

Chapter 15: The Ecumenical Councils

The era of the ecumenical councils, the period in church history between the fourth and eight centuries, probably represents one of the most important epochs in the history of Christianity after the apostolic era. This period spawned the main doctrines taught within contemporary professing Christianity by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Throughout the history of the religious movement founded by Jesus of Nazareth, church councils (whether general or local, ecumenical or regional) were convened and held for the purposes of settling certain religious disputes and obtaining a more specific definition of Christian dogma (beliefs).

But before we move on to examining the historical circumstances that led to the convening of ecumenical councils along with proceedings, decisions, and consequences, I want to say a few words about the first Apostolic Church council held in Jerusalem in the middle of the first century. It is critical for us to examine some of the subsequent controversial teachings that arose after this council. In fact, such teachings provoked sustained opposition from the apostles and their successors. They felt compelled to wage an uncompromising spiritual struggle against such teachings.

The First Apostolic Church Council in Jerusalem

One central issue confronted the first century Church and motivated the assembly of the first church council in which most of the apostles participated. The issue boiled down to this question: are Gentile converts to Christianity obligated to keep the Law of Moses which the Old Testament Israelites obeyed, including the rite of circumcision?

At the very beginning of the Christian era after 30 A.D., the Christian Church was comprised nearly exclusively of converts from Judaism (i.e., the religion of the Old Testament). Christ and all His apostles were Jews by nationality. Also, all those who had heard Peter's sermon at Pentecost (the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles) were Jews or proselytes (Gentiles who had previously converted to Judaism and all its Old Testament rites).

Some of the religious rites in Judaism included the circumcision of boys eight days after birth (or circumcision of Gentile men at their conversion to the Jewish faith), labeling food as clean and unclean, and the celebration of annual holy days such as Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Trumpets, Yom Kippur, and Sabbaths.¹

God strictly commanded His people to obey all these laws - always and everywhere. At the time when Christ walked the earth, Teachers of the Law (Scribes and Pharisees) preached that one must strictly comply with the requirements of the Law. Indeed, in many cases, these Teachers of the Law overstepped the bounds of the Law and introduced their own rules with regard to the observance of the Law. They ended up

¹ See Genesis 17, Exodus 20, 31:13-17, Leviticus 11, 23, Numbers 28-29, Deuteronomy 5:12.

overcomplicating the Law by making it appear much more difficult than what God had ever intended.

The Lord Jesus Christ perfectly and consistently adhered to the Old Testament law. Never did He violate any commandment of God, starting from His circumcision after His birth to His obedience of every requirement of the Law, including the observance of holy days and the days of rest (the Sabbaths). His disciples also obeyed these regulations, which God strictly commanded. They even obeyed the Law when Jesus showed them His love by suffering and dying on the cross. In arranging His burial, the disciples obeyed God's commandments not to work on the Sabbath day of rest (Mark 15:44-16:1, John 19:38-42). The disciples learned the example of strictly conforming to the whole law of God from the Lord Christ Himself who said:

*“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.”*²

Jesus' disciples continued to observe the Law after His ascension into heaven. The first Christians (all native Jews) continued with common prayers in the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple (like other Jews). Christ's death brought about the tearing of the curtain that "sanctified" the "Holy of Holies" from the hand of God. This act was a significant sign that God was terminating the Old Testament sacrificial system of worship.

However, Jesus' disciples continued to offer sacrifices for cleansing (Acts 21:17-26), circumcise their children, celebrate holidays, abstain from unclean foods, and observe the Sabbath.

The disciples even went to the extreme of confining their preaching ministry to the Jews and thinking that their work extended only to the Jews in the Diaspora. They wrongly misinterpreted the Great Commission which Jesus had given them:

*“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*³

So we see that at the beginning of church history, the disciples strictly conformed to the Law. They did not recognize that Jesus' substitutionary death had changed the meaning of the Old Testament Law after His resurrection. Indeed, they did not understand that God's requirements had changed since Jesus' resurrection.

Here are some things Jesus told the apostles regarding His messianic mission to the Israelites:

² Matthew 5:17.

³ Matthew 28:18-20. Author's emphasis.

“Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁴

*“Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.’ But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she cries out after us.’ But He answered and said, ‘**I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**’”*⁵

Also, the apostles on the day of the descent of the Holy Spirit had quite a different impression of what was happening – and what would soon happen. The Lord revealed to them truth that was quite different from their prior impressions, particularly through the Apostle Paul. Consistent with their understanding about the Old Testament prophecies regarding Messiah’s return from Heaven and His establishment of the kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6), the apostles interpreted the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God descended upon them quite differently than what we read in the book of Acts. Specifically, the apostles viewed the descent of the Spirit of God as a clear sign of imminent disaster about to fall upon the sinful world order. They believed that God would intervene to bring about natural catastrophes in the world.⁶ For this reason, the apostles believed that they should spread the Gospel of Jesus to Jews all around the world as soon as possible.

However, the conversion of Paul, formerly a fanatic Pharisee, started to change their understanding. In addition to Paul’s preaching to the Jews, the apostle also began to preach to the uncircumcised Gentiles. The Lord revealed to Paul a truth that was previously hidden in mystery. This truth revealed that Christ died for the sins of people of all nations, not only for the sins of the Jewish people, to whom Paul himself belonged. Paul explains in his epistle to the Ephesians:

*“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh - who are called **Uncircumcision** by what is called the **Circumcision** made in the flesh by hands - that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation... **Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...** by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in **the mystery of Christ**), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it **has now been revealed by the Spirit** to His holy apostles and prophets: **that the Gentiles should be***

⁴ Matthew 10:5-6. Author’s emphasis.

⁵ Matthew 15:21-4. Author’s emphasis.

