

Introduction to the Ecumenical Councils

I. Introductory Matters

a. What is an ecumenical council?

i. Definitions

1. Ecumenical Council: "A synod or assembly which, ideally, represents the whole Christian world and regulates matters involving doctrine, discipline, and cultic life."¹²
2. Creed/Confession: "A Creed, or Rule of Faith,² or Symbol, is a confession of faith for public use, or a form of words setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church."³

b. Why study the councils?

i. The ecumenical councils shaped church history.

1. The seven ecumenical councils span from A.D. 325 to A.D. 787.

ii. The ecumenical councils shaped the history of the world.

1. "Nobody will ever write a history of Europe that will make any sort of sense, until he does justice to the Councils of the Church, those vast and yet subtle collaborations for thrashing out a thousand thoughts to find the true thought of the Church. The great religious Councils of the Church are far more practical and important than the great international treaties which are generally made the pivotal dates of history. For in almost every case the international peace was founded on a compromise; the religious peace was founded on a distinction —the enunciation of a principle which has affected, and still does affect, the general state of mind of thousands of Europeans from admirals to applewomen."⁴

¹ Jerald C Brauer and Brian Albert Gerrish, *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1971), 285.

² In 1054 the church split into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. Both "churches" excommunicated the other. Therefore, ecumenical councils, by definition, cannot take place after this date.

³ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The History of Creeds*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1978), 4.

⁴ Quoted in Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787) : Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1990), 8.

- iii. The creeds produced by the councils are valuable.
 - 1. Creeds summarize the faith succinctly.
 - 2. Creeds aid in the training and maturing of Christians.
 - 3. Creeds unify Christians in a common faith.
 - 4. Creeds and confessions are public standards of doctrine which guard against error. They separate:
 - a. Christians from Unbelievers
 - b. Orthodoxy from Heresy
 - c. Denomination from Denomination

c. Does the Bible give warrant for conciliar meetings?

- i. The so-called Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-35 gives biblical precedent for conciliar meetings.
 - 1. The question arose over whether male Gentile converts to Christianity needed to receive the Mosaic custom of circumcision in order to be justified. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed those who required circumcision and were appointed by their church to go to Jerusalem as representatives to meet and discuss the matter with the Apostles and elders. (Acts 15:1-6) The Apostle Peter argued that salvation is by grace alone. (Acts 15:7-11) Paul and Barnabas gave testimony of God's salvation by faith alone among the Gentiles. (Acts 15:12) Finally, James interprets Amos 9:11-12 as a prophecy concerning the inclusion of Gentiles and judges that Gentiles are not required to receive the sign of the Old Covenant. The conciliar meeting then drafts a letter to publish to the churches instructing them in right doctrine. (Acts 15:22-35)

d. Does the Bible give warrant for creeds/confessions?

- i. Jesus gives warrant for personal confessions/summaries of faith.
 - 1. "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but

whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32-33, ESV)

- ii. The church is founded on Christ, yet several formulas of faith precede Pentecost.
 1. Peter’s Confession in Matthew 16:16.
 - a. ¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:13-19, ESV)
 2. The “Shema” of the Mosaic Covenant is a short confession of faith.
 - a. ⁴ “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, ESV)
- iii. After Pentecost, Paul’s refers to a confession the early church recited in their public worship referred to as the “Mystery of Godliness.”
 1. ¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16, ESV)
- iv. “The Church is, indeed, not founded on symbols, but on Christ; not on any words of man, but on the word of God; yet it is founded on

Christ as *confessed* by men, and a creed is man's answer to Christ's question, man's acceptance and interpretation of God's word."⁵

e. What is the relationship between Scripture and the creeds and confessions of the church?

- i. "In the Protestant system, the authority of symbols, as of all human compositions, is relative and limited. It is not co-ordinate with, but always subordinate to, the Bible, as the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and practice... The Bible is the *norma normans*; the Confession the *norma normata*. The Bible is the rule of *faith* (*regula fidei*); the Confession the rule of *doctrine* (*regula doctrinæ*). The Bible has, therefore, a divine and absolute, the Confession only an ecclesiastical and relative authority."⁶

II. Historic Survey

- a. **Nero's Persecution (AD 64)** – after the Great Fire of Rome, Emperor Nero used Christians as scapegoats.⁷
- b. **Herod's Temple Destroyed (AD 70)** – General Titus destroys Herod's Temple.
- c. **Domitian's Persecution (AD 90)** – Jewish people refuse a poll tax and Christians are implicated and persecuted by association.⁸
- d. **Trajan's Policy Against Christians (AD 98-117)** – Christians were not to be sought out but if accused and found guilty of being Christian, they were to be punished unless they recanted.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The History of Creeds*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1978), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7

⁷ "Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired." from Tacitus, "The Annals of Rome," *The Internet Classics Archive* (Daniel Stevenson, 2000), last modified 2000, accessed December 6, 2024, <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.mb.txt>.

