

ANGLICAN THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION
FOR JOINT DOCTRINAL DISCUSSIONS WITH THE
EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCHES

The Status of Ecumenical Councils in Anglican Thought
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1. The Theory of Councils and the early history.

After the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 a long time passed before another council was held. The next councils of which we have any information were called to decide on a common policy towards the Montanists, to agree on the date of Easter, and to discuss the canon of the New Testament. Tertullian says that in the Greek churches synods were held to examine difficult and profound questions, and that these synods were held in awe by the faithful as a repraesentatio totius nominis Christiani. In the person of the bishop the entire church entrusted to him is reckoned to be present. And the presence of the Lord himself is assured by his promise, Matt. 18, 20. Councils were especially necessary if a common course of action was to be reached on matters where scripture was found to be either unclear or quotable on both sides of a controversial question such as the readmission of the lapsed. That scripture was the supreme authority was a self-evident proposition, and where it spoke clearly the task of a council was straightforward. But where it spoke less clearly, conference was necessary and a search was made for agreement on the widest possible basis. Cyprian's African bishops sent their decisions to Rome and other churches 'lest our numbers should not seem enough'. The text of Matt. 18, 20 was understood to imply that if the Lord is present when only two or three gather in his name, a fortiori he is there when many more are gathered. The larger the council, the wider the representation of the universal church (representation being understood in a sense stronger than the notion of a parliamentary deputy). It followed that if the decisions of a council were to be reviewed, the body which reviewed them would be either larger in number or wider in its territorial representation, and, if possible, both.

So in 325 the emperor Constantine called at Nicaea a synod of about 220 bishops, almost all from the Greek East, but with important Western delegates. Nicaea was the largest synod hitherto called. Because of the importance of its decisions for orthodoxy in the subsequent conflict with Arianism, its defenders came to invest it with a unique aura, first magnifying its numbers even further to 300, to 'more than 300', next to the sacred number of 318; then giving it the epithet of 'world council', 'ecumenical', in contrast to the local, provincial synods that had met previously; finally insisting on its universal reception by orthodoxy, its ratification either by the emperor or by Rome. Those who used these last arguments were convinced that the Nicene homousios expressed the true sense of scripture, but they had to persuade those who were hesitant on the point. The retrospective ratification of subsequent assent by the faithful was effectively the decisive factor, and this found strong expression in the Councils of Constantinople of 381 and of Ephesus in 431. The council of Constantinople (381) made its way only slowly to 'ecumenical' rank. It first received the nimbus of special authority at the council of Chalcedon in 451, which reaffirmed its decree (objectionable to Alexandria and Rome) about the privileges of Constantinople as second see after old Rome and which cited its creed partly to justify the production of the Chalcedonian definition as yet another supplementary interpretation of the Nicaenum. The second council was not numbered among the general councils by Rome until 517; previously Rome accepted only Nicaea, Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon.

The gradualness of the process of reception to ecumenical status is a common feature apparent in the history of the majority of general councils, and must be taken into account in any theological statement about their authority. Not all councils that, at that time, were accorded the title of 'ecumenical' council were later recognised as possessing this high authority. The council of Ariminum (359) which rejected the Nicaenum in favour of an inclusive, vague formula with room for Arianism, is an obvious example. From the middle of the fifth century Eastern Christendom became divided (and remains so divided) between those who accepted the ecumenical authority of Ephesus 449 and those who accepted Chalcedon 451. The council of

Ephesus 449 had all the apparatus of a general council, but its dogmatic decisions were not acceptable to strict Chalcedonians, and they looked back on the Second Council of Ephesus as an example of a general council that had erred and therefore forfeited proper claim to the dignity of the ecumenical title.

The process of recognition was also slow for the fifth general council of 553 which condemned Origenism and the 'Three Chapters'. After many changes of mind Pope Vigilius had finally assented to the decisions of the council, but Western hostility to the condemnation of the Three Chapters (as being a compromise to placate the Monophysites) remained powerful and produced temporary schisms in the Western church. When it was accepted, the fifth council did not rank in Western eyes as possessing quite the same majesty as the first four councils. In the period before the fifth council was accepted it was common to assert (against Monophysite critics of Chalcedon) that the number of general councils accepted by the orthodox catholic church was the sacrosanct number four, corresponding to the four canonical gospels.