⁶ See Peter’s speech in Acts 2:16-21, when he gives an explication of the ancient prophecy from Joel 2:28-32.

fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel...”⁷

However, it was not easy for the first Christians (physical descendants of the Jews) to accept the fact that salvation was available to Gentiles and not only the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Peter himself suffered from this difficulty. Even though ten years had elapsed since the founding of the Church and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Jewish Christians not only refused to welcome (uncircumcised) Gentile converts, but they also neglected to preach the Gospel to Gentiles:

*“Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, **preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.**”*⁸

The Lord ordained the Gospel to be spread among the Gentiles. God sent a vision through a dream to the Apostle Peter. The purpose of the vision was to break down the wall that restrained Jewish Christians from ministering to Gentile people. The wall was very strong. This wall consisted of very hard material erected over centuries of Jewish customs and traditions, as well as an incomplete understanding of God's commandments in the Old Testament, which were addressed only to the descendants of Jacob. The commandments to distinguish clean and unclean foods, to sacrifice animals, and to observe holidays and Sabbaths were addressed only to the Israelites and not to the pagan peoples. God's commandments always began with these words:

*“Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ‘**Speak to the children of Israel, saying, These are the animals which you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth...**’”*⁹

*“Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘**Command the children of Israel, and say to them, ‘My offering, My food for My offerings made by fire as a sweet aroma to Me, you shall be careful to offer to Me at their appointed time.**’”*¹⁰

*“**And Moses called all Israel, and said to them: ‘Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing today, that you may learn them and be careful to observe them... Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you... And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.**’”*¹¹

Because the Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth, separated them throughout history as His people, the Jews considered their nation alone to be worthy of the Kingdom of

⁷ Ephesians 2:11-14, 19, 3:4-6. Author's emphasis.

⁸ Acts 11:19. Author's emphasis.

⁹ Leviticus 11:1-2. Author's emphasis.

¹⁰ Numbers 28:1-2. Author's emphasis.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 5:1, 12, 15. Author's emphasis.

Heaven. The Jews called the Gentiles “dogs” unworthy of God's grace and benevolence. The Apostle Peter, who still firmly adhered to the Old Testament laws and regulations, could not immediately be convinced that his views on religion were not entirely correct. Let us read how Peter's attitude changed:

*“There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius!’ And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, ‘What is it, lord?’ So he said to him, ‘Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.’ And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. **In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.** Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.’ Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, ‘Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?’ And they said, ‘Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.’ Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I myself am also a man.’ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, **‘You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.** Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?’ So Cornelius said, ‘Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a*

man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.' So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.' Then Peter opened his mouth and said: **'In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ - He is Lord of all - that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.'**"¹²

So we see that even Peter, the first among the apostles, could not immediately accept the truth of the New Testament that Christ's death and resurrection eliminated the differences between Jews and Gentiles who believed in Him. God no longer considered the regulations on clean and unclean foods as valid any longer (Acts 10:15). This vision that the Lord gave to Peter is confirmed by the words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote about these events somewhat later:

*"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, **the law of commandments contained in ordinances**, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity."*¹³

In another place, this apostle also confirms the truth that the Old Testament requirements of observing holy days and Sabbaths were no longer binding on New Testament believers:

¹² Acts 10:1-48. Author's emphasis.

¹³ Ephesians 2:14-6. Author's emphasis.

*“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”*¹⁴

However, after the apostle Peter returned from the house of Cornelius in Caesarea to the Church in Jerusalem, which consisted of only Jews who still adhered to Jewish traditions, problems arose. Christians who came out of Judaism, which were zealous for the Law (see Acts 21:17-26) accused Peter of “compromising” the faith of the elders. The Scriptures reveal the problem which Peter faced and his response to Jewish Christians deeply rooted in tradition:

*“Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. **And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!’** But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, **‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’** But I said, **‘Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.’** But the voice answered me again from heaven, **‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’** Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven. At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, ‘Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ **If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?’**”¹⁵*

After Peter’s speech, the brothers in Jerusalem recognized the truth that God chose to reveal His mercy to Gentiles by offering them salvation through faith in Christ the Savior:

*“When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’”*¹⁶

However, after several years, the number of Christians increased not only in Judea but also outside it, especially due to the ministry of the apostle Paul and his companions in founding churches in Syria and Asia Minor. The majority of these new church members came from pagan backgrounds, not Jewish.

¹⁴ Colossians 2:16-17.

¹⁵ Acts 11:1-17. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁶ Acts 11:18.

On one occasion the apostles Paul and Barnabas stayed among believers in Antioch, Syria, some Jewish professors of Christianity came to them. These Jewish men were still not firmly established in the Gospel. Rather, they remained very stubborn and disobedient to apostolic authority. They attempted to restart the controversial debate of the importance of the Old Testament Law in relation to the Gentiles, despite the fact that the Jerusalem church (i.e., its leaders and the apostles) had settled the matter years ago:

*“And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. **But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.’”**¹⁷*

This conflict motivated the calling of the first church council. The apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem Church along with common believers attended this council. They arrived at the decision to renew their stance on the uncompromised confession of the Gospel. Specifically, the council’s stance reaffirmed the Gospel truth that the Old Testament symbolism and requirements of circumcision, clean and unclean foods, holy days, Sabbaths, and the like were unnecessary for the salvation of people. Rather, the council affirmed the truth that God accepted people possessing a living and effective faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Luke said this about the decision of the Jerusalem Council:

*“Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, **and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.** Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? **But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.**”¹⁸*

*“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which **you could not be justified by the law of Moses.**”¹⁹*

¹⁷ Acts 15:1-5.

¹⁸ Acts 15:6-11. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁹ Acts 13:38-9. Author’s emphasis.

*“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, **even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith** apart from the deeds of the law.”*²⁰

*“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”*²¹

*“...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law **but by faith in Jesus Christ**, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, **that we might be justified by faith in Christ** and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.”*²²

After the victory of Christ’s doctrine over pharisaical Judaism at the first Jerusalem Church Council, the Christian fellowship throughout the Roman Empire was able to live and grow spiritually free of the yoke of these “teachers”.

However, this respite in the spiritual battle against false teachers was only temporary. This conflict resurfaced in other more dangerous spiritual doctrines, against which the apostles and their successors fought until the third century after Christ. This threat emerged in the form of various Gnostic teachings which contained elements of several religions intermingled with Christian belief. Gnosticism was a great concern for the disciples of Jesus and led many into a state of confusion, especially in the time after the Apostles. The next section of this chapter analyzes the danger to the Church posed by various Gnostic teachings from the first century to the era of the various Ecumenical Councils.