⁸ González Justo L, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 36, 37.

- e. **Decian's Persecution (AD 249-251)** – Required all citizens to perform a sacrifice for the emperor's well-being.
- f. **Valerian's Persecution (AD 257-260)** – Edicts against Christians, initially only targeting clergy. Confiscation of property, arrest, and execution to those who refused to recant.
- g. **The Great Persecution (Diocletianic Persecution) (AD 303-311)** – Initiated by Diocletian, Galerius, and Maximian. Destruction of churches and Scriptures, loss of legal rights, arrest of clergy, forced public sacrifices to the Roman gods.
- h. **Reign of Constantine (AD 306-337)** – Converts to Christianity. Moves Imperial capitol east from Rome to Byzantium, renaming it Constantinople.
- i. **Edict of Milan (AD 313)** – Thought many cite the Edict of Milan as the sponsorship of Christianity by the state, the true nature of the edict was toleration. In the wake of Milan, this period saw the end of pagan-against-Christian conflicts and the rise of both Christian-against-pagan as well as Christian-against-Christian conflicts.
- j. **Council of Nicaea I (AD 325)** – Combats the heresy of Arianism. Holds that Christ, according to his divine nature, is of the same substance as the Father.
- k. **Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430)** – Author of Confessions (c. AD 397-400), City of God (AD 413-426).
- l. **Reign of Theodosius I (AD 379-395)** – Issued Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380) which declared Nicene Christianity the only legitimate religion for Roman Citizens, effectively making Christianity the state religion. Banned public sacrifices (AD 391) and closed pagan temples including the Serapeum in Alexandria.⁹
- m. **Council of Constantinople I (AD 381)** – Reaffirmed Nicene orthodoxy. Gregory of Nazianzus presides and Gregory of Nyssa makes the distinction between nature and person within the Trinity.¹⁰ Argued that the Holy Spirit is of the same substance as the Father and the Son. Combated the heresy of Montanism¹¹, Modalism & Apollinarianism¹².

⁹ For an interesting narration of this period of history see Edward Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation* (Oakland, California: University Of California Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries : A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 129.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 130. Apollinarianism denies the presence of a human mind or soul in Christ. See F L Cross and E A Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

- n. **Sack of Rome (AD 410)** – Visigoths under Alaric I sack Rome, initiating the Middle Ages.
- o. **Council of Ephesus (AD 431)** – Combats the heresy of Nestorianism, hypostatic union. Council approved the title “*theotokos*” for Mary.¹³
- p. **Sack of Rome (AD 455)** – Vandals under Genseric sack Rome again.
- q. **Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)** – Combats the heresy of Eutychianism. Rejected the Monophysite heresy of Eutychianism. Issued the Chalcedonian Definition.¹⁴
- r. **Fall of Western Roman Empire (AD 476)** – Western Roman Empire falls to barbarians under Germanic warlord, Odoacer.
- s. **Benedict of Nursia (c. AD 480-547)** – Writes the “Rule of St. Benedict” and founds the Benedictine Order of monasticism.
- t. **Reign of Justinian I (AD 527-565)** – Ruled the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire, reconquered western territories, built the Hagia Sophia.
- u. **Council of Constantinople II (AD 553)** – Convened by Emperor Justinian. Continued battle against Nestorianism.¹⁵
- v. **Muhammad (AD 570-632)**
- w. **Council of Constantinople III (AD 680-681)** – Combated the heresy of Monothelism. Holds there are two wills in the person of Christ because “will” is a property of nature, not person.¹⁶
- x. **Muslim Conquest of Spain (AD 711)**
- y. **Battle of Tours (AD 732)** – Franks, under Charles Martel, defeat the Muslims at the Battle of Tours, halting Muslim progress from Spain into the interior of Europe.

¹³ F L Cross and E A Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2005) 1145. Nestorianism holds there are two separate persons in the incarnate Christ, one divine and the other human.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 410, 411.

- z. **Council of Nicaea II (AD 787)** – Convened by Empress Irene. Addresses iconoclast controversy. Affirms the veneration of icons as a legitimate practice, distinguishes between veneration and worship.¹⁷
- aa. **Reign of Charlemagne (AD 768-814)** – On Christmas Day in AD 800, Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor of Europe initiating the Holy roman Empire.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1152.