

Heresies and Councils

The Early Church

When the Apostles of Christ preached Christianity, they established churches all over the world. These churches have kept the upright apostolic faith for several hundred years.

All churches were led by 5 Apostolic Sees:

- See of Jerusalem (St. James)
- See of Alexandria (St. Mark)
- See of Antioch (St. Peter)
- See of Constantinople (St. Paul)
- See of Rome (St. Peter)

The Early Church had two main features:

1. ***Unity***: all churches across the world were living in perfect unity and fellowship together.
2. ***Universal***: all the church matters were discussed among the 5 Archbishops as brothers, since no bishop was higher in rank over another.

When the devil failed to make Christians deny their faith through persecution and torture, he changed his strategy and sought to divide the Church through heresies and wrong teachings. However, the Church fought against these teachings in what came to be known as the "Ecumenical Councils".

First Council: Jerusalem (around 60-65 AD)

The first problem that faced the Church was the heresy of **Judaism**: Christians from a Jewish origin taught that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses first in order to become Christians. That is, one must become a Jew first in order to be accepted in the Christian Church.

St. Paul and St. Peter fought fiercely against this heresy, and when they could not convince the Jewish Christians, they called the other Apostles to a council in Jerusalem to discuss the matter and reach a common decision. The council was chaired by **St. James the Apostle**, who is considered the first Archbishop of the See of Jerusalem (Act 15:28).

Decision: Salvation is through blood of Christ alone... no need for the Jewish practices any more as they were all symbols of the sacrifice of Christ. Any person (Gentile or Jew) becomes Christian through faith not through keeping the Law of Moses.

First Ecumenical Council: Nicea (325 AD)

It was called by Emperor Constantine to investigate:

1. the timing of the Feast of Resurrection (Easter)
2. the dispute about re-baptizing the repenting heretics
3. the Heresy of **Arius**: Christ is not fully God

Arianism

Arius was a priest in Alexandria who denied the eternality of Christ, claiming contrary to the Apostles' doctrine that the Son was a created being who came into existence at a point in time, and thus was not truly God. He did not however claim that Christ is a mere man, but he considered Him a semi-God. His famous words were: "there was a time when the Son did not exist".

He was very eloquent and persuasive in his speech and very knowledgeable in the Scriptures, but he mis-interpreted many verses in the Bible and used them to prove his claims. However, the Copts did not fall for his heresy, because at that time even the ordinary people used to talk theology whenever they meet. So, they issued a complaint against him to the Pope, St. Peter the Seal of Martyrs, who when investigated the matter, excommunicated him.

However, Arius did not stop there, but went to Asia and Europe spreading his wrong teachings and pulling many away from the upright faith. Pope Alexandros (19th), who followed St. Peter, sent letters refuting Arianism, which made Emperor Constantine call for the council to investigate the matter.

At that time, St. Athanasius the Apostolic was just a young deacon, but he was very strong in defending the faith. So, Pope Alexandros ordained him priest and then bishop just to be able to take him to the Council.

Council attended by 318 bishops from all over the world. The council hero was by far St. Athanasius who rebuked Arius boldly and proved the falseness of his claims, affirming beyond doubt the eternity of the Son and His consubstantiality with the Father.

Council Decisions:

1. Fix the date of Easter to be the Sunday following the Jewish Passover (Sunday following the paschal full moon = full moon that falls on or after the spring equinox. Julian vs. Gregorian calendar differences)
2. Not to re-baptize the repenting heretics (only 1 baptism), but re-baptize those who were baptized by heretics
3. Excommunicating Arius and all his followers from the fellowship of the church, refuting all his teachings completely, and establishing the **Nicene Creed** to keep and preserve the upright faith (till "... shall be no end")

Second Ecumenical Council: Constantinople (381 AD)

This council was held to investigate three serious heresies that spread after Arianism:

- 1. Macedonius**, Pope of Constantinople, who denied the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, considering Him a creation higher in rank than the angels.
- 2. Appolinarius** who denied that Christ had a rational human soul, this being replaced by the Divinity, so that His body was a glorified and spiritualized form of humanity. Thus, Christ is not fully man.
- 3. Eusebius** who claimed that the Holy Trinity is one and the same hypostasis, who appeared in the Old Testament in the form of the Father, in the New Testament in the form of the Son and after Christ's ascension in the form of the Holy Spirit.

Council Decisions:

The council was attended by 150 bishops, who:

- convicted all three heresies
- completed the Nicene Creed to include the part about the Holy Spirit (truly we believe in the Holy Spirit...).

The most prominent defender of the faith was **St. Gregory the Theologian** (the Speaker of Divinity who put the Gregorian Liturgy) and Pope Timothy of Alexandria (22nd).

