

ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Matthew 16:13-19

Prepared by Fr. Ammonius Guirguis for the Discipleship Class. Delivered in March – April 2021

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

Definition:

An **ecumenical council** is a conference of ecclesiastical dignitaries (bishops, priests, deacons) and theological experts convened to discuss and settle matters of **Church doctrine and practice** in which those entitled to vote are convoked from the whole world (*oikoumene*, in Greek) and which secures the approval of the **whole Church**.

Historical facts:

- The **Church** remained a **whole** (One Universal/Catholic Church) until the mid-5th century BC.
- A **schism** (split) happened at the **Council Chalcedon in 451 BC** where the Church split into **Chalcedonian** and **Non-Chalcedonian** Churches.
- The **Coptic Orthodox Church** (Church of Alexandria) remains **Non-Chalcedonian** recognizing **the three ecumenical councils** held when the Church was a whole.

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

The three Ecumenical Councils recognized by our Coptic Orthodox Church:

1. **Council of Nicaea** in 325 AD
2. **Council of Constantinople** in 381 AD
3. **Council of Ephesus** in 431 AD

Who represented our Church (The Coptic/Church of Alexandria) in those councils?

1. In **Nicaea**: Bishop **Alxandros/Aledander** (the 19th Pope) and the Alexandrian delegation included his **Deacon Athanasius** who became the 20th Pope. The council was attended by 318 delegates from all Christendom.
2. In **Constantinople**: Bishop **Timothy** (the 22nd Pope) along with an Alexadrian delegation. The total of attendees from all Christendom was 150.
3. In **Ephesus**: Bishop **Cyril** (the 24th Pope) the Alexandrian delegation included also **St. Shenoute the Archimandrite**. The total of attendees from all Christendom was 200.

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

Main Centres of Christianity in the early centuries:

Eastern Roman Empire (<i>spoke Greek</i>)	Western Roman Empire
Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople	Rome (<i>Latin</i>)

Other Centres of Christianity in the early centuries:

Eastern Roman Empire (<i>spoke Greek</i>)	Western Roman Empire
Caesarea, Towns in Asia Minor	Carthage, Southern Gaul

The ecclesiastical head of each of those centres was called “**Bishop**”.

The title “**Patriarch**” started to be used in the 5th century.

Ecumenical vs Local Councils:

Each bishop can hold a local council within his area/province/region. If issues discussed are not resolved, the matter could be investigated by an ecumenical council involving the Church in the whole world. **Ecumenical councils were called by the Emperor.**

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

Important Terms (*as they pertain to councils*):

+ **Heresy**:

+ **Anathema**:

+ **Canon**:

+ **Creed**:

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

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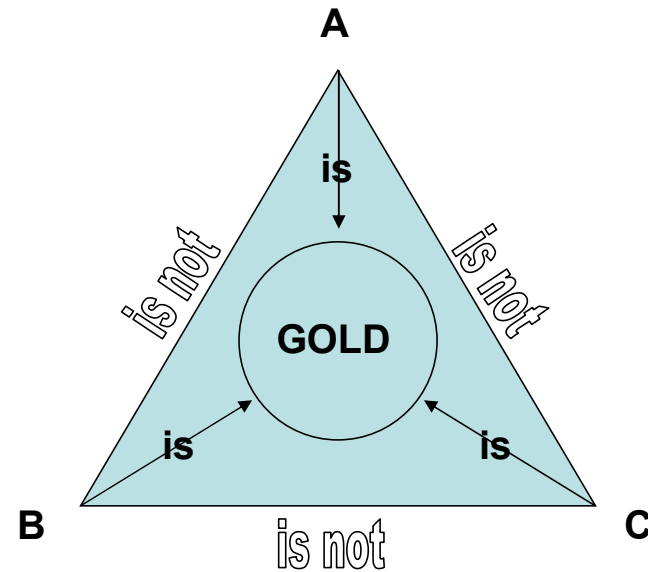
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- + **Creed**: a summary of the principal articles of faith professed by the Church

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

Understanding what “**of ONE essence**” means:

- The three apexes are **EQUAL**
- A, B, and C are of the **SAME substance** (gold)
- A **is not** B, B **is not** C, and C **is not** A
- Same substance = Same essence
- If A is not B, A will coincide with B and the triangle will collapse!

