



# Ecumenical Councils

## **Objective:**

- ❖ To learn about the major ecumenical councils and their role in defending the Christian faith from heresies

## **Memory verse:**

*“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:4).*

## **Lesson outline:**

### **I. What Do “Ecumenical Councils” Mean?**

They are meetings held for the Bishops of all the Christian Sees in the whole world. They are held when urgent matters arise, such as strange teachings that could cause disruption or division within the Church.

### **II. Conditions to Be Observed in Ecumenical Councils**

- ❖ They are to be held whenever there is a heresy or a division.
- ❖ They were called by a Christian Emperor.
- ❖ They are attended by the majority of the Bishops of the east and west so as to ensure global representation.
- ❖ They are to be held whenever a new issue is to be determined which had not been discussed.

### **III. The Above Conditions Apply to Three Councils Only**

- ❖ The Council of Nicene
- ❖ The Council of Constantinople
- ❖ The Council of Ephesus

The importance of such councils arises from the fact that the Church wishes to insure that it draws its doctrines from the following principal sources:

- ❖ The Holy Bible
- ❖ Apostolic doctrines
- ❖ Ecumenical councils

Consequently, the Church respects these councils and is blessed by them, as well as by their decisions and saintly members. This is due to the belief that these councils ensure that the Church is built on very strong foundations.

### **IV. What are the Specific Functions of these Councils?**

- ❖ Investigation of issues related to faith to ensure correct delivery of teachings & doctrines
- ❖ Setting down the regulations and laws necessary for the policies of the Church
- ❖ Solving the problems that face the Church and ending disputes among the clergy, the congregation, or between both of them
- ❖ Bringing to trial the clergymen who deviated from, or contradicted, the faith



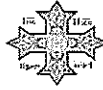
## V. Which was the First Council in Christianity?

The First council was held in Jerusalem and was presided over by the Apostle James, Bishop of Jerusalem, in the year 50-51 AD (Acts 15:6-29). The purpose of the council was to study the conditions imposed upon the Gentiles as a prerequisite to their conversion to Christianity. Some apostles agreed that a Gentile should first fulfill the doctrines of Moses concerning circumcision and then become a Christian by accepting baptism. St. Paul, however, felt that faith in Jesus Christ transcends the Jewish ordinance, and all the apostles accepted his opinion.

## VI. A Comparison among the Three Ecumenical Councils:

	<i>The Council of Nicene</i>	<i>The Council of Constantinople</i>	<i>The Council of Ephesus</i>
<i>Year</i>	325 AD.	381 AD.	431 AD.
<i>Number of Attendants</i>	318 Bishops	150 Bishops	200 Bishops
<i>Place</i>	City of Nicene	City of Constantinople	City of Ephesus
<i>Presiding Emperor</i>	Constantine the Great	Theodosius the Great	Theodosius the Young
<i>Name of Heretic</i>	Arius, an Alexandrian priest	Macedonius, Bishop of Constantinople	Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople
<i>Important Persons in the Council</i>	St. Athanasius the Apostle, a deacon at that time	Patriarch Theodosius of Alexandria, Abba Malathius of Antioch, St. Gregory the Enlightener, and St. Gregory of Nyssa	St. Cyril the Great (Pillar of faith), Pope of Alexandria
<i>The Heresy</i>	The denial of Christ's Divinity; the Son (Word) is not One with the Father in essence	The denial of the essence of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is not a person of the Holy Trinity, distinct from the Father or the Son, but a creature similar to angels	In Jesus Christ, there are two persons or entities and two natures. Also, he refuted the designation of the Holy Virgin Mary as the mother of God. In other words, he denied the union of humanity and divinity.
<i>Most Important Laws Issued by the Council</i>	The issuance of the Creed: "We believe in One God ... whose kingdom shall have no end."	The completion of the Creed of faith by adding "Yes, we believe in the Holy Spirit..."	The Introduction to the Creed of faith was written: "We magnify you, O mother of the True Light..."

These three councils are the ones accepted by the Coptic Orthodox Church. However, others councils were held later on by other churches.



## VII. The Council of Ephesus

- ❖ It was held in 443 AD to issue a judgment on the heresy of Eutyches, who was the abbot of a monastery near Constantinople. At first, he was a fervent defender of the faith, opposing the doctrines of Nestorius. However, he suddenly swerved to the opposing camp and claimed that Christ's humanity (manhood) vanished into His divinity (Godhood) so that He had one integrated nature.
- ❖ When the council was held, presided by Pope Dioscorus, Eutyches attended it to clarify his doctrine. It proved to be consistent with the true Nicene faith. His innocence was, therefore, announced and he returned to his monastery. He later denied the faith and the council then produced the following decree: "For the second time, we reinforce our statement and belief in the One Nature of the Incarnate Word, without mingling or confusion or alteration."

