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Ecumenical and Local councils

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“*But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter*” (Acts 15:5,6 NKJ).

“It is often said that the meeting of the apostles (Acts 15) to discuss whether circumcision was required of Gentile converts was the primary model of the church’s practice of leaders’ meetings for debate and resolution of problems.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“The first example of Christian bishops conferring with one another is provided in the practice of extending letters of communion and recommendations for Christians traveling between various city churches… Tertullian is one of the first to mention that the Asia Minor bishops had a custom, already in place before the second century, that the church leaders of their large area would meet occasionally to discuss controversies.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Tertullian (160-220 AD) wrote:

“*Throughout the provinces of Greece, there are held in definite localities those councils gathered out of the universal churches. By means of these councils, not only are all the deeper questions handled for the common good, but the actual representation of the whole Christian name is celebrated with great veneration*.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“The first church councils were held in Asia Minor in the latter half of the second century to consider what to do about Montanism (Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.1.10; cf. Tertullian, *JEJ*. 13, for councils in Greece)… Bishops of a province met annually under the presidency of the bishop of the chief city with some regularity in the mid-third century, particularly in North Africa, as is known from Cyprian of Carthage.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

St. Cyprian (200-258 AD) wrote,

*“When the persecution had quieted, and opportunity of meeting was afforded, a large number of bishops.. met together”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

*“We have thought it necessary for the arranging of certain matters, dearest brother and for their investigation by the estimation of a common council, to gather together and to hold a council, at which many priests were assembled at once.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

The Seventh Council of Carthage 256 AD stated:

“*On the first of September, a great many bishops from the provinces of Africa, Numidia, and Mauritania met together at Carthage, together with the presbyters and deacons, And a considerable part of the congregations were also present*.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The **Apostolic Constitutions** State:

*“Let a synod of bishops be held twice a year. Let them ask one another the doctrines of piety, and let them resolve the ecclesiastical disputes that happen.”[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Pope Dionysius of Alexandria (248-264 AD) wrote,

“*In the most considerable councils of the bishops, I hear it has been decreed that those who come from heresy should first be trained in [orthodox] doctrine and then should be cleansed by baptism*.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

“The first council of bishops from a significantly wider geographical areas occurred at Arles in 314. It was called by Constantine to deal with questions posed by the Donatist schism in North Africa… This gathering provided precedent for the First Ecumenical Council, held in Nicaea in 325 to discuss the teachings of Arius.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Five Types of Early Councils[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Ecumenical Councils: three authoritative councils in doctrinal matters convened by the Emperor (Nicaea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431).
2. Patriarchal: Synods of Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, and Antioch already in the third century gathered bishops from outside their immediate province anticipating the patriarchal organization of later times.
3. Provincial: the Council of Nicaea required the bishops of a province to come together twice a year.
4. Diocesan: the bishop of a city was expected to call together his clergy several times a year.
5. Endemic: A peculiar type of Council was the permanent or “resident” holy synod in Constantinople. After the transfer of the imperial government to Constantinople in the fourth century, there would be bishops from many places in the capital at any given time. The emperor would call in whatever clerics were in Constantinople at the time to meet with the local clergy on any matter of moment.

General or Ecumenical Councils:

“A formal meeting of bishops and representatives of several churches convened for the purpose of regulating doctrine or discipline. General or Oecumencial councils are assemblies of the bishops representing the whole church. The decrees of such General Councils are held to possess the highest authority which the church can give.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Reason for Summoning an Ecumenical Council

Some heresies had settled into the church temporarily, yet the time was not opportune to summon an Ecumenical Council for official condemnation. The fathers responded to such heresies condemning them, yet no Council was to convene unless a heresy threatened a schism in the church. As an example the First Ecumenical Council was summoned, not that the Arian heresy was the first heresy to appear in the church, but because Emperor Constantine, beginning to believe in Christianity (not as yet baptized) felt that Arius could result in splitting the empire. Arius after being divested and his teachings condemned at the Alexandrine Council headed by Pope Alexander in 318AD, (the historian Hefele contends that the Alexandrine Council convened in 320AD)[[13]](#footnote-13), left Alexandria for Nicomedia (and the countries on the western boundary of the Mediterranean Sea, East of Egypt) where he began dispersing his concepts and was able to influence two bishops: Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea.

The Arian struggle intensified in Alexandria between Arius and his followers on one side, and Pope Alexander and those with him on the other[[14]](#footnote-14). As for his influence outside Alexandria, he was about to cause a split in the Roman Empire, which prompted the summoning of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea. This however was not the first heresy to appear in the church.

There are many heresies which did not cause an Ecumenical Council to convene, where the Church was satisfied with condemning or excommunicating them together with their innovators, either in local councils or through other methods (the methods varied over the years). Often the Church anathematized a heresy after its innovator had died. Possibly the heresy did not reach its climax during his lifetime, but his disciples revitalize it after his demise, posing a danger to the Church. Macedonius was condemned at the Council of Constantinople and was divested from his throne as Patriarch of Constantinople, along with two other heresies from a time prior to convening the council: The Sabellian heresy and the Apollinarian heresy. The Council primarily convened regarding the heresy of Macedonius, but the fathers assumed the opportunity to purify the thoughts from the other heresies for which convene councils were not convened; Sabellius and Apollinarius were condemned along with their heresies.