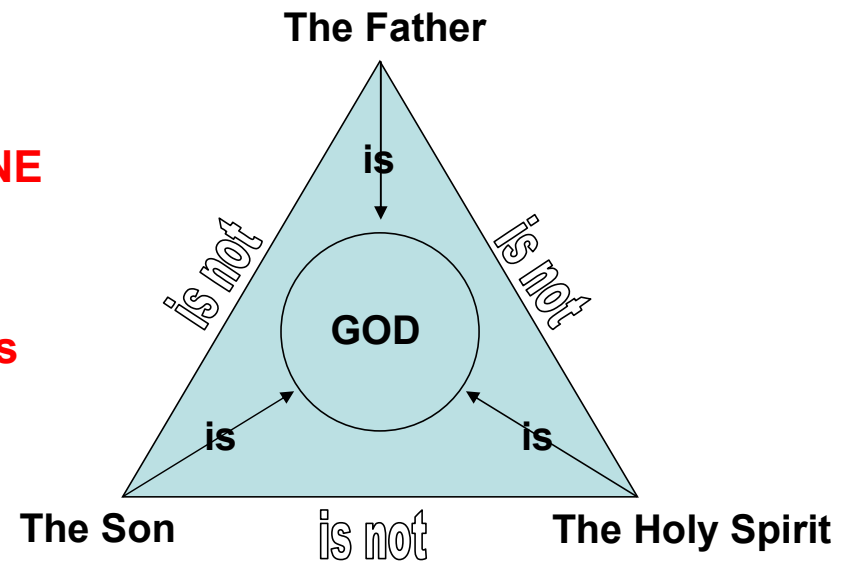


CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

Understanding what “**of ONE essence**” means:

- The three Hypostases are **EQUAL**
- The Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit are **ONE in essence**
- The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit **always coexist**. There was no time when the Father existed without the Son and Holy Spirit
- Explaining the **birth of the Son from the Father before all ages** through the analogy of “mind & thought” and “fire having flame, light and heat”.



CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

The First Ecumenical Council

COUNCIL OF NICAEA: held in **325 AD** with **318** attendees

Historical Background:

- Church leaders and theologians convening together to discuss and settle matters of **Church doctrine and practice** was a biblical tradition that had been initiated by the disciples and apostles in Acts 15 when the early church faced the problem of **Judaization/Judification** in AD 50.
- The Church has been enduring severe persecution for the past 3 centuries. **The Church flourished during persecution!** Actually, the **external** suffering strengthened the Church! Now, the devil is scheming **internal** disputes in attempt to destroy the Church from within.
- A few years earlier, the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine, issued the **Edict of Milan** in **313 AD** declaring Christianity as a **licit (lawful) religion** in the Roman Empire.
- Coming out of long persecution, some of the bishops who attended in Nicaea were maimed or dismembered!

CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

NICAEA, Historical Background: (Cont'd)

- **Arius**, a priest in Egypt, came up with a heretical teaching arguing that “if the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: so, there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he [the Son] had his substance from nothing.” [*Text shown in purple refers to heretic sayings or names of heretics*]
- **Arius** started as a deacon during the reign of St. Peter, the Seal of Martyrs, the 17th Pope
- **Arius** live during the papacy of the following Alexandrian bishops (patriarchs):

Peter (17 th Pope) 302 – 311 AD	Excommunicated Arius who had been ordained deacon by Bishop Meletius of Lycopolis . Was warned against Arius in a dream/vision!
Achillas (18 th Pope) 311 – 312 AD	Befriended Arius and restored him to Christian communion! Arius became a priest! Pope Achillas stayed only 6 months in the papacy.
Alexandros (19 th Pope) 312 – 328 AD	Held 2 local councils to sway Arius , but to no avail. Excommunicated him. When mediation failed, Constantine ordered the first ecum. council
Athanasius (20 th Pope) 328 – 373 AD	Despite Arius ' defeat and excommunication in Nicaea, Athanasius suffered a lot from Arius supporters and was exiled from his throne 5 times!

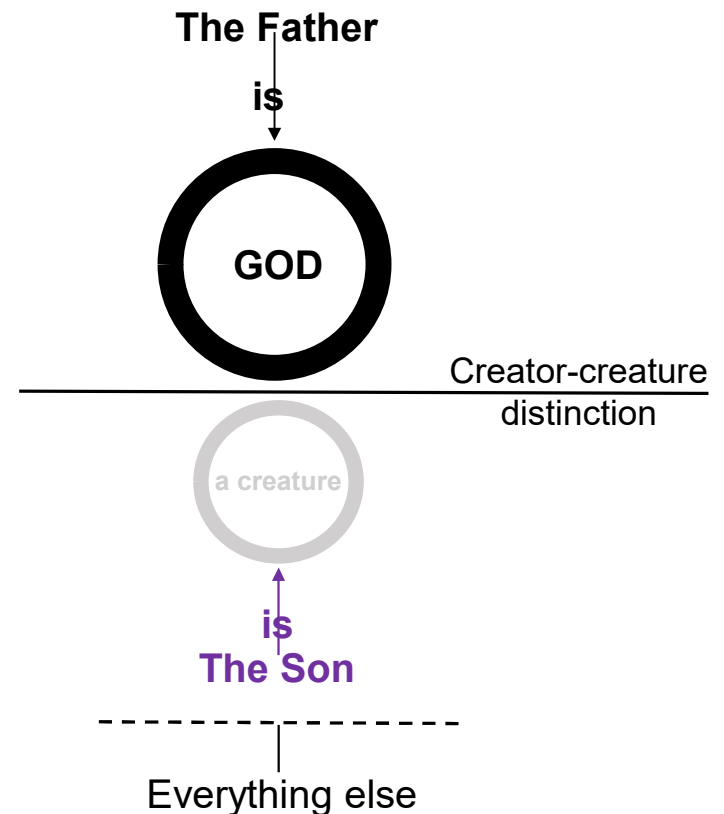
CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

