



Church Councils

Source: The Encyclopedia of
Religion: Volume 4

Agenda

- Early Councils
 - Early Ecumenical Councils
 - Medieval Councils
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1. Councils in the Early Church

- Acts 15:6-29
 - Involved
 - Apostles
 - Elders
 - Issues
 - Full observance of the Mosaic law
 - Resolution—grace and some abstinence
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1. Councils in the Early Church

- Other special meetings of the bishops in particular provinces or regions to deal with disputed matters
 - Prophetic monastic movement (Asia Minor, c. 170 AD)
 - The date of the celebration of Easter (Asia Minor, Palestine, Gaul, and Rome, c. 190 AD)
 - Readmission to Christian communion of those who had “lapsed” in persecution (Rome, c 230-250 AD, Carthage, c. 240-250 AD)
 - Scandalous behavior of Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch (Antioch, 264-268)
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils: Nicaea (325 AD) 1st ecumenical council

- Called by emperor Constantine I at **Nicaea**, in northwest Asia Minor in the summer of 325 (June 19th—August 25)
 - Model for later authoritative gatherings
 - Style and procedure similar to Roman Senate
 - Involved: influence of the emperor Constantine, Bishop Hosius of Cordova and the Alexandrian priest Athanasius—who formulated common theological and practical decisions.
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Nicaea cont. 1st ecumenical council

■ Issues

- To settle the controversy raised of Arius's denial of the eternity and full divinity of Jesus
 - Resolution: Jesus as Son of God is “begotten, not made” and “of the same substance as the Father”
 - Laid groundwork for the doctrine of Trinity
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Constantinople I, (381 AD) 2nd ecumenical council

- Involved: Emperor Theodosius I convoked a meeting of 150 Greek-speaking bishops in 381 (May—July)
 - Issues
 - Affirmed Nicaea's insistence on the full divinity of Jesus as Son
 - Condemned those who denied that the Holy Spirit is a distinct individual within the Trinitarian mystery of God
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Ephesus (431 AD) 3rd ecumenical council

- Held at Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor in the summer of 431 AD
 - Involved: a meeting of bishops called by then emperor Theodosius II; representatives of the opposing groups could not agree to meet and they excommunicated each other
 - Issues
 - Bitter dispute between Nestorius bishop of Constantinople and Cyril, bishop of Alexandria over the proper way of conceiving the relationship of the divine and human aspects of Jesus
 - Judge the propriety of calling Mary “Mother of God” (*theotokos*)
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Ephesus (431 AD) 3rd ecumenical council

■ Issues cont.

- Later (April 433) Cyril came to an agreement with the more moderate of Nestorius's supporters to excommunicate Nestorius and to accept the title *theotokos* as valid, but also recognize that in Jesus two distinct natures—the human and the divine—are united without confusion in a single individual
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Chalcedon (451 AD) 4th ecumenical council

- Involved: Emperor Marcian called the meeting for over 350 bishops (including three legates from Pope Leo I and two North African bishops)
 - Issues:
 - Humanity of Jesus constituting a distinct and operative reality or “nature” after the incarnation of the Word
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Chalcedon I (451 AD) 4th ecumenical council

■ Issues cont.

- The chief inspiration of the theological statement on balanced “two-nature” Christology was the letter written by Leo to Bishop Flavian of Constantinople in 449.
 - Regarded as the 4th ecumenical council
 - Confirmed some jurisdictional primacy in Asia Minor and northeastern Greece to the second see in Constantinople
 - Didn't end controversy on the theological stuff (p. 126)
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Constantinople II (553) 5th ecumenical council

- After more than a century of recriminations, especially in the East, the emperor Justinian I convoked another meeting at Constantinople (Constantinople II) in the year of 553 (5 May—2 June)
 - Persuaded 168 bishops to present a reformulation of the Christology of Chalcedon in terms that more clearly emphasized the centrality of Jesus' divine identity.
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Constantinople II (553) 5th ecumenical council

- The also condemned the speculative theology of Origen (third century) and his followers; also, the chief opponents Cyril of Alexandria from a previous century.
 - The Roman bishop, Viglius I, was present in Constantinople but refused to attend, suspecting along with most Western bishops that it was being forced to weaken the stated faith of Chalcedon, in the interests of political unity—however in 554 he agreed to accept the decisions of Constantinople II, a step that resulted in decades of controversy in Italy and Africa
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Constantinople II (553) 5th ecumenical council

