

Week after Jonah's Fast - Ecumenical Councils

Objective:

- ❖ To learn about the major ecumenical councils and their role in defending the Christian faith from the different 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 heresy or division.
- ❖ They are called by a Christian Emperor.
- ❖ They are attended by the majority of the Bishops in 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 before.

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 Domains Of These Councils?

- ❖ The investigation of issues related to the faith (To ensure the correct delivery of its teachings and 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 or the congregation or between both of them.
- ❖ Bringing to trial the clergymen who deviated from, or contradicted the faith.

V. What Is The First Council In Christianity?

The First council was held in Jerusalem and was presided 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 into Christianity. Some apostles agreed that a Gentile should fulfill the doctrines of Moses concerning circumcision first, 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

	The council of Nicene	The council of Constantinople	The council of Ephesus
Year	325 AD.	381 AD.	431 AD.
Number of attendants	318 Bishops	150 Bishops	200 Bishops
Place	City of Nicene	City of Constantinople	City of Ephesus
Presiding emperor	Constantine the Great	Theodosius the Great	Theodosius the Young
Name of heretic	Arius, an Alexandrian priest	Macedonius, anointed Bishop of Constantinople	Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople
Important persons in the council	St. Athanasius the Apostle, a deacon at that time	Patriarch Theodosius, Pope 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
The heresy	The denial of Christ’s divinity as he claimed that the Son (Word) is not One with the Father in essence.	The denial of the essence of the Holy Spirit as he stated that the Holy Spirit is not a person of the Holy Trinity, distinct from the Father or the Son, but a creature similar to angels.	He claimed that in Jesus Christ there are two persons or entities and two natures. He also refuted the designation of the Holy Virgin Mary as the mother of God. In other words he denied

			the union of humanity and divinity.
Most important laws issued by the council	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 others churches

VII. The Council of Ephesus

- ❖ It was held in 443 AD to issue a judgment on the heresy of Eutyches who was the head of the monastery near Constantinople. At first, he was a fervent defender of the faith, opposing the doctrines of Nestorius. However, he suddenly swerved to the opposite 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 Discorus, Eutyches attended it to clarify his doctrine. It proved to be consistent with the true, which is the 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”.

A. 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. As 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 motions of the Council of Calcedon and its theological struggles, we were wrongly called Monophysites. However, the union in which the non-Calcedonian Orthodox Churches believe differs essentially from the union, which the Eutyches believe. 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. In this way, the Eutyches in fact, deny the real existence of the human nature of Christ. The Coptic Church condemns the absolute monophysitism of Eutyches as 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.

A. The hope for the unification of the Churches and their restoration to order preceding 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 holding them?
- ❖ Compare among the three ecumenical councils of Nicene, Constantinople, and Ephesus in the light of the heresy they fought against. 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.