadrennial manual endorses the Nicene Creed and other pre-20th-century catechisms and the like by Western Protestants and Anglicans. From their 19th-century start, both branches of early IPHC, including the 'radical' FBHA, printed manuals, disciplines, and constitutions affirming their beliefs and system of governance.²

² Vinson Synan, *Old-Time Power: A Centennial History of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, GA: LifeSprings, 1998); Vinson Synan and Dan Woods, *Fire-Baptized: The Many Lives and Works of Benjamin Hardin Irwin* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2017).

It is one thing for PHC founder G.F. Taylor, who earned a master's degree at the University of North Carolina, to say the Azusa St. Revival message is a truth worth dividing established churches. While emphasizing the importance of the Pentecostal experience, he affirmed that the body of Christ has always been much larger than just the Pentecostal Movement. Today, the Pentecostal World Fellowship provides ways for Pentecostal denominations and local churches to work together with other Christians in addressing persecution, poverty, pro-life, immigration, and care for the planet issues.

Those who surrender to the postmodern paradigm of post-denominationalism and care little about pre-denominational churches should read the commentary on John 17:21 by JH King and GF Taylor. North Carolina PHC Conference Superintendent AH Butler would call on this text during the November 21-23, 1911, PHC North Carolina convention as he looked back at recent events. The January 31, 1911, merger of the FBHC and PHC might be the first instance of organic unity achieved by Classical Pentecostals in the U.S.A.³ Of course, in true Pentecostal fashion, they suffered schisms in 1915 (Pentecostal Fire-Baptized Holiness Church) and 1921 (Congregational Holiness Church).

The following is taken with permission from the introduction to IPHC Presiding Bishop Doug Beacham's forthcoming revision of his *A Brief History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church*.

This sense of our unique identity, yet unity with Christ's larger body, has been part of our spiritual DNA from our beginning. In his inaugural editorial on May 3, 1917 of *The Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, G.F. Taylor wrote, "It shall not be the policy of this paper to magnify the PHC above every other organization on earth. We believe that the Church is of God, that it is God's will for His Church to be properly organized, and that He blesses them for so doing. We do not believe that we have the only church in the world, neither do we believe that all other churches are of the devil, nor that they belong to Babylon. We believe that God has committed a certain portion of His work into our hands, and that we shall be responsible for that at the judgment."

Thus, this is the story of the men and women who have been called to and through the "tribe" of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. As Taylor wrote in 1917, we have not thought of ourselves as the only people serving God. We have historically

³ Harold D. Hunter, "Full Communion: A Pentecostal Prayer," *Ecumenical Trends* 37:1 (January 2008) 1-7, 15. See *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Pentecostal Holiness Church of North Carolina*, November 21, 22, and 23, 1911 (Goldsboro: Nash Brothers, 1911), 4; GF Taylor: "Other Organizations," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* 1:24 (October 11, 1917), 9; "Perilous Times," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* 1:49 (April 4, 1918), 4; "Editorial Thoughts," "Bear With Me," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* 1:50 (April 11, 1918), 1, 8; (p. 8); JH King, "A Word to the Ministry and Membership of the Pentecostal Holiness Church," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* 5:4 (May 26, 1921), 2-3.

connected ourselves to God's work through the centuries and continue to recognize His people who are part of other "tribes," that is, other denominations and movements who comprise the Church universal.⁴

GF Taylor would use his role as editor of the official periodical for the PHC to emphasize support for the 451 CE Council of Chalcedon. JH King would do likewise to explain the connection between the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the core beliefs of the PHC. Affirming creeds from the first four ecumenical councils is still common among Pentecostals. Taylor's resistance to Babylonize non-Pentecostal churches stands out against the tapestry of constant condemnation of other churches by Pentecostals at that time and even into the 21st Century, fueled by frenzied takes on dispensational eschatologies.⁵ The King-Taylor approach is now foundational for member churches of the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America.

⁴ I reviewed the revised manuscript in 2020. The original book was AD Beacham, Jr., *A Brief History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, GA: Advocate Press, 1983). Beacham's revision has not been completed as of this date.

⁵ GF Taylor, "Sunday School Lesson," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* 2:49 (April 3, 1919), 2. JH King, "Articles of Faith: Doctrinally Considered," *The Advocate: Official Organ of Pentecostal Holiness Church* 20:13 (July 30, 1936), 9.