

GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION

Studies in the Faith

History of the Church - Part II



**GREEK ORTHODOX
CHURCH
OF THE
ASSUMPTION**

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HISTORY OF THE CHURCH - PART II

“All profess that there are seven Holy and Ecumenical Councils, and these are the seven pillars of the faith of the Divine Word on which He erected His holy mansion, the Catholic and Ecumenical Church ”

(John II, Metropolitan of Russia—1080-1089)

READING ASSIGNMENTS

The Orthodox Church: by Timothy Ware, Chapter 2, Pages 17–40

“The Councils of Christ”: An article in Christian History, Vol. 16, No. 2, Pages 38-39

Acts of the Apostles: Chapters 13:1–18:22

VIDEO

The History of Orthodox Christianity: Byzantium, Part 2 of 3:

<https://www.goarch.org/-/history-of-orthodox-christianity-byzantium-2-of-3->

THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD: 33 A.D. TO 100 A.D.

1. The establishment of the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2:37 ff)
2. The establishment of the first Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 2:37-42)
3. The development of the threefold ministry of Deacon, Priest and Bishop (Acts 6:1 - 6, Acts 14:23 ff)
4. St. Stephen the first martyr and the dispersion of the apostles leading to the establishment of the Church throughout the empire (Acts 7:54-8:3)
5. The conversion of St. Paul to Christianity—who brought the Church to the gentiles (Acts 9:1-9)
6. The Development of the Liturgical Life of the Church (Acts 13:2)
7. The first council of Bishops—the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–35).
8. The development of monasticism (late 3rd early 4th century)

THE CHURCH OF THE SEVEN COUNCILS: 325 A.D. to 787 A.D.

The highest source of authority in the church is not the bishop but instead are the ecumenical councils. The ecumenical councils were called to deal with matters of Faith. While in session they also dealt with matters of worship and discipline. Ecumenical Councils were called to settle matters of Faith that were threatening to the Orthodox Beliefs of the faithful. Guided by the Holy Spirit the DECISIONS of the council on matters of Faith and Morals are accepted as infallible and binding. This is possible because the council is guided by the Holy Spirit. The decisions of the ecumenical councils are called "Canons" and are contained in a book called "The Rudder."

The model for the ecumenical councils is taken from the first council held in Jerusalem and recorded in the Book of Acts 15:1-35. The apostles, including St. Paul, gathered in Jerusalem to decide whether one had to meet the requirements of the Jewish Law of the Old Testament before becoming Christian. The decision was that the Law had been fulfilled and it was not necessary to maintain the Jewish Laws. What was important was that one acknowledges Jesus as Lord, repent, be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit.

The seven ecumenical councils held during the period of the united Church, that is, before the Patriarchate of Rome separated from the four Patriarchates of the east in the year 1054 A.D. are listed below:

1st COUNCIL: Nicea in 325 A.D. against Arianism: Arius was an Alexandrian priest who taught that Christ was

not God, but a creation of God, that the Son was inferior to the Father. This first council, convened by Constantine the Great, proclaimed that Jesus was fully God and hence proclaimed Arius' teaching as false. In light of the Arian heresy, the first seven articles of the Nicene Creed were developed by the first council in defense of the Church's beliefs.

I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages.

Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father, through Whom all things were made.

Who, for us all and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

Crucified for our salvation under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried.

And on the third day He rose according to the Scriptures.

And ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Hence, the first council dealt with a heresy which attacked the Divinity of Christ. The Arian heresy, that Jesus was not fully God, exists today in the beliefs of the Jehovah Witness Cult.

In addition, the first council dealt with the problem of when to celebrate Pascha (Easter). Until that time some celebrated Pascha with the Jewish Passover, others before, and others after the Jewish Passover. This first council decreed that the date for the celebration of Pascha must fall after the first full moon after the spring vernal equinox. It is by Tradition that the Church has added the third requirement that Pascha can only be celebrated after Passover. The Church added this requirement so that Pascha would not be confused with the Jewish feast of Passover. The Church today continues to adhere to these requirements for determining the date of Pascha.