The Struggle of True Christianity against Gnosticism

During the first few centuries of its existence, young Christianity encountered a major problem. Lacking the compilation of the Scriptures of the New Testament as the authoritative source of Christ’s teachings and ministry, young Christianity was confronted with the challenge of Gnosticism.

Gnosticism derives from the Greek word “gnosis” meaning “knowledge”. Gnosticism was a strange mixture of different religious beliefs and religious practice derived from a host of sources, including Far Eastern, Persian, Greek, Old Testament Jewish, and finally Christian sources. Gnostic teachings were very diverse.

²⁰ Romans 3:19-22, 28. Author’s emphasis.

²¹ Romans 10:4.

²² Galatians 2:16. Author’s emphasis.

In some areas, Gnostic teachings agreed with the Bible. However, in many other areas, Gnostic teachings not only differed but even opposed the basis of Christianity.

Gnosticism taught as the crux of its belief system a “secret knowledge” of spiritual truth revealed only to “chosen” believers and not just to “ordinary” Christians:

“But everything depends on a sound understanding of the concept of gnostic knowledge... The Gnostics sought the knowledge of inner truth connected with the human soul, which leads one further to religious meaning... According to the Gnostic work ‘Pistis Sofia’, Jesus taught his disciples: ‘Do not be weary but search day and night.’”²³

Core beliefs of Gnosticism included the existence of an unknowable and transcendent divine heavenly entity whom the Gnostics worshiped. On the other hand, Gnosticism also taught the existence of an evil god who created the physical world. Most Gnostics regarded Jehovah, the Creator God of the Old Testament, as an inferior god who was responsible for the appearance of evil in the world. The Gnostics considered matter to be evil. Indeed, one can conclude that the Gnostics considered God, the Creator of the Old Testament (whom the Gnostics called “the Demiurge”) as equivalent to Satan, the enemy of human souls, who opposed men’s efforts in achieving true spirituality by attaining the secret knowledge or “Gnosis”.

“As those who know²⁴, the Gnostics viewed the world as a realm of deep suffering. **They held that the world was in absolute darkness** in which they could barely speak of fragments of meaning. The ascetic life of the Gnostics signified the radical rejection of the world, which up to that time had only been paralleled by the Indian gurus. **Gnostics also denied that nature could ever bring joy to people. They saw the actions of nature to be governed by the laws of darkness and were the first to consider nature as a Satanic creation,** which resulted in the Gnostics holding an antagonistic relationship to nature. For centuries, [Gnostics considered] Christianity failed to deliver people from this darkness. The Gnostics considered the infinite expanse of outer space as characterized by eternal silence and left them with a terrifying impression. According to the Gnostic view, man is imprisoned in the world like a horrible prison cell and was created from a mixture of light and darkness that finds no outlet. ‘Who threw me into this world of suffering? Who has put me into the darkness of evil?’ asked the Gnostics. These poignant words of lament illustrated the Gnostic’s alienation, loneliness, and wandering in this dark world. **The Gnostic concept of life on earth consisted of fear and horror, confusion and curse, a nightmare and dizziness, intoxication and self-denial.**”²⁵

Some Gnostics taught that the knowledge of God could come only from self-knowledge by the principle of “Know God through knowing yourself.”

²³ Walter Nigg, *The Book of Heretics*, (Belgrade, 2004) 38.

²⁴ The word “gnostic” means “one who knows”.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-9. Author’s emphasis.

“Reaching gnosis means recognizing the real source of divine power, that is, the ‘depth’ of your being. Whoever realizes this source through knowledge of himself also will illuminate his spiritual background and recognize his true parents – his spiritual Father and Mother.”²⁶

According to Gnostic teaching, “the true God” did not participate in the creation of the physical world. The Gnostic “God” is implanted in the human soul and is hindered from liberation by the evil physical world. Gnosticism accepted and incorporated some Christian elements. Here is a summary of its teaching:

“Since the Demiurge created the world, God tried in many ways to redeem his emanations [created humans] from physical matter through their ascendance to higher aeons. However, the creator of all matter, the Demiurge, hindered their redemption in many ways. In the end God will send one powerful aeon to conquer the Demiurge and to redeem the divine emanations from their bondage to physical matter. This is the basic essence of Gnostic thinking before its Christianization.”²⁷

The adaptation to Christianity of Gnostic thought incorporated the powerful spirit (“aeon”) as the supreme god sent to enlighten humanity and return it to the state before humanity’s imprisonment in the material world. This state that predates the material world is the world of pure spirit of which is comprised the “heavenly Christ”.

However, this “Christ” is not the Christ described in the pages of the New Testament. The Gnostic version of Christ has only an apparent, not actual, human body. [This teaching is sometimes called the “embodiment” of Christ.] Followers of this religious syncretism (mixture of religions) criticize true Christians and call them heretics for their belief in the real humanity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Also, the Gnostics do not believe that the Lord truly suffered and died on the cross at Calvary:

“The Gnostics made a strict distinction between the heavenly and the earthly appearance of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. [They alleged that] the true Christ had no earthly form... This understanding led them to claim that Christ never suffered on the cross, but instead a certain Simon of Cyrene suffered on the cross in his place ‘while the real Christ vanished with a smile.’ The true heavenly Christ received deliverance... If matter is considered evil, as something created by the Demiurge, then Christ could not and dared never to be burdened with it. Otherwise He would not have been able to bring about salvation from it... According to the Gnostic view, humanity exists in an intermediate state which is partially trapped in matter and partially consists of light substances originating from the upper world. The heavenly Christ redeems man from the mixing up of

²⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (Vintage Books: New York, 1979) 76.