This language, with its implication of exclusiveness (neither less nor more than four, as Irenaeus had written of the gospels), continued to be used even after the fifth council was received. Gregory the Great writes that he accepts the four councils as the four gospels, and then adds as an afterthought that he also accepts the fifth council. There was, therefore, a natural tendency to regard the first four councils as possessing a specially privileged position among ecumenical councils; but those who spoke in this way did not mean to imply that no council after Chalcedon could ever be received as possessing an ecumenical standing. The sixth ecumenical council of 680-1 was concerned with a cause nearer Rome's heart - the condemnation of monotheletism (even at the price of being forced into admitting the error of Pope Honorius in admitting the heretical doctrine) - and this council encountered greater difficulties in the East than in the West. Even after its general reception, however, it continued to be customary to regard the fifth and sixth councils as contributing supplementary, qualifying footnotes to the decisions of Chalcedon. All six councils had ecumenical rank, but this did not mean that they were all of equal importance.

A similar 'supplementary' status was accorded in the Greek East to the Quinisext council of 692 (or Second Council in Trullo), which claimed to be ecumenical and was recognised as such in the East. Its 102 canons include a number of anti-Western points: canon 36 reaffirms the so-called 28th canon of Chalcedon on the privileges of Constantinople; canon 13 reproves the rule of celibacy for simple priests; canons 28, 55, 57, and 82 censure Roman liturgical customs. Although the Roman legates at the council signed the canons, their signature was evidently disowned at Rome ('they signed because they were deceived', says the Liber Pontificalis). It was with the object of circumventing this refusal of Roman recognition that the patriarchs of Constantinople began to treat the Quinisext canons as being supplementary to and therefore bearing the authority of the earlier ecumenical councils, especially the Sixth Council of 680. It became common for its canons to be cited simply as 'of the sixth council'; and this passed to Gratian, despite the warnings on this subject given by the ninth century papal librarian Anastasius.

Accordingly, the council of 692 retains ecumenical authority for the Greek East. But in the West better information about its history than was available to Gratian has prevented the same recognition.

The Seventh council (Second Council of Nicaea, 787) was received at Rome. Its iconophile decisions accorded with the position of Pope Hadrian I. Nevertheless it did not achieve recognition in the Frankish empire, where it was vehemently attacked in the Libri Carolini, and the consequent uncertainties left a mark upon later Western language about this council. Hincmar rudely described the Seventh Council as pseudosynodus Graecorum. This view was strongly opposed by the papal librarian Anastasius (d.897) who provided a Latin translation of the Acts of both Seventh and Eighth Councils. The hesitancy may be detected in the compilation of Gratian in the 12th century where the following propositions lie side by side: (a) the first four general councils are the principal ones; (b) newly elected popes in their profession of faith at consecration confirm eight councils; (c) the number of councils listed with dates extends only to the first six - the decrees of the Quinisext of 692 being cited as decrees of the sixth council; (d) decrees of the Nicene council of 787 are cited by Gratian in his work from time to time, as an accepted part of the corpus of canon law; (e) no general council may be called except

by the Pope, a proposition from the pseudo-Isidorian decretals. When Thomas Aquinas is discussing images in the Summa Theologica there is no appeal to the decisions of the Seventh Council. The silence does not, of course, imply any rejection, but simply that the medieval West never thought in the Greek way of a sacred canon of seven general councils in which the seventh was on just the same self-evident standing as the first four or six. Moreover, for the West the series of general councils was continuing, in the eighth council that condemned Photius, and then in the successive Lateran councils (I, 1123, Investiture; II, 1139 Arnold of Brescia; III, 1179, papal elections; IV, 1215, Waldenses, Joachim, &c.), though, at the same time, the West was conscious of the limited character of the Western general councils. Even Innocent III knew that the Roman church was not actually the universal church. Here again, therefore, the Western theologians were allowing some distinctions in degrees of authority among the general councils that they accepted.

After Photius and the end of the intense, heroic struggle against Iconoclasm, which had been fought with the toughness of the German *Kirchenkampf* of modern times, the decrees of the seventh council were valued in a way that put them on no subordinate level, as if the presence of the icons were a mere matter of optional devotional practice. The establishment of the Feast of Orthodoxy on the first Sunday in Lent (probably from 867 onwards) commemorated the triumph of the Iconophiles, and was an annual reminder, unparalleled in the West, of the East's debt to its iconophile martyrs.

The definition of the Seventh Council rejects the iconoclast argument that the icon should be replaced by the cross, and affirms that, by the divinely inspired authority of the Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church, holy pictures in mosaic and painting, as well as the cross, may properly be placed in churches and may adorn vestments and vessels. The pictures may rightly portray Christ, the Theotokos, the angels, and the saints. They serve to lift men's minds to those whom they represent. They should be revered, but not worshipped with that worship that befits God alone. (I.e. *proskýnesis* is appropriate, but not *latrefa*).