Some verses that were used in the council to refute Macedonius:

- You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth (Ps 104:30)
- How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:14)
- Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mat 28:19)
- But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?" (Act 5:3-4)

Third Ecumenical Council: Ephesus (431 AD)

Nestorius, Pope of Constantinople, in studying the incarnation of the Divine Logos, developed a conception that there was no unity between the Divinity and the humanity of Christ. Rather, Christ had two distinct natures that co-existed inside Him but did not unite. In fact, St. Mary gave birth to Christ the human, who when the Holy Spirit descended upon received the Divine nature and became God. Therefore, he refused to call St. Mary "**Theotokos**" (Mother of God) and wanted to call her "Christotokos" (Mother of Christ).

Pope Cyril the Pillar of Faith, along with **St. Shenouda the Archimandrite**, fought against this wrong teaching, refuted his heresy and sent out letters proving Christ's unique nature and that "His divinity united with His humanity without mingling without amalgamation and without alteration" (Holy Liturgy: Final Confession).

Council Decisions:

200 bishops were gathered at Ephesus to investigate the heresy and the Pope's letters:

- excommunicated Nestorius and refuted his teaching
- accepted and supported the teachings of Pope Cyril
- to confirm their belief that St. Mary is the Mother of God, they put the **Introduction to the Creed** ("We magnify you O Mother of the true Light and we glorify you O Saint Mother of God").

Our Coptic Orthodox Church believes in and accepts the decisions of these three ecumenical councils (only), as do all the Churches around the world. Up to this moment, all the Churches were united in the true faith and refuted all the heretics and their teachings.

Summary of Ecumenical Councils

Ecumenical Council	Reason for Council	Defenders of Faith	Council Decisions
First Council at Nicea (325 AD)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arianism Heresy: denying Christ Divinity 2. Date of Easter 3. Re-baptizing heretics 	<p>318 Bishops:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pope Alexandros (19th) - St. Athanasius the Apostolic 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Excommunicating Arius and his followers and refuting all his teachings 2. Putting the Creed (till "... of whose Kingdom there shall be no end") 3. Easter is the Sunday after Jewish Passover 4. No re-baptism for heretics, but re-baptize those who they baptised
Second Council at Constantinople (381 AD)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Macedonian Heresy: denying Divinity of Holy Spirit 2. Apollinarian Heresy: Christ not fully human 3. Eusebian Heresy: God is one Hypostasis 	<p>150 Bishops:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pope Timothy (22nd) - St. Gregory the Speaker of Divinity (Theologian) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Excommunicating Macedonius, Apollinarius and Eusebius and refuting all their teachings 2. Continuing the Creed ("Truly we believe in the Holy Spirit...")
Third Council at Ephesus (431 AD)	Nestorian Heresy: two distinct natures of Christ	<p>200 Bishops:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pope Cyril the Pillar of Faith - St. Shenouda the Archimandrite 	<p>Excommunicating Nestor and all his followers</p> <p>Putting the Introduction to the Creed ("... we glorify you O St. Mary, the Theotokos...")</p>

Fourth Council: Chalcedon (451 AD) "The First Schism"

Despite the decisions of Ephesus Council, the Nestorian heresy was still spread in the West. In defense of the one nature of Christ, **Eutyches**, a much esteemed abbot of a monastery near Constantinople, went too far as to claiming that the Divinity has swallowed the humanity, which in turn dissolved completely in the Divine nature. His famous analogy was: "as a drop of ink dissolves in an ocean".

Pope Flavian of Constantinople completely rejected this claim, and having a Nestorian belief himself, he called for a local council in 448 AD. The council decided to excommunicate Eutyches and re-declared the Nestorian faith.

As a result, Eutyches sent complaining letters to Pope Leon of Rome and Emperor Theodosius, who in turn called for a second council at Ephesus. In this council, **Pope Dioscorus** of Alexandria rebuked Eutyches, who confessed that he was wrong and returned from his heresy. Flavian, on the other hand, insisted on his Nestorian thought and was thus excommunicated. **Pope Leon of Rome** refused to accept this decision as he was also Nestorian. Thus, the Second Council of Ephesus was not concluded.

After the departure of Emperor Theodosius, Marcian succeeded him but he did not have an upright faith. He called for the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon. After several sessions and lots of disputes between Pope Dioscorus and Leon, Emperor Marcian prevented Pope Dioscorus and several bishops who were defending the faith from entering the final council session, excommunicated the Pope, and appointed another Pope for Alexandria.

The Copts, however, refused to accept the appointed Pope, considering Pope Dioscorus their true Patriarch and his teachings the true apostolic teaching. So, Emperor Marcian started a wave of persecution that was by no means less violent than the Roman persecution, but the people remained firm in their faith.