**The First Three Ecumenical Councils:**

First: Nicene Council 325 AD

Convened:

1. To refute the Arian heresy.
2. To formulate the Nicene Creed, which ended with, “Yes we believe in the Holy Spirit”, being content with this phrase concerning the Holy Spirit since the focus of this Council was defending the Divinity of Christ.

second: Constantinople Council 381 ad

1. To refute the heresies of Macedonius, Sabellious, and Apollinarius
2. To continue the Nicene Creed to end with, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come.”
3. The Creed was re-named the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

third: Ephesian Council 431 ad

1. To refute the Nestorian heresy. Nestorius (Patriarch of Constantinople) was divested of his priestly rank and anathematized, along with his teachings.
2. To formulate the Introduction to the Creed, “We exalt you O Mother of the True Light, and glorify you O Holy Virgin Mother of God (Theotokos)…”

**Receiving Doctrinal Decisions**

The doctrinal decisions in keeping and defending the Apostolic faith which the assembly of the holy fathers of the first three ecumenical councils (Nicaea 325 AD, Constantinople 381 AD and Ephesus 431 AD) decreed are considered infallible. These doctrinal decisions were accepted by the general church.

However, not all the administrative decisions of the same councils were accepted.

“Decisions on matters of faith are called “symbols” (creeds or definitions of faith). Decisions on disciplinary, liturgical, or organizational matters were framed in “canons.” Athanasius saw it as significant that the bishops at Nicaea, when they approved a statement of faith, said, “**This believes the Catholic church,” for they could not define the faith but only confess that which had been delivered to them, but in their other decisions they wrote, “It seemed good”** (*Syn*. 1.15).”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Council of Constantinople 381 AD as an example:

* **Philipp Schaff mentions**:

“**Pope Damasus confirmed this synod; but, this confirmation could only have referred to the creed and not to the canons**. As late as about the middle of the fifth century, Pope Leo I. spoke in a very depreciatory manner of these canons… Thus, as late as the year 600, **only the creed, but not the canons of the Synod of Constantinople were accepted at Rome**; but on account of its creed, Gregory the Great reckons it.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

* **The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology states:**

“Canon 3 reassigned orders of precedence in the East. This especially caused Rome to refuse to acknowledge this council for many years. When it did receive it, it continued to reject its canons until well into the seventh century. At Chalcedon 451, the synod of 381 was retrospectively given Ecumenical status as the Second Ecumenical Synod.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Authority of the Councils**

“Conciliarism is the view that the authority of the councils is above that of popes.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

“The council was always given **precedence in authority over the bishop or patriarch**. From the beginning the synod of bishops was expected to manifest a “common mind”.. Thus when a crisis arose over a point of doctrine or discipline, the collective mind and faith of the bishops should be able to recognize immediately and acclaim authoritatively the true line of the tradition… The conciliar outcome was not to be decided by majority vote.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The conciliarity of the church, is that one should not have an independent opinion but that he should live through the community and intellect of the fathers. The conciliarity is that one should not think that he is conducting the church himself, but should know that the others are mirrors that reveal the truth.

The catholic church is when the church lives in conciliarity. This catholicity of the church can be fulfilled by the conciliarity of the church.

**Interpretation of “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us”** (Acts 15:28 NKJ)

Only the decisions of the assembly of apostles were infallible.

The attendants of the council of the apostles were the twelve disciples themselves, the seventy apostles, including the evangelists, St. Paul and St. Luke who wrote the New Testament books. St. Peter wrote, “*for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Pet. 1:21 NKJ). St. Paul wrote, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” (2 Tim. 3:16 NKJ).

The Book of Revelation mentions, “*Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*” (Rev. 21:14 NKJ), St. Paul wrote, “*having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone*” (Eph. 2:20 NKJ).

Therefore the holy apostles are in a superior condition compared to any person throughout history. Consequently their council cannot be compared to any other council, since it is the only ultimately infallible council in all its decisions which are mentioned in an inspired book.

The decision of the council of the apostles was in consensus. The opinions were presented to the apostles and elders and the whole church in an open discussion. Therefore St. James was able to conclude saying, “*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us*” (Acts 15:28 NKJ), for the following reasons:

1. The decision was one by *men of God* inspired by the Holy Spirit, including writers of Holy Scriptures.
2. The decision was in consensus.
3. The decision was not reached by voting, was without one objection.
4. The decision did not cause any schism in the church, on the contrary it annulled any likeness of division or chaos caused by the Judaists.

All the above mentioned points are not present in any other succeeding church council.

1. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ANF, Vol. IV, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Garland Publishing, second edition, New York & London 1998, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ANF, Vol. V, p. 328, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ANF, Vol. V, p. 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ANF, Vol. V, Seventh Council of Carthage, p. 565 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ANF. Vol. VII, p. 502. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ANF, Vol. VI, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Garland Publishing, second edition, New York & London 1998, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Garland Publishing, second edition, New York & London 1998, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cross, F.L. & Livingstone, E.A., *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, USA 1997, p. 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. C. J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils*, from the original documents, AMS Press 1972, reprinted from the edition of Edinburgh T. & T. Clark, 1894, Vol. 1 p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Some submit to the church and its leadership, while others are intrigued by and delight in strange ideas, being inclined toward peculiarity. This is the case throughout the generations. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Garland Publishing, second edition, New York & London 1998, p. 296-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. P. Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. XIV, Canons of the One hundred and Fifty Fathers Who Assembles at Constantinople, P. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, London, 2004, p. 82, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hastings, Mason and Pyper, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2000, P. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)