The historian of the first seven general councils is bound to notice that there is a certain shift in the ground of authority to which they appeal. At the first general council at Nicaea in 325 the orthodox had great difficulty in justifying the council's use of the non-scriptural word *homousios* in their creed. At the second council at Constantinople in 381 the affirmation of the Godhead of the Spirit was principally based upon liturgical tradition in (a) the baptismal formula, (b) the *Gloria Patri*, but since the former was also there in scripture the argument did not materially modify the appeal to the authority of apostolic tradition in scripture. Even so, the discussions preceding the Council of Constantinople (381) paid much attention to the tradition of orthodox fathers, and the first patristic florilegium occurs in St. Basil, On the Holy Spirit. The appeal to florilegia with extracts from orthodox fathers became important in the third and fourth general councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon; likewise for the fifth and sixth. Thereby the presuppositions were provided by which the Seventh Council could defend the icons by appealing not to scripture except in fairly general terms but principally to the traditions of the Fathers. The definition of the Seventh Council includes a verbatim quotation of St. Basil: 'The honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype.'

2. The Anglican evaluation of general councils.

(a) Article XXI (1563 and 1571, derived from the 42 Articles of 1552/3)

"General councils may not (non possunt) be gathered together without the commandment and will of princes. And when they be gathered together (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and the Word of God) they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in the things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture."

A commentary on this, from the circle in which Article XXI was first compiled, is provided by cap. 14 of the *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* (1551-53, first printed 1571).

(b) Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum, cap. 14 (ed. Cardwell, p.6)

"Although to councils, especially general councils, we gladly accord enormous honour, yet we judge that they ought to be put far below the dignity of the canonical scriptures. Moreover, we make a considerable distinction among the councils themselves. For some of them such as the pre-eminent four,

Nicaea, Constantinople I, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, we embrace and accept with great reverence. The same judgement indeed we hold concerning many other councils that were held later, in which we see and acknowledge that the most holy Fathers promulgated many definitions, with great weight and entire holiness, concerning the blessed and supreme Trinity, concerning Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, and the Redemption of man procured through him, in accord with the divine scriptures.

We do not, however, think that our faith is bound by councils except so far as they can be confirmed out of the holy scriptures. For it is manifest that some councils erred sometimes, and that their definitions contradict each other, partly in matters of (canon) law, partly even in faith. Therefore councils will be studied with honour and Christian reverence, but will be subject to the test of the pious, certain, and upright rule of the scriptures."

Cap. 15 lays down a similar criterion for the Fathers. They are on no account to be despised (*minime contemnendum*), but scripture is of greater authority.

(c) The Homilies of 1571 (commended in Article XXXV) contain in homily 2 a vigorous attack 'on the peril of idolatry' attaching to the Roman doctrine of images, and paints a horrific picture of the corruption surrounding the Byzantine personalities principally concerned in the Second Council of Nicaea of 787. The Libri Carolini had lately been printed for the first time (1549) and provided fuel for Protestant iconoclasm. The Homily, on the other hand, speaks in unreserved language about the first six general councils.

(d) Article XXII rejects as res inutilis, inaniter conflictata, the doctrina Romanensium.... de veneratione et adoratione tum imaginum tum reliquiarum.

The background of the Article is the profound distrust of the superstitions of popular religion, which, it should be said, is also apparent in the decree of Trent (sess. 25 can 14 - of Dec.4, 1563 - Denzinger 984-988), though Trent of course adopts a much more positive view towards the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the cultus of the saints through statues and pictures, citing the decree of the Seventh Council in vindication of its view.

No Anglican document of the 16th century can be said formally to state an iconoclast theology in the sense that this is true of the Iconoclast councils of 754 and 815 which carefully formulated a sophisticated argument about the nature of the true religious image. Whenever an Anglican writer of the first Reformation period expresses reserve or indeed hostility towards images of saints, the discernible motive is fear of sentimental religion divorced from the gospel or at least not visibly expressing its characteristic faith. The question is regarded, that is to say, as a matter of devotional practice.

(e) Although not an ecclesiastical document, the Act of Parliament 1 Eliz. c.1, 36 1559 deserves mention. It decreed "that judges ecclesiastical appointed under the king's commission shall not adjudge for heresy anything but that which heretofore hath been so adjudged by the authority of the canonical scriptures or by the first four general councils or by some other general council wherein the same hath been declared heresy by the express words of the said canonical scriptures, or such as hereafter shall be termed heresy by the high court of parliament of this realm with the assent of the clergy in convocation."