2nd COUNCIL: Constantinople in 381 A.D. against Arianism and Apollinarianism: Apollinarius taught that the humanity of Christ was not fully developed. The Divine Logos had somehow assumed Jesus' humanity. If Jesus was not perfect man, and perfect God he could not save us. This council also condemned Macedonius, who preached that the Holy Spirit was inferior to the Father and the Son. In response, the three Cappadocian Fathers, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa, worked together and emphasized the "threeness" of God while St. Athanasius emphasized the oneness of God. Together, these four great Saints of the Church, in the light of the Macedonius and Apollinarius heresies, developed the doctrine of the Trinity. Hence the doctrine of the Trinity was established and affirmed. In defense of the Trinity, the Council Fathers completed the Creed by adding five additional articles to the original seven.

*And He shall come again in glory to, judge the living and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.
(Against the heresy of millennialism)*

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified; Who spoke through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

I await the resurrection of the dead.

And the life of the age to come. Amen.

The creed came to be known as the Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed and was incorporated into the Liturgical life of the Church.

Hence, the second Council dealt primarily with the heresy which attacked the Humanity of Christ.

3rd Council: Ephesus in 431 A.D. against Nestorianism: Nestorius, a bishop of Constantinople, taught that Jesus' humanity and godhead were represented in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but in two distinct persons co-existing in the same body. Hence, the Virgin Mary was only the mother of God's humanity, not his divinity. As a result, Nestorius wanted to call the Virgin Mary, "Christotokos" (the mother of Christ), and not "Theotokos" (the mother of God). The council affirmed that even though Jesus Christ was complete God and complete Man, the union between His divine nature and his human nature took place in such a unique way that one did not disturb the integrity of the other. What the Virgin Mary bore was a single and undivided person who is God and man at once. The dual nature of Christ, both fully God and Man co-existing equally in one person was affirmed. The title for mother of God, "Theotokos", upholds this doctrine. Hence, in the Orthodox Church, the Mother of God is referred to as the "Theotokos" to this day.

4th Council: Chalcedon in 451 A.D. against Monophysitism: Once again, the two natures of Christ, divine and human, became the cause of controversy. A bishop named Dioscorus taught that at some point Jesus' divine nature consumed and eliminated His human nature. The heresy is called Monophysitism. The word monophysite means "one nature." This council condemned the monophysite teachings and declared that Jesus Christ had two natures: divine and human, full and complete, as defined in previous Councils. Unfortunately, due to this heresy, a segment of the Church separated and continues to be parted until this day. They are the Armenian Church, the Coptic Church in Egypt and other parts of North Africa, as well as the Jacobite Churches, collectively called the Non-Chalcedonian or Oriental Orthodox Churches. These Churches to this day do not accept the findings of the 4th Ecumenical Council. This schism is currently in the process of being healed, however communion has not yet been fully restored.

5th Council: Constantinople in 553 A.D.: The fourth-century Arian controversy made its way into Western European Christianity in the sixth century. In the eastern part of the empire the Monophysite controversy continued to plague the Church. Following the established tradition of his predecessors, Justinian the Great called the Fifth Ecumenical Council which declared once and for all the teachings of the Church regarding the two Natures of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

6th Council: Constantinople in 681 A.D.: This council met to discuss the heresy of Monothelitism. The Monophysite controversy did not subside. Many attempts were made to settle this dangerous controversy. One such attempt said, "Yes, Jesus Christ did have two natures, divine and human, but the human nature was motivated and influenced by the divine nature." In other words, the divine nature made all the decisions and the human nature carried and acted them out. This teaching came to be known as "monothelitism," or "one will," which was divine. The sixth council condemned this teaching as a heresy and proclaimed: "Christ has two natures, with two activities: As God He worked miracles, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. As Man He performed the ordinary acts of daily life, His human nature exercised its own free will."

