**The Emperor’s Kiss**
(excerpt from *The Apostasy That Wasn’t*, pg 126. – by Rod Bennett)

“When they were all assembled, the emperor ordered a great hall to be prepared for their accommodation in the palace, in which a sufficient number of benches and seats were placed. Each of the bishops took his place with becoming modesty, and silently awaited the arrival of the emperor. The court officers entered one after another, though only such as professed faith in Christ. Hosius and Eustathius, representing the West and the East respectively, appear to have acted as co-presidents, taking seats near the head of the hall.” (Theodoret – *Ecclesiastical History*)

‘And now, all rising at the signal which indicated the emperor’s entrance, at last he himself proceeded through the midst of the assembly…he surpassed all present in height of stature and beauty of form, as well as in majestic dignity of mien, and invincible strength and vigor.’ (Eusebius of Pamphilus - *Life of Constantine*)

Eusebius Pamphilus, always ready to magnify Constantine in his obsequious writings, makes much of the golden throne that had been provided for his use. Theodoret, on the other hand, records that the emperor asked for a “low stool” instead, and “did not seat himself on it until he had asked the permission of the bishops. Then all the sacred assembly sat down around him.” (Theodoret – *Ecclesiastical History*)

This opening session was called to order by the Eastern presider, Eustathius, who welcomed the emperor and asked him to address the gathering. Constantine rose and made the speech in his native Latin, with an accompanying translation into Greek, likely provided by Hosius:

“It was once my chief desire, dearest friends to enjoy the spectacle of your united presence; and now that this desire is fulfilled, I feel myself bound to render thanks, to God the universal King, because, in addition to all his other benefits, he has granted me a blessing higher than all the rest, in permitting me to see you not only all assembled together, but all united in a common harmony of sentiment. I pray therefore that no malignant adversary may henceforth interfere to mar our happy state.”

Continuing in a tone that, unhappily, remained a little too reminiscent of his high-handed letter to Arius and Alexander, the emperor exhorted the bishops to unity…

“and recalled to their remembrance the cruelty of the late tyrants, and reminded them of the honorable peace which God had, in his reign and by his means, accorded them. He pointed out how dreadful it was that at the very time when their enemies were destroyed, and when no one dared to oppose them, they should fall upon one another, and make their amused adversaries laugh, especially as they were debating about holy things, concerning which they had the written teaching of the Holy Spirit. For the gospels (continued he), the writings, and the oracles of the ancient prophets, clearly teach us what we ought to believe concerning the divine nature. Let, then, all contentious disputations be discarded; and let us seek in the divinely-inspired word the solution of the questions at issue. These and similar exhortations he, like an affectionate son, addressed to the bishops as to fathers, laboring to bring about their unanimity in the doctrines.” (Theodoret – *Ecclesiastical History*)

**In the preserved records, however, Constantine’s manner changes dramatically almost immediately after this oration**; after he would have been personally introduced, that is, to all of the gathered delegates one by one. If the emperor still labored, up to this point, under his impression that the whole dispute was merely a tiff between theoreticians, fostered by misused leisure, then he may not have been expecting to meet at Nicaea the kind of men with whom he was actually presented:

**Many individuals, like the holy apostle, bore in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ…. (Cf Galatians 6:17) Paul, bishop of Neo-Caesarea, a fortress situated on the banks of the Euphrates, had suffered from the frantic rage of Licinius [one of Constantine’s persecuting co-emperors]. He had been deprived of the use of both hands by the application of a red-hot iron, by which the nerves which give motion to the muscles had been contracted and rendered dead. Some had had the right eye dug out, others had lost the right arm. Among these was Paphnutius of Egypt.**

**These delegates, many of them had to be carried in on litters.** Constantine also met simple, holy souls like Spyridion of Cyprus, who had continued his daily routine a sheepherder even after being elected bishop of a major diocese; and James, a hermit of Mygdonia, who, the emperor was told, had raised a man from the dead with the very hands Constantine was now holding!

“In short”, as Theodoret concluded, “the council looked like an assembled army of martyrs.” Constantine, not surprisingly, was moved, even shaken. **“Observing that some among them had had the right eye torn out, and learning that this mutilation had been undergone for the sake of religion, he placed his lips upon the wounds, believing that he would extract a blessing from the kiss.”** (Theodoret – *Ecclesiastical History*)

The world, surely, has witnessed few scenes so momentous: the successor of Nero, of Caligula, of Commodus and Diocletian, kneeling on the floor of his own palace, kissing the ugly face of Roman persecution. Later, when the actual debates got started, the emperor sat quietly on his low stool and “listened to all with patient attention, deliberately and impartially considering whatever was advanced.” (Socrates - *Ecclesiastical History*) **He gave, after this, no more lectures.**