²⁷ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, volume 1, 326.

this painful condition. The deepest desire of the Gnostics is their release from this condition.”²⁸

Christ’s apostles struggled fiercely against these beliefs and correctly labeled them heretical. The apostle John in his first epistle most likely was addressing the Gnostic doctrine of "embodiment". This Gnostic doctrine espoused the idea that Christ’s earthly body came from the devil. Here is how the Apostle in the first century spoke out against this really apostate idea:

*“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come... Beloved, **do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.**”*²⁹

Numerous other differences exist in the teachings of the Gnostics versus those of the apostles. Specifically, these false teachers often misrepresented events in the Old and New Testaments. The Gnostics portrayed the true servants of God in the Bible as slaves to the lesser god, the Demiurge, while they claimed that God’s enemies and wicked people were heroes of the faith and the true servants of “the heavenly God”.

“The boldness of their view of history is expressed through their novel appreciation for the character of Cain. That archetype of the despised man, whom the Creator condemned as ‘a fugitive and vagabond to roam the earth,’ is no longer perceived as a criminal of fratricide worthy of a curse. Rather, Cain is equated to the persecuted Savior... Gnostic rebellion against God the Creator has consistently led to the radical inversion of all past historical judgments. Their consistent loyalty to Cain was extended to all other lawbreakers in Scripture. Gnostic thinkers advocated for Sodom, Esau, and the sons of Korah, while they rejected Abel, Enoch, and Noah. The Gnostics even justified Judas Iscariot, whose betrayal brought Jesus salvation, according to the Gnostic understanding... **The Gnostic heretics apparently saw in these lawbreakers the spirit of their own spirit.**”³⁰

Besides all this, the Gnostics were prolific in their writings. Specifically, during the first and second centuries after Christ, there existed a large number of so-called Gnostic gospels and other writings which allegedly told about the lives of Jesus and His disciples. The Gnostics claimed these numerous works to have been authored by the Apostles themselves in order to establish the authority of their teachings. Thus, among the Gnostic writings we find the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Truth,

²⁸ Nigg, 42-3.

²⁹ 1 John 2:18; 4:1-3. Author’s emphasis.

³⁰ Nigg, 44. Author’s emphasis.

Gospel of the Egyptians, the Secret Book of James, the Apocalypse of Paul, Peter's letter to Philip, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), the Secret Book of John, the Wisdom of Jesus Christ, and others.³¹ The Gnostic Gospels (nearly all of which were written well after the deaths of the apostles) directly negate all the basic doctrines taught in the New Testament records. Here are some examples of these Gnostic gospels allegedly endowed with "hidden knowledge" on the basis of "enlightenment".

The text called "On the Origin of the World" refers to the idea that there are two gods, a lower god - the creator of the material world that is revealed in the Old Testament as the Lord - and another called the exalted God (which could be defined as Mother-god, i.e., the feminine principle):

"...he continually boasted, saying to them (the angels)... 'It is I who am God, and there is no other one that exists apart from me.' And when he said this, he sinned against all the immortal beings who give answer... Then, when Pistis saw the impiety of the chief ruler, she was filled with anger... She said, 'You are mistaken, Samael (that is, 'blind god'). There is an immortal man of light who has been in existence before you!'"³²

The Secret Book of John gives a heretical commentary on Deuteronomy 6:4: "*Hear, O Israel: I am God, and there is no other.*"

"**In his madness...** He said, 'I am God, and there is no other God besides Me,' for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come... But by announcing this he indicated to the angles who attended him that there exists another God. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?"³³

The Gospel of Philip informs us that Jesus had intimate sexual relations with Mary Magdalene:

"The companion (of the Savior) was Mary Magdalene. (But Christ really loved) her more than (all) the other disciples and kissed her (often) on (her mouth). The other (disciples were offended...) and said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' The Savior answered and said to them, 'Why do I not lover you like her?'"³⁴

The Apocryphon of John tells us that everyone can experience the Lord in his own and unique way. To the immature disciple, Jesus appears as a child. To a mature disciple, Jesus appears as an old man - a symbol of wisdom:

³¹ See Elaine Pegels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 20, 28, 56.

³² See <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/origin.html> .

³³ *Ibid.*, 68. See also <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/apocjn.html> .

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

“Now ... (the heavens opened up and) the entire creation (which is) under heaven was lit up, and the (earth) shook. (I trembled myself and) saw the light (of the child)... While I watched, he became an old man. Then he (changed its form) and again became a servant ... I witnessed many forms of light.”³⁵

The Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas the Contender claim that Jesus was the spiritual twin of Thomas. They allege that every man who attains "secret knowledge" can become his spiritual brother. They in fact represented Christ as the "second, secret ego" for every person who seeks to know himself (e.g., the knowledge of Christ). Knowing Christ and knowing self is defined as one and the same (which the Bible would contradict as being utterly false):

“Now, since it has been said that you are my twin and true companion, examine yourself, and learn who you are... I am the knowledge of the truth. So while you accompany me, although you are uncomprehending, you have (in fact) already come to know, and you will be called 'the one who knows himself'. For he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of the all.”³⁶

The Gnostics taught many other things. Some groups of Gnostics believed in a divine trinity comprised of the entities of God the Father, God the Mother (the Holy Spirit), and the Son - Christ. Because they believed in a bisexual God, some Gnostics taught an account of the creation of man that differs from the account recorded in the Bible. They believed that God first created human beings as having both male and female genders that had been connected to one another (akin to Siamese twins). Then God reconsidered the situation and separated these genders from each other, thus having created male and female as separate genders and human beings.

Gnostics advocated the idea of complete asceticism and denied the importance of marriage. They despised childbearing, because they thought it was just the continuation of incarcerating the spirit into the prison of evil matter, which was the conception of their dreaded enemy, the Demiurge, the god of creation. The Gnostics did not have formal leaders in their communities, but any member of the community could assume any role. Also, women were named as spiritual teachers and leaders and given the authority to baptize and do other things in the community.³⁷

Any informed reader of the Bible will realize that the Gnostic texts utterly contradict the description of Jesus, His teachings, and His attitude toward His disciples as recorded by the New Testament apostles.

The problem of Gnosticism was much greater in the early centuries of Christianity than today. One major factor was the confusion that sprung from the contemporaneous

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58. See also <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/bookt.html>.