NICAEA, the heresy of Arius (Arianism):

- Arius, a priest in Egypt, came up with a heretical teaching arguing that “if the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence.”
- Arius wrote to St. Alexander, Bishop Alexandria: *“We know one God, alone Unbegotten, the son begotten by the Father, is created, and was not before he was begotten.”*
- So, **there was a time when the Son was not!** It therefore necessarily follows, that he [the Son] had his substance from nothing.
- Arius would agree that the son has the same will as the Father, however, the son is of a **similar** (not of the same) **essence** of the Father!

If the son is created like us, how can he save us?



CHURCH HISTORY

Ecumenical Councils

Council of Nicaea:

Proceedings:

- **Presiding Bishop:** After the council was declared opened, the choice fell on Hosius of Cordova who was elected both for his age and sanctity.
- **Addressing the Arian heresy:** Despite being just a deacon, **St. Athanasius** was instrumental in refuting **Arian's argument** during the council.
- **One lota of difference:**

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- **Addressing the Arian heresy:** Despite being just a deacon, **St. Athanasius** was instrumental in refuting **Arian's argument** during the council.
- **One iota of difference:** **Homoousios** is the Greek term used, in an orthodox way, to describe the divinity of the Son in the Trinity. It was the term adopted by the Council of Nicaea. It means “**of the same essence.**” It means that the Son is of the same essence as the Father and, thus, is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father.
Homoiousios is the term used as a **tweak** by the **Arians** and other heresies that deny that the Son is co-eternal and co-equal to the Father. With the added **iota**, this term means “**of similar substance.**” It was used by **those who believed that Jesus was “adopted” as a “Son of God” or that he was created by the Father as a being greater than the angels but lesser than the Father.**

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Ecumenical Councils

Council of Nicaea:

Proceedings (Cont'd):

- **The Creed:** The council, then selected three members to word the Creed. They were Alexandros, Pope of the See of Alexandria, his deacon Athanasius, and Leontius, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia. The three agreed that the Creed must affirm the divinity of the Son, so as to the basis of the Christian faith of the Church Universal for all time. The council approved the Creed that they worded as follows:

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty (παντοκράτορα), Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ). By whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.”

- This text was further elaborated on and augmented in the 2nd Council in Constantinople.

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Ecumenical Councils

Council of Nicaea:

Proceedings (Cont'd):

- **A significant addendum to the Nicene Creed:** Right underneath the sentence, “**And in the Holy Ghost**” that terminates the statements of beliefs, the convening fathers ended the text with **anathemas** against almost all shades **Arian propositions**. Those anathemas stated:

“But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.”

- Although the fathers convened in the next **Ecumenical Council in AD 381 in Ephesus** clearly reaffirmed the Church condemnation of all shades of **Arianism**, they did not include the above anathemas within the text of the augmented Creed they agreed upon.

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Ecumenical Councils

Council of Nicaea:

Proceedings (Cont'd):

- **Other agenda items of the Council:**
 - **Unifying the date of celebrating the Resurrection Feast (Easter):** The council recommended independence from the Jewish calendar in determining the date of Easter and to adopt a Christian computation as per the custom of Church of Alexandria that guarantees that Easter would always fall on a Sunday after the Jewish Passover.
 - **The Meletian Schism:** Meletius, Bishop of Lycopolis (Asyut in Upper Egypt) stirred a schism as he thought that the rules set by the Church to receive back lapsed Christians (during persecution) were too lax. Limitations were imposed by the Council on the authority of Meletius as a bishop working under Pope Alexandros. Those measures, however, were in vain; the Melitians joined the Arians and caused more dissension than ever, being among the worst enemies of Athanasius. The Melitian heresy ultimately died out around the middle of the fifth century.

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Ecumenical Councils

Council of Nicaea:

Proceedings (Cont'd):

- **Other agenda items of the Council (Cont'd):**
 - **The issuance of 20 Canons to address various Church discipline including:**
 - Organizational structure of the Church focusing of ordination of bishops and clergy in general.
 - Reconciliation of the lapsed due to persecution (not to repeat their baptism).
 - Readmission to the Church of heretics and schismatics.
 - Liturgical practices.