7th Council: Nicea in 787 A.D. Against Iconoclasm: Iconoclasts stated that icons should not be allowed in Churches, that Churches should have, at the most, crosses in them. This heresy focused on Christ's human nature, the Christian attitude towards matter, and ultimately the true meaning of Christian redemption. The Iconoclasts were purists who were suspicious of any religious art which represented God, Jesus Christ, the Theotokos or the Saints in any artificial or material way. They demanded that the Church rid herself of every form of art that found expression in this way and that such religious art should be destroyed. The Iconodules, on the other hand were those who believed that icons served to preserve the doctrinal teachings of the Church. This controversy of the veneration of icons began in 726 and ended finally in 843 A.D. The seventh ecumenical council affirmed the place of icons in worship. The empress Theodora brought to a halt the persecution against the Iconodules in 843. This final victory of the Holy Icons is known as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Eastern Orthodox Christendom commemorates this triumph every year on the First Sunday of Lent called "The Sunday of

Orthodoxy."

**SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY
THE SYNODIKON
(The Confession of Faith as Pertains to the Holy Icons)**

As the prophets beheld, as the Apostles have taught, ...as the Church has received,...as the teacher's have dogmatized, ...as the Universe has agreed, ...as Grace has shown forth, ...as Truth has revealed, ...as falsehood has been dissolved, ...as Wisdom has presented, ...as Christ awarded, ...thus we declare, ...thus we assert, ...thus we preach Christ our true God, and honor His Saints in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in Churches, in Holy Icons; on the one hand worshipping and reverencing Christ as God and Lord; and on the other hand honoring as true servants of the same Lord of all and accordingly offering them veneration.

This is the Faith of the Apostles, this is the Faith of the Fathers, this is the Faith of the Orthodox, this is the Faith which has established the universe.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

- 313 AD: The Edict of Milan, making Christianity legal.
- 325 AD: The 1st Ecumenical Council, held at Nicea (District of Constantinople) which condemned Arius who denied that Christ was the second person of the Trinity. First articles of the Nicene Creed written.
- 330 AD: The Roman Capital moved to Byzantium.
- 337 AD: The death of Constantine.
- 381 AD: The 2nd Ecumenical Council in Constantinople combated persistent teachings of Arius and Apollinarianism. Expanded and produced the final draft of the Nicene Creed defining the beliefs of the Church and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.
- 407 AD: The death of St. John Chrysostom, the Patriarch of Constantinople, whose version of the Divine Liturgy is the main Liturgy celebrated in Orthodoxy today.
- 431 AD: 3rd Ecumenical Council in Ephesus. The Nestorian controversy (Theotokos vs Christotokos).
- 451 AD: 4th Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon condemned Monophysitism (the one-nature). Defends the two nature doctrine that Jesus is fully God and also fully Man.
- 529-535 AD: The compilation of Justinian's Code of Roman Law.
- 537 AD: The completion of the church of Hagias Sophia (Holy Wisdom) by Emperor Justinian. Also called the Great Church, it was the cathedral of Constantinople, and its style of worship was copied throughout the East.
- 553 AD: 5th Ecumenical Council in Constantinople further amplifies the true doctrines of the Church.

- 632 AD: The death of Mohammed.
- 681 AD: 6th Ecumenical Council in Constantinople. Condemned the Monothelite (the one will) heresy.
- 691 AD: The Quinisext Council (also known as the Trullan Council) is called to finish the work of the 5th and 6th Councils. Its work was on the canons of the Church. No dogmatic matters of faith were addressed.
- 726 AD: The Iconoclastic controversy begins.
- 787 AD: The 7th Ecumenical Council, held in Nicea, the condemnation of iconoclasm.
- 843 AD: Icons returned to the Churches: First Sunday of Lent.
- 863 AD: The first Slavic mission from Thessaloniki.
- 988 AD: The mission to Kiev from Constantinople.
- 1054 AD: Schism between Roman West and Byzantine East.
- 1439 AD: The Council of Florence.
- 1453 AD: The fall of Constantinople.