- Constantinople II is generally accepted since then as the fifth ecumenical council

2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Constantinople III (680) 6th ecumenical council

- In the century that followed the 5th ecumenical council, Greek theologians continued to look for ways of reconciling the monophysites, Christians who had broken from the official church after Chalcedon by emphasizing the dynamic unity of the two natured Christ as a divine person
 - One such attempt favored by several 7th century Byzantine patriarchs and emperors, was the ascription to Christ of a single divine will and “activity,” or range of behavior.
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Constantinople III (680) 6th ecumenical council

- Led by the exiled Greek monk Maximos the Confessor, a local Roman synod of October 649 rejected this new Christology as a subtle weakening of the integral affirmation of Jesus' humanity
 - This condemnation was confirmed by a small gathering of mainly Eastern bishops in the rotunda of the imperial palace in Constantinople between 7 November 680 and 16 September 681—subsequently recognized as 6th ecumenical council
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Note

- Ten years later the emperor Justinian II summoned another gathering of bishops in the same rotunda to discuss disciplinary issues and formulate practical canons that would supplement the authoritative theological decisions of Constantinople II & III.
 - This was called the “Quinisext” (5th & 6th) synod or the synod “in the rotunda”—a.k.a. as the Trullan synod
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Note

- The membership of this meeting was also entirely Greek and a number of its canons explicitly rejected Western practices
 - This gather is not regarded as ecumenical, however, its legislation became one of the main sources of Orthodox canon law and was also frequently cited by Western medieval canonists
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Nicaea II (787) 7th ecumenical council

- The main theological controversy in the 8th and 9th centuries Eastern church was no longer directly over the person of Christ, but over related issues of the legitimacy of using and venerating images in the context of worshiping a transcendent God
- In 726 emperor Leo III began the policy of removing and destroying the images in churches (iconoclasm) and his successor, Constantine V, convoked a synod of 338 bishops in Constantinople in 754 to ratify this practice, excommunicating those who defended the use of images, including the theologian and monk John of Damascus

2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Nicaea II (787) 7th ecumenical council

- In 787 (24 September—7 October) the empress Irene convoked another synod at Nicaea (Nicaea()), attended by some 350 Greek bishops and two papal representatives
 - This synod reversed the decision of the year 754 and affirmed the legitimacy of venerating images and of asking for the intercession of the saints, while insisting also that worship, in the strict sense, is due to God alone
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2. Early Ecumenical Councils:

Nicaea II (787) 7th ecumenical council

- A resurgence of iconoclastic influence in the early 9th century delayed full acceptance of this council's decrees in the East, while the rivalry of the emperor Charlemagne and the poor Latin translation of the acts of Nicaea II that reached his court led to resistance in the West and even to condemnation of the council's decisions at a synod of 350 bishops in June 794.
 - However, Nicaea II was recognized as the 7th ecumenical council at the council of Constantinople (869-870) a recognition that was endorsed by the West by Pope John VIII in 880
 - It was the last ancient council recognized as authoritative by virtually all Christian churches (p. 127)
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3. Medieval Councils

- After the death of Theophilos, the last iconoclastic emperor, in 842, controversy in mid-ninth-century Constantinople over the manner of reinstating the veneration of images led to the forced abdication of the patriarch Ignatius in 858 and to the appointment of the learned civil servant Photios, a layman, as his successor
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3. Medieval Councils

- None of the Photian councils is recognized as ecumenical by other churches
 - After the synod of 879-880, Eastern and Western bishops ceased to meet over common concerns for almost four centuries
 - Local and regional synods, however, continued to play an important role in civil and ecclesiastical life
 - It was only in the time of the “Gregorian reform,” however, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, that the popes as part of their program of strengthening the power and independence of the ordained clergy in ruling the church, thought again of convoking councils with a more than regional representation
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3. Medieval Councils

- Gregory and his successors began to invite bishops and abbots from other parts of Europe to participate in Roman synods and also took the lead in mobilizing European forces to regain the Christian holy places in Palestine from Muslim occupation
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3. Medieval Councils

- Three 12th century Roman synods demonstrated the concern of the popes at this period to assert the independence of the hierarchy from lay control by enacting a variety of measures that insured the moral and social integrity of the clergy
 - The Lateran councils of 1123, 1139, & 1179
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