³⁷ For more details on Gnostic teachings, read Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (Vintage Books: New York, 1979).

writing and dissemination of the Gnostic heretical writings and the actual New Testament texts. Both claimed apostolic authorship, though only the New Testament texts were actually written by the apostles. The heretical works of the Gnostics blossomed and spread like wildfire among the Christian churches at the same time as the true apostolic writings. Thus, the apostles in the middle of the first century and other teachers of the Church in the second and third centuries were forced to confront this emerging Gnostic heresy in writing and oral preaching with strong opposition. In the middle of the first century, the apostle Paul warned Christians about the practice of false teachers who pretended to be Apostles by forging apostolic signatures at the end of their heretical works:

*“Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.”*³⁸

*“...Not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or **by letter, as if from us**... Let no one deceive you by any means.”*³⁹

Church writers in the second century such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others warned the Church of the danger of accepting this dangerous spiritual apostasy:

“Tertullian, a writer of great talent around the year 190, defined the most orthodox position: since Jesus had physically risen from the grave, so every believer should await a physical resurrection. For him there is no room for doubt... Tertullian declares that anyone who denies the resurrection of the body is a heretic, not a Christian.”⁴⁰

“Each of them⁴¹ by his own temperament alters the tradition that was received, which then he teaches and shapes it according to his own will... On the basis that these heretics and enemies of the apostles whether because of the diversity of their teachings that each individual receives, or simply disseminated by his own will.”⁴²

Irenaeus of Lyons describes the heresy of the Gnostics and issues a stern warning against their activities:

“They regard themselves as 'mature' so that no one will ever rival them in the expanse of their knowledge – not even if you were to mention Peter, Paul, or some other apostle... **They imagine themselves to be greater than the apostles**, whom they consider to have preached the Gospel still under the influence of Jewish ideas, **and that these Gnostics are smarter and wiser than the apostles.**”⁴³

³⁸ Colossians 2:4.

³⁹ 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁰ Pagels, 45.

⁴¹ That is, the Gnostics.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 61.

“Let not those persons who blaspheme the Creator ... such as the Valentinians and all those falsely named 'Gnostics' be recognized as agents of Satan by all who respect God. Through them Satan is revealed to speak even against God, the one God who has prepared the eternal fire for all kinds of heresies.”⁴⁴

Finally, during the third and fourth centuries A.D., the Gnostic influence began to weaken significantly. One major factor was the canonization of the New Testament books. Once the reliability of the 27 authentic New Testament documents was recognized and disseminated to Christians, it became obvious that the various Gnostic heretical texts were falsifications. While the New Testament texts affirmed the teaching of Christ, the Gnostic texts undermined His teaching. The separation of these books enabled Christians to reject the Gnostic forgeries as untrustworthy.

However, in spite of Christianity's eventual triumph over the Gnostic heresies, Gnosticism was not the final challenge faced by early Christianity. Soon afterward there arose other movements that in various ways challenged the divine nature of Jesus Christ. They alleged that Christ was not the eternal Son of God (i.e., God in the flesh), but rather some sort of creature. Regarding this issue, the Emperor Constantine convened the so-called First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the year 325.

The next section of this chapter will consist of an overview of church history between the fourth and seventh centuries after Christ, the time when the Ecumenical Councils were convened. It is critical to note that these Councils were convened at a time when the Church enjoyed considerable favor and support from the government. Such a situation stands in stark contrast to the first Apostolic Council held in Jerusalem, a time of great persecution against the Church. Highlighting this contrast is particularly critical for shedding light on the major differences in the atmosphere that prevailed during the Apostolic Council of the middle of the first century in contrast with that of the “Ecumenical” Councils of later centuries. Specifically, the Apostolic Council, which was inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, eventually concluded in unanimity and confirmation of evangelical orthodoxy. In contrast, later Church Councils (seven of which later received the designation of “Ecumenical”) resulted in deep divisions among the official ecclesiastical authorities and their followers, as well as frequent quarrels, schisms, excommunications, persecutions and even murders because they had never resolved the religious questions they were supposed to discuss.

Many of these later bishops to be introduced to the reader not only taught doctrines alien to the teachings of Christ and the apostles, but they also demonstrated behavior completely opposite to the qualifications for pastoral ministry as taught by the Apostles (such as in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 2 Timothy 2:24-24, Titus 1:7-9). The lack of spiritual regeneration of these men enabled them to adopt and merge various pagan teachings into Christianity. The "Ecumenical Councils" and many local church councils introduced and affirmed strange doctrines and liturgical practices that have no foundation in the teachings of Scripture.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

The next part of this chapter will present a very dark page in the history of the Christian Church. This history is the fulfillment of the prophetic words of the apostles recorded in the New Testament, which foretold a time in which the majority of people in the "Church" will be *“lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.”*⁴⁵

The First Ecumenical Council and the Factors that Led to its Convocation

After the rise of Gnosticism, which nearly undermined Christianity by drawing on ideas from pagan religion and philosophy, other false teachings arose in the second and third centuries. These false teachings introduced a heretical understanding of the nature of God. These teachings emerged from within the Church. Their main characteristic was the denial of the Bible's teachings about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as the Holy Trinity. Such teachings sought to explain the divine order that exists in the invisible world in a rationalistic manner. The two earliest schools that propagated such errant teachings on the Trinity were called the dynamic and modalistic schools.

These two schools belonged to the so-called monarchian movement (that is, anti-Trinitarian).⁴⁶ They considered the divinity of God the Father as superior to the Son and the Holy Spirit. They reckoned the Son and the Holy Spirit as lesser beings or forces of God, or perhaps simply manifestations of God the Father. While the dynamic modalists believed that Christ (the Word of God) and the Holy Spirit possessed the same power as God (the Father), they also considered the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be merely three different and unique manifestations of one God.

The best known representative of the dynamic modalist school was Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, who lived in the third century after Christ. He taught that Jesus Christ was just an ordinary man who was born in an unusual way. According to the bishop, the impersonal divine power known as “logos” dwelled in the man Christ.