The Counsels of Christ

*The Orthodox believe Jesus' voice
can still be heard in the seven ecumenical councils.*

by STANLEY SAMUEL HARAKAS

Jesus Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide the church "into all truth" (John 16:13). According to the Orthodox, this promise finds its most complete fulfillment in the ecumenical councils. At ecumenical (from the Greek word for worldwide") councils, bishops and clergy from across the church gathered to produce two types of rulings. Canons deal with administrative matters and can be changed by later councils. Hoi, doctrinal formulations, cannot; they permanently express authentic Orthodox teaching.

Through the centuries, Orthodox leaders have gathered in dozens of councils to discuss doctrine and practice. But the Orthodox believe there have been only seven truly ecumenical councils. Here are the main theological teachings and some sample canons passed by each council.

1. Nicea (325)

- 318 bishops
- Opposed the teaching of Arius by affirming that Jesus Christ is fully divine.
- Issued the first version of the Nicene Creed.
- Passed 85 canons: Rome is the first see of Christendom; various restrictions are to be placed on Christians who denied the faith under persecution; prayer should be offered standing.

2. Constantinople (381)

- 150 bishops
- Affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit, thus formulating the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: One God in three persons (*hypostases*), Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Completed final version of Nicene Creed (also called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed).
- Passed seven more canons: bishops should not interfere in matters of other dioceses; the bishop of Constantinople is second only to Rome.

3. Ephesus (431)

- 200 bishops
- Rejected the teaching of Nestorius, affirming that Jesus Christ was one person with two natures.
- Declared Mary the *Theotokos*, “Birthgiver of God.”
- Passed eight canons: bishops deposed by Nestorian bishops are to be reinstated; it is forbidden to alter the Nicene Creed.

4. Chalcedon (451)

- 630 bishops
- Opposed monophysite views, which held that the divine nature of Jesus Christ overwhelmed his human nature. Taught that the divine and human in Christ were united without confusion, change, division, or separation.
- Passed 30 canons: clergy and monks forbidden from involvement in business or the military; women cannot be ordained deaconesses before the age of 40; priests and deacons are not permitted to seize the material goods of their bishop once he dies.

5. Constantinople II (553)

- 165 bishops
- In light of continuing controversies about the person of Christ, it re-affirmed the teachings of the previous ecumenical councils regarding Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
- No canons passed.

6. Constantinople III (680)

- 170 bishops
- Opposed the monothelete (single divine will) teaching about Christ, and affirmed that Jesus Christ had both full human and divine wills, united harmoniously under the leadership of the divine will.
- No canons passed.

5. & 6. Quinisext Council (692)

- 327 bishops
- Also known as the Council in Trullo because it was held in the *trullus*, or domed room of the emperor’s palace in Constantinople.
- It is viewed as an extension of the Fifth-Sixth Ecumenical Councils, thus the name.
- Passed 102 canons: obligatory clerical celibacy condemned; Saturday fasting during Lent forbidden.

7. Nicea II (680)

- 367 bishops
- Held in the midst of the more-than-century-long icon controversy (725-842). Concluded that only God

can be worshiped, but icons can be honored as a means of expressing devotion to what was depicted in them.

- Passed 22 canons: bishops, priests, and deacons cannot be appointed by secular authorities; women cannot stay in bishop' houses or men's monasteries.

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CLASS CHECK LIST

- Attended class
- Viewed the video on "The History of Orthodox Christianity: Byzantium", Part 2 of 3.
- Read the article Councils of Christ In Christian History, Vol. 16, No. 2, Pages 38-39
- Read pages 17-40 of The Orthodox Church, by Timothy Ware.
- Read Acts of the Apostles: Chapters 13:1 - 18:22