### **What is the belief of the Coptic Church concerning the Nature of Jesus Christ?**

The Coptic Orthodox Church believes that the Lord Jesus Christ is God Himself, the Incarnate Logos Who took to Himself a perfect manhood. His Divine nature is one with His human nature, yet without mingling, confusion or alteration - a complete Hypostatic Union. Because this union is permanent, never divided nor separated, we pray in the Coptic Liturgy that His Divinity parted not from His Humanity for a single moment nor even for a twinkle of an eye. The Divine nature (God the Word) was united with the human nature, which He took of the Virgin Mary by the action of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit purified and sanctified the Virgin's womb so that the Child to whom she gave birth would inherit nothing of the original sin; the flesh formed of her blood was united with the Only-Begotten Son. This Unity took place from the first moment of the Holy Pregnancy in the Virgin's womb. As a result of the unity of both natures (the Divine and the human) inside the Virgin's womb, one nature was formed out of both, "The One Nature of God the Incarnate Logos" as St. Cyril called it. After the schism, which took place in the year 451 A.D., when the Coptic Orthodox Church rejected the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon and its theological struggles, we were wrongly called Monophysites. However, the union in which the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches believe differs essentially from the union which Eutyches believed. Eutyches said that our Lord is one nature, but His union is based on a notion that the humanity of Christ is totally absorbed in His Divinity and vanishes completely, like a drop of vinegar in the ocean. By this, Eutyches in fact denied the real existence of the human nature of Christ. The Coptic Church condemns the absolute Monophysitism of Eutyches as a heresy.

## VIII. Other Councils - The Council of Chalcedon

It was held in 451 AD in the city of Chalcedon, in Asia Minor, and was attended by emperor Markian and his wife. It was concerned with the discussion of the laws laid by the second council of Ephesus and particularly two problems:

- a. The pardon of Eutyches and the confirmation concerning the One Nature of Jesus Christ
- b. The neglect of reading the letter of Lakan, the Nestorian Bishop of Rome

During the first session, they could not resist the argument brought forward by Pope Dioscorus. They then held a second session without him and issued incriminating verdicts after they had confessed in the first session and had said, "We have sinned and ask for forgiveness." The Pope had also told them, "As for me. I do not hesitate or falter one moment in the belief of the Universal Apostolic Church, and I am interested in nothing else but the salvation of my soul and the protection of the true doctrines and upright faith."



This attitude of the Council led to the beginning of the divisions in the Church. Two big parties were formed: the Orthodox Churches, which included the followers of Pope Dioscorus and which continued to adhere to their doctrines (called non-Chalcedonian), and the Chalcedonian Churches.

**The hope for the unification of the Churches and their restoration to the order which preceded the division:**

There is hope that the Church becomes universal and apostolic so that all Christians become one flock of one shepherd.

***Applications:***

- ❖ What is meant by ecumenical councils? In general, what are the causes leading to them?
- ❖ Compare among the three ecumenical councils of Nicene, Constantinople, and Ephesus in the light of the heresies they fought. What were their most important decrees?
- ❖ Clarify briefly the heroic roles of St. Athanasius, St. Cyril, and St. Dioscorus in strengthening the Orthodox faith. What title did each deserve?
- ❖ Clarify the role of ecumenical councils in the history of the Church.





## THE COPTIC CHURCH & THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS<sup>†</sup>

### **THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS**

Scholars who study the first Ecumenical Councils get to know the Alexandrian theologians as leaders and pioneers of the Christian faith and thought on an ecumenical level. Their prominence was not based on any political power because Alexandria was under the Roman Empire and subsequently was ruled by the Byzantines until the Arab conquest of Egypt. Their strength was based on their deep spiritual, pious, theological, and biblical thoughts and studies.

The Alexandrian Fathers were not looking for leadership or personal benefit, but it was the openness of their hearts with divine love and their extensive studies that attracted many people to the School of Alexandria and to the Egyptian desert, where they learned the Alexandrian theology and were introduced to the ascetic life of the Egyptian monks. The Copts, by their adherence to the orthodox (true) faith since early Christianity, played a positive role in solving many theological problems in both East and West. They did not interfere in other churches' problems, but because of their spirit of love and unity, they were called upon and consulted by other churches.