As for the modalists, their best known teacher was an educated Roman elder named Sabellius, a native of Libya, who taught in the Libyan area to the west of Egypt called Pentapolis. Their religious belief taught that God is a unique being and a divine person who revealed himself in three forms, first in the role of the Father, then as the Son, and finally, the role of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ 2 Timothy 3:2-5. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁶ Antitrinitarians are distinguished by their denial of the Holy Trinity, that is, they do not believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons nor that they are one divine essence (of God).

⁴⁷ See Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 350, 353.

However, at the same time when the main proponents against the Trinity were spreading their teachings, there appeared an opposing group of teachers. This group taught “subordinationism”. This group taught that there are three divine persons (not just one), but that the Son (Logos) and the Holy Spirit are subordinate in every way to God the Father, even to the extent of possessing less “Divinity” than God the Father. The most well-known proponents of “subordinationism” who opposed “monarchianism” included Origen, his pupil Dionysius the Great, bishop of Alexandria, and Hippolytus of Rome, and quite possible others including Athanagoras, Theophilus, Tertullian, and Lucian.⁴⁸

The Emergence and Spread of Arianism

The view of “subordinationism” that the Son was subordinate in essence to the Father particularly shook the church in the first half of the fourth century. One offshoot was developed and taught by an educated elder in Alexandria named Arias. Arias had been a disciple of Lucian of Antioch (who was a sympathizer and member of the party of Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch). Dr. Momir Jovic summarizes the essence of the teaching of Arias:

“The learned Alexandrian presbyter Arius (Areios 256-336) tried to show fierce opposition to anti-trinitarianism by using subordinationism. Instead, Arius ended up becoming its strongest advocate. From 318-9, Arius began to preach that God is of eternity, but the Son was His first creation, through which everything else is created. Alleging that the Holy Spirit created the Logos – the Son, Arius arrived at this conclusion: the Father is one from eternity, yet the Son or Logos arose in time and never was eternal. Therefore, the Son or Logos cannot be equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, since the first created being is the Son/Logos. Therefore, only God is the true and eternal uncreated Father. However, as the Son did not always exist, but was born in time, hence God was not always Father.”⁴⁹

The first person to respond to Arius’s preaching was his Bishop Alexander. After unsuccessful efforts to convince Arius of the error of his teaching, a synod was convened in 320 in Alexandria. Over 100 Egyptian bishops attended and chose to condemn the teaching of the presbyter Arius. During this synod, all the followers of Arius, mostly other presbyters and deacons along with a few bishops, were excommunicated.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See *Ibid.*, 355.

⁴⁹ Momir Jovic, *Early Christianity in the Balkans*, 27-8.

⁵⁰ In addition to the formal debate at the church synod regarding the theological orthodoxy of Arius’s teaching, ordinary believers also held different opinions and debated them. Dr. Jovic describes the situation in Egypt during the time of this dispute:

“Two factions in the church in Alexandria formed as a consequence: one in favor of Arius, the other in favor of Bishop Alexander. Those uninitiated in Christian doctrine took part in debating the essence of Christianity. This left the interpretation of the essence of the Trinity to the inflamed passions of the masses in the streets and markets. In this situation, the followers of the ancient religions resorted to those

Refusing to submit to the synod's verdict, Arius sought help from his friends. These included his classmates who also studied under Lucian of Antioch: Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (Eusebius of Caesarea - the famous historian of the early Church) and Eusebius of Nikomedia. These bishops gave Arius refuge and also accepted his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Since the dispute over the teachings of Arius led to further splintering within the Church, the Emperor Constantine chose to intervene. After his victory over his rival Licinius made him the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, Constantine tried to reconcile the opposing sides (Arian and Alexander) through the intermediary mission of the Bishop Hosius from the Spanish city of Cordoba. However, this bishop's mission to reconcile the two conflicting parties failed. Constantine's advisors suggested that he convene a general Church Council to consider and resolve these issues.

The Convening of the First Ecumenical Council

In the spring of 325 in Nicaea (Asia Minor) there gathered more than 200 Christian bishops⁵¹, presbyters, and deacons, mostly from the eastern provinces. The Western bishops, who also numbered in the hundreds, did not participate in this Synod, except for a few of them⁵², including two presbyters sent to represent the Roman bishop Sylvester. The intention of the Emperor Constantine in convening the Council was to achieve universal reconciliation between the parties in conflict and thus maintain unity needed within the Roman Empire:

“Before the synod could be summoned by the Emperor, there occurred a private dialogue between the major parties in the dispute, namely Arius and Athanasius, the deacon of the archbishop of Alexandria. Athanasius was renowned for his expertise in theological doctrine, rhetoric, and ability to debate. But no accord was concluded. When the Emperor arrived in Nicaea to personally open the synod, opponents of Arius made accusations against him. However, they immediately came under fire. Constantine stated that he intended to mediate the dispute and not to be their judge. Constantine himself opened the Council of Bishops and gave the opening speech in which he invited them to reconcile themselves, but he himself would lead the discussions at the Council.”⁵³

ridiculous public hearings that were unfamiliar to Christian believers. Christianity experienced a new form of utter confusion that became the butt of jokes for theater comics.” Jovic, 29.

⁵¹ Early church historians generally disagree on the exact number of attendees at this Council. Eusebius of Caesarea cites about 250 participants, yet Athanasius the Great and Socrates speak of "over three hundred." Church tradition claims the number of gathered bishops at 318, but primarily for the reason of having that number equate to the number of Abraham's servants who fought against the four kings who captured his nephew Lot (Genesis 14). See: *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 10. On the other hand, some historians say the number was only 220 assembled bishops. See: John Foster, *Church History I*, 136.

⁵² The big question arises: if several hundred Western bishops did not attend this Council, as well as a considerable number of bishops from the East, then could the Council of Nicaea (as well as the six other Councils to follow) even be considered "ecumenical," that is, relevant to the universal church?

⁵³ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol, 1, 538.

The result of the Nicaean Council was the near unanimous condemnation of the doctrines of Arius. Along with Arius, only two other bishops officially voiced their dissent: Secundus of Ptolemais and Theonus of Marmarica. These two bishops, along with Arius, were banished to Illyria in order to render them harmless and to maintain the “unity” of the Church. However, it is noteworthy that in addition to these two bishops, who officially voiced their opposition to the Council’s decision, there were seventeen others who also did not agree with the decisions of the Council. However, these bishops were more pliable. After the Emperor's persuasion and coercion, these other bishops signed off on the creed against their consciences.⁵⁴ The Council adopted the following creed (practice) of faith:

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, 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, being of one substance with the Father; 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.