This is cited by Hooker, EP VIII.2.17.

Two questions are raised by the Anglican documents of the first Reformation period, viz. the authority of any general council, whether Nicaea, or Chalcedon, or any other, and the authority of the Seventh Council of 787 in particular.

In the first period the question of the authority of general councils was dominated by Trent, and the ground occupied by the Elizabethan Anglicans was that general councils were very important, but their dogmatic decisions were binding when they were seen to be supported from scripture. Hooker speaks of general councils as God's gift to the church, a way of reaching harmony on points of disagreement, which had apostolic precedent and remained highly esteemed in the ancient church until pride, ambition, and tyranny made them scenes of faction. Even so, abuse does not do away with the use. And Hooker remains persuaded that a true council, in which faction was set aside, would be the ideal way of resolving the disputes of the Reformation age. (EP i, 10, 14). Likewise he discusses the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ with a reference to the decisive definitions of the 'four most famous general councils' (EP v, 54, 10). Hooker does not discuss images,

but vigorously defends the observance of saints' days, the use of the sign of the cross, etc. He does not otherwise give any major analysis of our problem, which did not seriously arise in his conflict with the Puritans.

Field, on the other hand, gives several pages to the question (Of the Church, 1606, V, 48-52), holding that, while not absolutely necessary to the church, general councils are the best practical way of defining orthodoxy against heresy, remedying abuses in the church, and ending schisms. Field gives to the clergy (primarily, but not exclusively the bishops) the responsibility for defining doctrine, but thinks that the laity have a proper and considerable part to play in the discussion. He insists that the members of the council must be entirely free to express their mind if the council is to have real authority, denies that they may only be held by leave of the Pope, and declares (with Melchior Cano) that the authority of general councils is not on the same level as scripture. In the Catholic tradition, both Thomas Netter Waldensis (the hammer of the Wycliffites) and Cardinal Nicolas of Cusa allow that general councils may err, e.g. Ariminum and Ephesus 449. Field's list of the councils received with deep respect by the Church of England begins with I-VI, as concerned with matters of faith. 'The Seventh... was not called about any question of faith, but of manners' Field welcomes the seventh council's condemning of adoration of pictures; it seems 'to allow no other use of them but that which is historical'. Yet even the Roman Catholics concede that there are risks of abuse, opening the way to gross idolatry.

Field in short has no objection in principle to the decree of the Seventh council as theology, but he regrets some of the practical consequences.

A similar position is in effect occupied by Laud in the Conference with Fisher (33, 13), though he does not discuss the particular problem of the Seventh Council. His principal target is Bellarmine's proposition that a general council may err if it is not confirmed by the Pope, but is infallible if so confirmed. His Instances of confirmed general councils that have erred include the Lateran council of 1215 on Transubstantiation; Constance on communion in one kind; and Trent on the invocation of saints and the adoration of images. For the ancient church commemorated with honour but did not invoke the saints; it prayed by the merits of Christ, but not by the merits of the saints. Even Trent admitted that to believe there is any divinity in images is idolatry. Yet the religion of Spanish peasants is precisely this.

Herbert Thorndike (Epilogue to the Tragedy of the Church of England, III, 1659, ch. 31) deals with the question at much greater length and detail. The first six councils he regards as binding on the consciences of Christians, but observes that the canons of the Quinisext of 692 were not recognised by the West. The seventh council he simply denies to have truly ecumenical status on the ground that, although there were papal legates there and though its decisions were accepted by Pope Hadrian, the Council wholly ignored Christendom north of the Alps and was rejected by the church in the Frankish empire. Thorndike concedes that the Libri Carolini were wrong in attributing to the Seventh Council the doctrine that images may be adored. 'That honour of images which the decree maintaineth is no idolatry. But he that says it is no idolatry which they enjoin does not therefore justify or commend them for enjoining it.' The practical dangers of debased popular religion are in fact visible and too great to be tolerable. Yet certainly the church may have images - for ornament of church buildings, for the instruction of those who cannot read, for the stirring up of devotion. Thorndike thinks it a fault in the homily on the peril of idolatry that it fails to recognise this point. But, he adds, 'all these reasons are utterly impertinent to the worshipping of images'. 'Whatsoever is appointed by the Church for the circumstance, furniture, solemnity, or ceremony of God's service,... is thereby to be accounted holy and so used and respected. The memories of God's saints and martyrs are fit occasions to determine the time and place and other circumstances of it..... If, instead of circumstances and instruments, the saints of God, or images, or any creature of God whatsoever, become the object of that worship for which churches were built and for which Christians assemble; by that means there may be room to let in that idolatry at the back door, which Christianity shutteth out at the great gate.'