When the Emperors accepted the Christian faith and the waves of persecution calmed down, the heretics found a great opportunity to spread their adverse teachings, especially Arius, Nestorius, Eutyches, Apollinarius, etc. It became imperative for the Alexandrian Fathers to play their positive role in trying to win back these heretics to the true faith of perseverance, but not at the expense of the evangelic thought of Church faith.

Now, I will confine my writing to the role played by certain Alexandrian Fathers in the Ecumenical Councils, setting aside a separate chapter for St. Dioscorus and the attitude of the Council of Chalcedon towards him. That chapter was separated because of its importance regarding how the Chalcedonian Churches perceive us and for those who do not understand the truth of our belief in the nature of Christ.

### **POPE ATHANASIUS THE APOSTOLIC AND THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA**

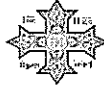
In our book, "The Coptic Orthodox Church as a Church of Erudition and Theology," I dedicated a special chapter for Pope Athanasius and Arianism. I will limit myself here to what St. Gregory of Nazianzen said, "When I praise Athanasius, virtue itself is my theme; for I name every virtue as often as I mention him who possessed all virtues. He was the true pillar of the Church. His life and conduct were an example for bishops, and his doctrine represents the Orthodox Creed.

St. Athanasius was ordained Patriarch (Pope) of Alexandria in A.D. 328, and he presided over the Church for 46 years; over 17 of those years were spent in exile on account of his vigorous opposition to the spread of Arianism, which had the support of several emperors. He was exiled five times.

Due to the spread of Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ and considered Him a creature found before all times and an instrument for creation, who played the role of a mediator between God and the world, in A.D. 325 the First Ecumenical Council was held in Nicaea. Arianism also maintained that the Holy Spirit is not God but an inferior god to the Logos.

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<sup>†</sup> From Introduction to the Orthodox Church, by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, Sporting – Alexandria, 1993



It was Emperor Constantine who invited the council that was attended by 318 bishops; among them was Pope Alexandros of Alexandria accompanied by St. Athanasius, his secretary at that time. St. Athanasius was a young man, and as a deacon, he was not allowed to participate in the discussions. It was said that the Pope ordained him as a priest so that he can take part in the discussions. St. Athanasius entered into a dialogue with Arius and his followers and completely defeated them with his zeal to defend the faith, his strong theological knowledge and his reasoning. He wrote the creed which all churches recite today. When the council was over, he left after winning the admiration of all the bishops assembled there and the hatred of the party of heretics who opposed him vigorously.

John Henry Newman wrote of St. Athanasius as “that extraordinary man ... a principal instrument after the Apostles by which the sacred truths of Christianity have been conveyed, and he believed in the Word.”

### **POPE TIMOTHY (TIMOTHIUS) AND THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE**

The second Ecumenical Council was held in A.D. 381 at Constantinople, at the invitation of Emperor Theodosius the Great. The council was attended by 150 bishops to try Macedonius, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. He was a follower of Arius and managed to become the Patriarch of Constantinople. Pope Timothy played a vital role in the council, and according to Sozomen, he chaired the Council.

The council dealt at first very effectively with theological matters, then it discussed some administrative issues; that's when temporal pride entered the Church. The Council put the Church of Alexandria after the churches of Rome and Constantinople because Rome was the capital and Constantinople was the "New Rome." At this point, the Pope and the bishops of Alexandria withdrew from the council. This withdrawal from the Council did not in any way affect the Fathers of the Councils and their works world-wide. It did not affect our appreciation for them. We still remember them in every liturgy of the Eucharist. It did not affect the position of Alexandria, for we find William Worrell writing about the ecumenical movement: "The see [of Alexandria] was the most important in the Church, as the city was the most important in the whole East. To the prestige of Ancient Egypt and Hellenistic Alexandria, the reputation for Christian learning and the power of leadership was added."

### **POPE CYRIL THE GREAT AND NESTORIANISM**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, A.D. 431, the third Ecumenical Council was held in Ephesus, at the order of Emperor Theodosius the Lesser. It was attended by 200 bishops, and St. Cyril the Great, Pope of Alexandria, chaired the council. The Council convened to try Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, for he divided Christ into separate persons: the Son of God and the son of man. St. Cyril emphasized the unity of the Godhead and manhood without mixing or mingling. He also emphasized the title "Theotokos," i.e. "the mother of God," for St. Mary in order to clarify that He who was born from her is truly God the Incarnate Word, not an ordinary man on whom the Godhead descended afterwards. I have already discussed this subject in the book "Church of Erudition and Theology."