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.”⁵⁵

In addition to resolving the Arian crisis and the adoption of the symbol of faith, the First Ecumenical Council enacted 20 canons (rules) and resolved some disputes in the church in Egypt. Additionally, this Council rejected the proposal of the Western bishops to institute celibacy as a mandatory requirement for the clergy.

Events between the First and Second Ecumenical Councils

Three months after the Council in Nicaea, the sentence of Arius to exile was ameliorated by his friend Eusebius, the bishop of Nikomedia, who had a deep friendship with the Emperor Constantine. The exile of Arius lasted only 3 years. Through that time, Eusebius along with friends and trusted advisors persuaded the Emperor to revoke the exile of Arius.

So once again, the Emperor heard out Arius. Arius gave Constantine a kind of vague confession of faith. The poorly informed Constantine became more persuaded that the Arian controversy was truly “a spat about nothing”. The Emperor sent a request to the

⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 538-9.

⁵⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed

bishops of Alexandria to welcome the former presbyter Arius once again into the church fellowship.

However, at that moment in the year 328, the seat of the bishop of Alexandria was occupied by Athanasius, who at the Nicene Council had been merely a deacon and was a bitter opponent of Arius. Bishop Athanasius refused to accept Arius back into the church fellowship without Arius's unequivocal confession of the Nicene Creed. Supporting the firm stance of Athanasius against Arius were the bishops Eustatius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra. However, two influential friends of Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea, won over many other bishops who prior to the Council of Nicaea were confused by the use of the philosophical term "homoousios". This term was first used by the excommunicated Paul of Samostasi, the former bishop of Antioch, who had used the term with a different meaning.

Day after day, as if the Nicene Council had never occurred, the number of sympathizers to the teachings of Arius increased. Consequently, a council was convened in Antioch in the year 330. Presiding at this council was the bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who had deposed Eustatius as bishop of Antioch and sentenced him into exile, after which he died 30 years later. Not stopping at that extent, the friends of the former presbyter of Alexandria extracted further "revenge" against the archenemies of Arius. In the year 335, another council was held in the city of Tyre in Phoenicia (also under the jurisdiction of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea). This council condemned Athanasius as a "heretic" (that is, the main proponents of "homoousios" or "one in essence"), deposed him as bishop, and persuaded the Emperor to exile Athanasius to Trier on the Rhine. A year later, another church council was convened in Constantinople, and the bishop Marcellus was deposed and expelled.⁵⁶

After all these events, Arius, who himself was getting up in years, was about to be welcomed back into church fellowship at a grand ceremony in the church of Constantinople under the auspices of the Emperor Constantine. Arius suddenly died.

Soon after his baptism by Eusebius of Nicomedia, the Emperor Constantine himself died in 337. His three sons inherited the rule of the Roman Empire. Two of them, Constans and Constantine II, ruled the West, while Constantius ruled the East.

At the beginning of the reign of this triumvirate, the most influential among the three rulers was Constantine II. He allowed all of the formerly excommunicated bishops to return to their posts. He returned Athanasius to his position as senior bishop of Alexandria. The people gladly welcomed his return. However, supporters of the policies of the two bishops, Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, appointed the latter to become the bishop of Constantinople. (He sacked the previous bishop of Constantinople, Paul, whom he considered a "lukewarm" defender of Arianism.) He convened another church council in Antioch in the year 339. This church council yet again voted on the expulsion of Athanasius from his position as bishop of Alexandria. They charged him with the misappropriation of other bishops' chairs. It did not help

⁵⁶ See Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 541-2.

Athanasius as archbishop of Alexandria that other Egyptian bishops gave their unanimous support to his ouster. Athanasius was again forced into exile. Aided by the Emperor Constantius with military force and many riots, Gregory of Cappadocia, a man with Arian sympathies, was installed as the new archbishop of Alexandria:

“Philagrius, Prefect of Egypt, and a friend of Arius, was ordered to provide Gregory with assistance. When news arrived that Gregory was approaching the city, the people flocked to the church to defend it from the heretic. The next event involved the shameful intervention of the military. Gregory with the aid of the soldiers emptied out the church. They asked for the whereabouts of Athanasius, but he managed to hide from them. On March 22, 339, Gregory made his official entrance into Alexandria. He ordered the persecution of the supporters of Athanasius.”⁵⁷

After he was deposed yet again, the bishop Athanasius found refuge in the West with his friends Hosius, the bishop of Cordoba, and Julius, the bishop of Rome. Both of these men supported the Nicene Creed and were not sympathetic to the teachings of Arius. Bishop Julius with the full support of the Emperor Constans (his brother Constantine II had died in 340 AD) convened a council in Rome in the 341. Julius’ intention was to resolve the issues arising from the expulsion of Athanasius. Although no representatives from the Church of Constantinople were present in Rome to attend the council, the bishop Julius along with the Western bishops declared Athanasius and Marcellus not to be heretics and chose to restore them to fellowship. This view conflicted with that of the bishops of the East.

In reaction to this council in Rome, the Eastern bishops convened another council later that year in 341 at Antioch. This council rejected the decision of the council in Rome. However, the current Bishop of Constantinople, Eusebius of Nicomedia, died. The successor to Eusebius, a bishop named Paul, fiercely opposed Arianism. However, the emperor Constantius deposed this man and installed in his place the bishop of Macedonia, who was a strong Arian. During that time, the supporters of Paul rioted on the streets and suffered roughly 3,000 deaths as a consequence.⁵⁸

The next issue to arise regarding the recognition of the Nicene Creed consisted of the alleged Second Ecumenical Council convened at the behest of the Emperor Constans in the Western part of the Empire. This major Church Council occurred in the year 343 in Serdica (modern Sofia, Bulgaria). Rather than providing mutual reconciliation and harmony to the two conflicting parties, instead this Council added to the complexity and escalation of the conflict. Church history informs us of this council:

“The Council was held in the second half of the year 343. However, broadly speaking, this was not one unified council. The intention of uniting both conflicting parties together was not realized. Indeed, there were two separate councils, one for the Byzantines, and one for the Westerners... **The Westerners,**

⁵⁷ Shmeman, *The Historical Path of Orthodoxy*, 120.

