



Type: Book Chapter

Appendix B: Christian Councils

Author(s): Barry R. Bickmore and Adam W. Bentley

Source: *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*

Editor(s): Noel B. Reynolds

Published: Provo, UT; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005

Page(s): 345-354



The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) existed as a California non-profit corporation from 1979 until about 2006, when it was allowed to go into involuntary liquidation, at which time copyrights held by FARMS and its authors and/or editors reverted back to their original author and/or editors. This chapter is archived by permission of editor Noel B. Reynolds.

Appendix B

CHRISTIAN COUNCILS

Barry R. Bickmore and Adam W. Bentley

During most of the Christian centuries, doctrinal and ecclesiastical disputes have been settled via councils of bishops and other ecclesiastical officers. Latter-day Saints have typically charged that these councils, and the creeds they produced, substituted worldly wisdom for the guidance of revelation. However, it is clear from our own history that Latter-day Saint leaders have sometimes preached contradictory opinions on issues of doctrine and practice, so the simple fact that Christians have sometimes been misled by the wisdom of the world cannot, in itself, be a foolproof indicator of apostasy. It is probably fair to say that all human beings have, to some extent, been limited by the wisdom of their times. Why, then, did God tell Joseph Smith that the Christian creeds “were an abomination” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19)? Joseph Smith said that, although the creeds of the different denominations all have some truth, “I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.”¹

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976,) 327.

*In this appendix, a number of important councils are briefly described to give the reader a sense of the major issues that have confronted Christianity over the centuries, and the decisions regarding these issues that have been set in stone via the creeds. For a complete list of Christian councils and creeds and analysis of their contributions from an LDS perspective, see John W. Welch, "All Their Creeds Were an Abomination": A Brief Look at the Creeds as Part of the Apostasy," in *Prelude to the Restoration (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004)*, 228–49.*

The First Council of Nicea (AD 325)

The First Council of Nicea was called by Emperor Constantine in an attempt to unify the church and resolve certain disagreements that had arisen in the church. Most importantly, a theologian named Arius, who had gained a large following, asserted that Christ as the Son was of a different essence than God the Father. Because the Son is a creation of the Father, he "had a beginning of existence; and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he had his subsistence from nothing."² At this time, nearly all Christian intellectuals assumed that God was a unique, eternally self-existent, spiritual being, completely distinct from all other entities, which were created from nothing. The orthodox response to Arianism was that the church had always believed that Jesus was truly God, and there cannot be more than one unique divine essence.³ To resolve this problem, Constantine called the council, inviting 318 bishops, as well as priests, deacons, and other members of clergy. They

2. Howard A. Slaatte, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1980), 9.

3. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 10.

represented the majority of the regions where Christianity was established. Those attending consisted of three primary groups:⁴ (1) the Nicenes, including Athanasius, who believed that the Father and Son were separate persons coexisting in the same being (2) the Arians and (3) a group J. N. D. Kelly called the “the great conservative ‘middle party,’” who taught that there were three divine persons, “separate in rank and glory but united in harmony of will.”⁵ The council eventually rejected the Arian view and concluded that the Son and Father are “of one essence” and that the Son “came down from heaven and was incarnate” in order to redeem man.⁶ Since the wording of the creed was acceptable to both the Nicenes and the middle party, the entire council accepted the creed, except Arius and two other bishops. They were consequently exiled to Illyria. In addition to addressing the debate over the doctrine of the Godhead, the council also issued a letter to all regions represented at the council proclaiming the Nicene Creed and a number of ecclesiastical canons. These canons outlined the jurisdiction of various bishops in provinces such as Rome, Alexandria, and Ephesus, and addressed the execution of priesthood and clerical duties that were passed at the council.

The First Council of Constantinople (AD 381)

Despite the conclusions made by the Council of Nicea, the church failed to unite the way that Constantine hoped. The East

4. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils* 11.

5. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 247–48.

6. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 13, quoting *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (hereafter *NPNF*), series 1, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1890) 14:3.

did not accept the Nicene Creed as readily as the West, and Constantine himself, and some of his successors, leaned toward Arianism.⁷ Theodosius the Great called the first Council of Constantinople to resolve the disagreements. The nature of this council was not as combative as the Council of Nicea, and its purpose was to expand upon some points of the Nicene Creed. The council added several clauses, expressing that Christ is incarnate “by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,” and that after being crucified and buried, Christ “sitteth at the right hand of the Father.”⁸ The new creed also included a clause regarding the status of the Holy Ghost. “And (we believe) in the Holy Ghost . . . who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.”⁹ Thus, in contrast to the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Constantinople includes the divinity of the Holy Ghost and acknowledges Christ’s birth from the Virgin Mary. The canons passed at this council ratified the Nicene Creed, addressed jurisdictional issues, and placed Constantinople as second to Rome in ecclesiastical authority.¹⁰

The Council of Ephesus (AD 431)

The Council of Ephesus was called by the Co-Emperors, Theodosius II and Valentinian III, in response to a request by Pope Celestine. Celestine received a letter from Bishop Cyril of Alexandria asking him to condemn the teaching of Nestorius. Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, taught that in order for

7. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 15.

8. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 17, quoting the Constantinopolitan Creed, in *NPNF* 14:163.

9. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 17, quoting the Constantinopolitan Creed, in *NPNF* 14:163.

10. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 18–19.

Christ to be perfectly human and also perfectly divine, his parentage must be part human and part divine. Nestorius would not refer to the Virgin Mary as the “Mother of God,” for her nature was human. Thus, in Christ’s body God’s nature coupled with human nature. Nestorius states, “We will separate the natures and unite the honor; we will acknowledge a *double* person and worship it as one.”¹¹ It is not entirely clear what Nestorius meant by this, because the terms *person* and *nature* had more than one meaning.¹² However, Cyril considered this heresy, for, “if our Lord is God, and if he was born of the Virgin then the Virgin was certainly the . . . ‘bringer-forth of God.’”¹³ The council, having reviewed the Nicene Creed, affirmed the “one person” view of Christ and concluded that the Virgin Mary ought to be called the “Mother of God.”¹⁴ The council found Nestorius’s position incommensurable with the Nicene Creed and condemned him. He died eight years later in exile.¹⁵ The controversy at the Council of Ephesus illustrates how the church had to grapple with problems associated with the adoption of the view that the divine nature is completely distinct from human nature, and yet, Christ is both fully human and fully divine.

The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)

Due to Cyril’s victory at Ephesus, the influence of the Eastern Church grew considerably. After deposing Nestorius, the

11. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 20, quoting William P. Dubose, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1900), xlix.

12. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 254.

13. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 20.

14. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 20.

15. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 21.

Eastern Church swung heavily toward the view that Christ, the incarnate Son, had only one nature, instead of two. In other words, the divine nature of God “absorbed” the human nature, leaving Christ clothed in a deified body.¹⁶ Thus, after the incarnation, God and God’s body were one, divine nature.¹⁷ This doctrine, called *Monophysitism*, was condemned around AD 448 by Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, because it seemed to imply that Christ was not really human. (This may have been the case for some Monophysitists, but for most, their concern was simply that the divine and human natures in Christ might be so separated as to render the Incarnation meaningless).¹⁸ In response to Flavian, Dioscorus, the patriarch of Alexandria, pressured Emperor Theodosius II to convoke a new council. The council convened again at Ephesus in 449, but Dioscorus took over the proceedings with his bands of Egyptian monks and terrorized the bishops present. Even though Pope Leo I sent a letter to Flavian dogmatically rejecting Monophysitism and was represented by legates, Dioscorus prevailed. Flavian was killed, the Papal legates were denied an audience, and the Pope’s letter to Flavian was never read. But this victory was short-lived, for Pope Leo, hearing the news, called the council a “Robber Synod,” and appealed to the emperor to convene another council.¹⁹ This request was granted when Theodosius II died, and Emperor Marcian came to power in 451. Marcian changed the council’s location to Chalcedon and regulated the council’s security with imperial forces. Although the Western Church was only represented by four bishops (two of which were the Pope’s

16. Francis Dvornik, *The Ecumenical Councils* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961), 25.

17. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 25.

18. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:257.

19. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 25.

legates) and the East had over 500 bishops present, the council ultimately condemned the acts of the Robber Synod. They read Pope Leo's letter attacking Monophysitism and concluded: "We all confess unanimously one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, made known in two natures [which are] without confusion, change, separation or division and which both meet in one person."²⁰ The bishops at this council began the practice of formally acclaiming the emperor. "To Marcian, the new Constantine, the new Paul, the new David . . . you have the faith of the apostles . . . You are the light of the orthodox faith . . . Lord, protect the light of peace. . . . Many years to the priest-emperor. You . . . have set the Churches right, . . . doctor of the faith . . . Be your empire eternal."²¹

The Second Council of Constantinople (AD 553)

Nearly a century after the fourth ecumenical council, Emperor Justinian I called a council, without Pope Vigilius's consent, in order to win the support of the Monophysitists in the East. To do so, he proposed to condemn the "Three Chapters," which were the writings of three anti-Monophysitist theologians in Antioch.²² While the council did condemn these writings, it stopped short of reversing the decision made at Chalcedon.