# The Coptic Church and the Ecumenical Councils<sup>†</sup>

**Reading:** Introduction to the Orthodox Church by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

**Golden Verse:**

*"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."*

**John 1:14**

**Lesson Aims:**

1. To learn about the Coptic Church's role and involvement in the Ecumenical Councils
2. To understand the issues discussed in the Councils and what views the Coptic Church held

**Lesson Notes:**

**1. The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.)**

- a. St. Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria
- b. The views against Arianism, which was the belief that Christ was not divine and only a human mediator between God and mankind

**2. The Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.)**

- a. Ranking of the Church of Alexandria after the Churches of Rome and Constantinople
- b. The Church of Alexandria's withdrawal from the Council and the Church's importance in the East

**3. The Council at Ephesus (431 A.D.)**

- a. St. Cyril the Great, Patriarch of Alexandria
- b. The views against Nestorianism, the belief that Christ had two natures that were divided, part human and part divine
- c. The title of "**Theotokos**" for St. Mary, which meant "Mother of God" and not only Mother of Christ, was clarified in order to eliminate any doubt that Christ was truly God the Incarnate Word



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<sup>†</sup> Prepared by Dr. Raif Yanney, St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, Bellflower, CA, U.S.A.



# Ecumenical Councils<sup>†</sup>

## I. Definitions

### A. “Ecumenical Council”

1. “Ecumenical” means worldwide
2. Council = meeting of Church Bishops

### B. “Heresy”

1. Heresy = departure from Biblical teachings
2. Orthodoxy has preserved the original, true faith.
3. The danger of going to other denominations: their teachings are non-apostolic and could be heretical without our knowledge

## II. The Ecumenical Councils

### A. Council of Nicaea

1. Arius denied the Divinity of Jesus Christ.
2. He said that Jesus Christ was created by God.
3. The composition of the Orthodox Creed

### B. Council of Constantinople

1. Macedonius denied the Divinity of the Holy Spirit.
2. Expanding the Nicene Creed to include the Holy Spirit

### C. Council of Ephesus

1. Nestorius divided Christ into 2 separate persons – the Son of God and the son of man.
2. Only Christ the man suffered alone on the cross.
3. Definition of “Theotokos.”



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<sup>†</sup> Prepared by Ossama Ekladius, St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, Bellflower, CA, U.S.A.





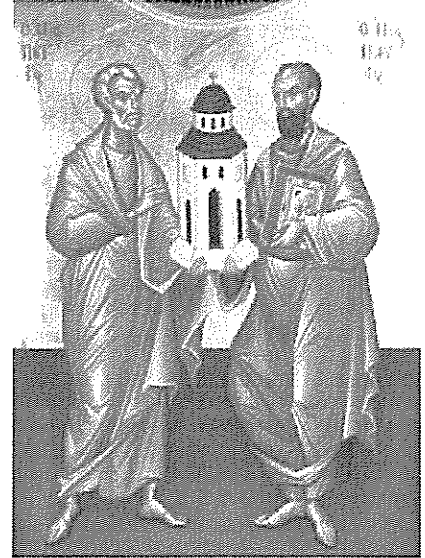
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# The Ecumenical Councils

## Memory Verse:

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

**Ephesians 4:4**



- The Creed which all Churches recite today was composed by the Council of *(circle all that applies)*
  - Jerusalem
  - Nicaea
  - Constantinople
  - Ephesus
  - Chalcedon
- The Council of Nicaea was held in \_\_\_\_\_ (year).
- St. Athanasius successfully defended the Orthodox faith against
  - Denying the divinity of the Holy Spirit
  - Separating the person of Jesus Christ
  - Denying St. Mary the title "Theotokos"
  - Arianism
- The part of the Orthodox Creed regarding the **Holy Spirit** was added by the Council of
  - Jerusalem
  - Nicaea
  - Constantinople
  - Ephesus
  - Chalcedon
- Match the name of the heretic with his belief:*

Arius	Divided Christ into two separate persons
Macedonius	Denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit
Nestorius	Denied the divinity of Jesus Christ
- What does the word "**Theotokos**" mean? To whom does it refer?
- Clarify briefly the heroic roles of St. Athanasius, St. Cyril, and St. Dioscorus in strengthening the Orthodox faith. What title did each deserve?