The situation of the sixteenth century Anglicans, confronted by the decrees of Trent at which (they felt) the Pope was acting as judge in his own cause, led them to a natural prickliness about general councils, especially when they read in Stapleton that general councils needed no evident or even probable support in scripture for their decrees. The insistence that general councils cannot be held without the will of princes looks odd today until one remembers that modern travel and currency regulations have the effect of

enforcing the same point. The proposition was basically an appeal to history against the papal claim (still standing in CIC) that the Pope possesses the exclusive right to summon ecumenical councils - a claim falsifiable by the simple fact that all the ancient ecumenical councils were called by emperors, not by popes. That is to say, it implied a refusal to acknowledge the 'general' or universal status of those councils which were merely Western and Roman in their ambit, from the Lateran councils onwards. On the other hand, the insistence that general councils remain subordinate to scripture brought out the importance of reception in the acknowledgement of their authority, and led to considerable interest in the historical(1) process by which these councils came to be regarded as having special status. It led, moreover, to stress being laid on distinctions between councils (e.g. the preeminence of the first four). That even Chalcedon did not possess absolute authority even for the Western church was proved by the refusal of Leo the Great and his successors to accept the (so-called) "28th canon" on the privileges of Constantinople. So not all decisions of general councils possessed equally binding authority. The legal form of papal (or imperial) ratification could not be regarded as tantamount to a 'Causa finita est', for the Pope might be a Honorius infected with heresy; and even if he were always orthodox a papal pronouncement could not add to the truth of a council's definition. In the last analysis the acceptance of a council as General rests with the universal church whence, in the first place, a council derives its authority and credibility. And the universal church judges by the apostolic tradition stemming from scripture.

This Anglican attitude to general councils expresses profound respect. At the same time the decisions of the great councils do not relieve the modern theologian of the need to think. Just as the fathers of Nicaea and Chalcedon found that they could not safeguard the apostolic tradition by merely repeating the words of scripture, so also the contemporary theologian cannot defend the truth in the 20th century by merely repeating the definitions of the fifth.

Anglican/Orthodox discussion has in the past betrayed some anxiety on the question whether the Anglican church accepts (a) the infallibility of general councils, (b) the seventh council. For the churches in the Orthodox tradition these are natural questions to ask. They have a strong tradition of deep reverence for the Seven councils, expressed in icons and inscriptions decorating churches, in the long profession of faith made by an Orthodox bishop at his consecration when he promises to uphold their definitions without deviation, or in the textbooks used by candidates for holy orders in Orthodox seminaries. Moreover, all the first seven general councils took place in the Greek East and had relatively small Western representation (one, Constantinople 381, having none at all). Furthermore, Anglican theology has absorbed much of the attitude of Augustine towards councils, viz. that (1) while they are important, their definitions never quite possess a final and absolute authority in such a sense that they may not need supplementation or even correction by later councils with wiser, second thoughts; (2) their decisions do not make it superfluous to study scripture and to use one's reason. Another, probably more influential factor making for a difference of attitude arises no doubt from the accidents of our university syllabuses, in which the study of early Christian doctrine stops with Chalcedon and Dr. Kelly. Sometimes it is asserted that Anglicans accept the first four councils and no more - the canon is exclusive. It would be hard to find documentary proof of this point except perhaps (as in an important paper by Yves Congar, *Le Concile et les Conciles*, 1960, 98) by means of selective quotation, and the assertion seems to be a misconstruction. Certainly the first four councils are accorded preeminence because of the gravity of their matter and their accord with scripture. But the principle of accord with scripture is extended (as in the *Reformatio Legum*) to later councils as well. The fifth and sixth councils are accepted in substance by representative Anglican divines of the classical period, and their reservations about the seventh council concern not the theology of the definition but the consequences of a popular, sentimental religion in which the crucial qualifications and distinctions drawn by the seventh council are not observed. Moreover, in estimating the later councils of the western patriarchate which the Roman Catholic church numbers among the 21 general councils that it receives, Anglicans are far from rejecting them out of hand. While regretting the limited and onesided character of some of the decisions of Trent, numerous Anglicans, precisely on the principle of accord with the apostolic tradition, would receive many of the council's decrees with respect. The same is more obviously true of Vatican II.

(1). Cf. Dvornik's implication that the status of the Eighth Council against Photius, accepted by the West, rejected by the East, is diminished by the fact that the Papacy did not number it among general councils until 200 years afterwards (Photian Schism, 444).