This caused the first schism in the history of the Church, which divided it into two groups:

1. **Non-Chalcedonian Churches:** Alexandria (Coptic & Ethiopian & Eritrean), Antioch (Armenian, Syriac, Indian) who remained in their faith and unity till this day and are called the *Oriental Orthodox Church*
2. **Chalcedonian Churches:** Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem

Second Schism (1054 AD) "inside the Chalcedonian Church"

The Chalcedonian Church covered the West of Europe (under See of Rome) and the East of Europe and parts of Asia (under See of Constantinople). However, after the fall of the Roman Empire the East and West grew further apart and problems between them started to arise and mount:

1. The Church in Rome believed that their Pope is the chief leader of all the Churches and thus is to be obeyed by all.
2. Some churches, to confirm the divinity of Christ, proclaimed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (Jn 15:26), and they added this to the Creed on their own accord in a local council. There were small scale disputes over this addition which continued till the 9th century, when the **Pope Nicholas of Rome** unilaterally and officially accepted the addition to the Creed without an ecumenical council.
3. Church of Constantinople tried to seize control over the churches in the Slavic countries, which lie on the borders between the Church of Rome and Constantinople.
4. To prove his control over the disputed churches, Pope Nicholas taught the new Creed to these churches to make them distinct from the rest of the churches following the See of Constantinople.
5. Understanding the seriousness of the matter (because this addition lead eventually to a tendency to relegate the Holy Spirit to a lesser place than the Father and the Son), **Pope of Constantinople** wrote several letters refuting this addition and proving its falseness.

By the 11th century, the conflicts became so severe (religious and political) that the Church of Rome decided in the spur of a moment to excommunicate the Pope of Constantinople. Because Rome had no legitimate right in any way to do so, it ended up dividing itself from the Orthodox faith in 1054 AD.

Thus, the Chalcedonies Church was divided into the **Roman Catholic Church** and the **Eastern Orthodox Church** (Greek and Russian and ?Jerusalem?).

More Schisms inside the Roman Catholic Church (The Rise of Protestants)

After its separation from the Church of Alexandria and Antioch in 451 AD and the Church of Constantinople in 1054, the Church of Rome started to fall in massive mistakes and heresies and had no one to correct or challenge it.

The most prominent of these false beliefs and practices are:

1. authority and infallibility of the Roman Pope
2. corruption of the clergy and Simony (buying of clerical offices)
3. the sale of indulgences
4. the doctrine of purgatory
5. the doctrine of saints excesses

The situation in the Church fell from bad to worse over time and the people became completely ignorant of the Christian faith as the malpractice of the clergy caused the majority of the congregation to keep away from the Church.

1. Martin Luther and the Protestantism (1520 AD)

He was a monk who opposed the practices of the Pope, especially the sale of indulgences for the purpose of gathering money. He wrote letters to oppose the idea theologically, which the people translated, printed and distributed as they found in them a formal expression of what they wanted to say themselves but could not.

When these oppositions reached the Pope of Rome, he formed a committee to look into the matter. The committee convicted Luther and his writings and excommunicated him in 1520. Luther got furious and started attacking the Catholic Church in many of its doctrines. However, instead of rectifying its practices and beliefs, his rage led him to another extreme:

- high authority of the Pope => annulling priesthood altogether
- misconceptions about the good deeds => salvation is through faith alone
- extreme view regarding intercession of the saints => no intercession at all

As a great multitude of people followed Luther out of rejecting the corruption of the Catholic Church, they separated themselves from the Church and called themselves the **Protestants**. However, not all Protestant agreed to every opposition of the Church doctrines, which ended up with more schism among the Protestants themselves, where each group has its own doctrines and beliefs depending on which practices of the church they accept or refuse.

2. Henry the Eighth (1528 AD)

After the Protestant Revolution, the **Church of England** remained part of the Roman Catholic Church for several decades. However, when Henry the Eighth took the rule of England, he tried forcefully to make the Pope of Rome agree to annul his marriage to Queen Catharine and allow him to re-marry because she could not bring him a son to become his heir.

The Pope refused as this is against the Christian teachings, a decision that made Henry get so furious as to declare himself the head of the Church of England and forced all the clergy to sign a decree to subject themselves to the king. This separated the Church of England from that of Rome, as the clergy would no more adhere to the Pope's decisions. To complete his revenge, Henry refused to continue paying the annual church tax to Rome, and prevented the appeal of any church matter before the See of Rome.

When Queen Elisabeth took over, she wanted to make the churches of England distinct from those in Rome, so she accepted several Protestant ideologies and practices into the English Church, causing it to become a weird mixture of Catholic and Protestant beliefs.

Major branches within Christianity