The Third Council of Constantinople (AD 680)

The decision that Christ is one person with two natures brought up another problem. That is, if Christ has two natures, does he also have two wills? Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople, argued that a single person can have but one will, so the divine

20. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 27.

21. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 27–28.

22. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 32.

will must have taken the place of the human will in Christ. (This view is called *Monothelism*.) Others argued that a person without a human will is not fully human. The Third Council of Constantinople was called by Emperor Constantine Progonatus to discuss the issue of Monothelism.²³ The council condemned Monothelism, as well as Pope Honorius for accepting this view. The council concluded that “in him (Jesus Christ) *are two natural wills . . . we say that his two natures shone forth in his one subsistence.*”²⁴

The Second Council of Nicea (AD 787)

After the Empire became Christian, concern developed that the use of images in worship would lead converted pagans back into idolatry. The Second Council of Nicea was called by Emperor Constantine VI and Empress Irene to address the issue. Several edicts forbidding any kind of image worship or pictorial representations of Christ were issued by Byzantine emperors in the eighth century,²⁵ but the council decided to allow the veneration of images as long as the personages represented by the images, not the images themselves, were honored. The Fathers strictly distinguished between veneration of images and worship of idols and anathematized any who refused to salute the venerable images or anyone who called the images gods. The pope confirmed the Acts of the Seventh Council, and the East accepted them, although it took at least sixty years for this acceptance to become nearly universal.²⁶

23. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 33.

24. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 26–27, quoting *The Definition of Faith*, III Constantinople, in *NPNF*, 14:344ff (emphasis in original).

25. Slaatte, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 28.

26. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 40.

The Council of Trent (AD 1545–1563)

The Council of Trent, which lasted for 18 years, was convened in response to the crisis caused by the Protestant Reformation. In the face of Protestant attacks against Catholic traditions and sacraments, the Roman Catholic Church formally discussed and defined every major item the Reformation had brought into question. For example, the council affirmed the authority of tradition and of the Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Bible prepared by Jerome in the late fourth century), defined the seven sacraments (i.e., ordinances) and the nature of the Mass as a true sacrifice, affirmed the necessity of good works in addition to grace, and defined the doctrine of purgatory. A number of badly needed reforms were also enacted. For example, the veneration of saints, relics, and images, and the granting of indulgences, were regulated. In addition, bishops were no longer allowed to reside outside their jurisdictions, it was forbidden that anyone should hold multiple ecclesiastical posts, the obligations of the clergy were defined, and requirements were set for acceptance into the ministry.²⁷

The First Vatican Council (AD 1869–1870)

Faced with radical new philosophies in the fields of natural science and politics, the Roman Catholic Church found it necessary to formally define the doctrine of Papal Infallibility to head off trends that led some to call for the reformation of previously defined doctrines.²⁸ The doctrine of Papal Infallibility states that the Pope, when speaking in the discharge of his

27. Philip Hughes, *The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils 325–1870* (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1961), 322–23; González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 119–21.

28. Dvornik, *Ecumenical Councils*, 95.

office, cannot err when defining doctrine regarding faith or morals, and that such decrees are irreformable.

The Second Vatican Council (AD 1962–1965)

The Second Vatican Council, convoked by Pope John XXIII on 11 October 1962, addressed many concerns of Roman Catholics around the world about how to adapt the life of the church to the modern world. Against the objections of conservatives, progressive delegates won sweeping reforms that allowed the use of native languages and other local adaptations to the liturgy, promoted religious freedom (which had generally been rejected as an ideal by the popes of the nineteenth century), paved the way for increased ecumenism, and emphasized the need to address the plight of the poor. Pope Paul VI concluded the council in 1965 and initiated programs to ensure implementation of the council's directives. However, Paul VI was more conservative than his predecessor and took steps to make sure the reforming zeal fostered by Vatican II did not go too far. For example, a papal commission recommended that some forms of artificial birth control be allowed, but in 1968 the Pope issued the encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, in which all such methods were banned.²⁹

29. González, *Story of Christianity*, 2:350–55.