⁵⁸ See Momir Jovic, *Early Christianity in the Balkans*, 39-40.

comprised of nearly a hundred bishops, met in civilian buildings next to the Rotunda, the complex of St. George... Hosius, the Bishop of Cordoba, who had presided over the Nicene Council, also presided over this Council of the Westerners... The Eastern bishops, having recognizing that Constans had initiated the convening of this Council, were in no rush to arrive in Serdica. They met in Philippopolis in August 343. **This group of more than 80 bishops** was somewhat smaller than the Westerners. According to Sozomen, the Eastern bishops sent a letter to the Western bishops that informed them they would not attend their council... because of the presence of Athanasius, Marcellus, and other bishops whom were restored to fellowship by the Western bishops... However, in refusing to attend the Council, the Eastern bishops realized that their standing before their own Emperor Constantius was weakened. They eventually arrived in Serdica... The leaders of the Eastern bishops included Stefan of Antioch, Acacius of Caesarea, Theodore of Heracles, Valens of Mursa, and Ursacius of Singidunum (until the arrival of the Eastern bishops, he had attended the Western Council, but as a representative of the Arian camp on behalf of the Eastern Goths). Neither party was able to come to unity in Serdica. Although both groups were physically close to one another, it was only enough to unite them in shouting matches with one another... **These two sessions resulted in the casting of mutual anathemas. The Eastern bishops excommunicated the Western bishops** Julius, Protogenea, Maximinus, and Gaudens, as they deemed them most responsible for the rehabilitation of the deposed bishops Athanasius, Paul, Marcellus, and Aselpa... In opposition to the East, the Council of Western bishops ratified the decisions of the Council of Rome in 341. Though they chose to review the cases of individual bishops, the Council reaffirmed the restoration of Athanasius, Marcellus, and Aselpa of Gaza to their positions as bishops... **Then the Council of Western bishops called for the expulsion of the bishops** Gregory of Alexandria, Basil of Ankara, and Quintilianus of Gaza. The Council also excommunicated the leaders of the group of Eastern bishops: Stefan, Acacius, Ursacius, Valens, and Theodore.”⁵⁹

So we see that despite the intent of the Council to achieve harmony and unity in the faith, instead the bishops of the West and the East pronounced mutual excommunications and expulsions on each other (even though such excommunications had almost no practical impact on the situation). Nonetheless, the return of Athanasius to the post of bishop of Alexandria for the third time was certain. The Western Emperor Constans made this a certainty in declaring war on his brother Constantius, Emperor of the East, who was already at war with the Persians. Constantius dictated an ultimatum that he would stop the war only if Athanasius were restored to his position. After the death of the bishop Gregory of Cappadocia, Athanasius once again became bishop of Alexandria, in spite of great opposition from his opponents, the Eastern bishops.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-2. Author's emphasis.

⁶⁰ The implication is that Constantius allowed Athanasius to return to Alexandria not out of any theological repentance, but rather out of political pressure from his brother Constans, who supported the Nicene Creed, in the West.

However, several years after the return of Athanasius, Constantius, the ruler of the Western part of the Roman Empire, died in the year 350. Constantius, who supported the Arians, became sovereign over the whole Roman Empire. Once again, persecution of the defenders of the Nicene Creed resumed. This time, the Emperor Constantius and his Arian advisers decided to issue an Ecumenical edict expelling Athanasius from his position over the church in Alexandria. Such an edict would have been binding only with the consent of a council of Western bishops.

However, the West in general at that time was “orthodox” and adhered to the Nicene Creed. Athanasius had many friends in the West who were bishops. The Eastern bishops persuaded the Emperor to carry out the edict by force what he was unable to do by persuasion:

“The Emperor and his advisers realized that as long as Athanasius relied on the West, his edict would never have ecumenical effect. Above all other factors, that is why he considered it necessary to subjugate the West under political power. In 352, Julius died and was replaced by the pope Liberius. The Emperor requested him to convene a Council to affirm the condemnation of Athanasius. The Pope unsuccessfully tried to defend himself. In 355, **300 Western bishops** were convened in Milan and **compelled under brute force to yield to the Emperor’s demands.**⁶¹ ‘My will for you is canon,’ replied Constantius to the request of the Bishop for an investigation of the matter under canonical ‘criteria.’ Under duress, **all** but a few unshakable bishops **signed the edict of the condemnation of Athanasius.** Those dissenting bishops were immediately sent into exile. Among those sent into exile was Liberius, who refused to recognize the decision of the Council. In the meantime, imperial officials forged the signature of the Bishop and distributed the edict.”⁶²

A year after the Council of Milan, military force once again expelled Athanasius from the bishop’s chair. For the next six years, he was forced to hide in the Egyptian desert. Church history tells us the details:

“After councils in Sirmium in 351, Arles in 353, and Milan in 355, the bishop was ousted once again. Athanasius began his third exile in 356. A mass excommunication was issued under the auspices of the Eastern bishops under the Council of Serdica. This excommunication included the bishops Hosius of Cordoba, Paul of Trier, Hilarion of Pictavia (Poitiers), Eusebius of Vercelli, Lucifer of Caligari, and Liberius of Rome. **The Emperor Constantius** went further and convened councils from the year 359. (The Eastern bishops held one

⁶¹ This incident shows yet another example of the lack of integrity on the part of the so-called “defenders of orthodoxy”. Such an incident stands in stark contrast with Christ’s apostles who suffered persecution with joy because of their loyalty to the Truth and their attitude that they “*ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). Apparently, these “defenders” in later centuries buckled under pressure and betrayed the truth due to the risk of losing their own earthly pleasures. This is consistent with the words of the Apostle Paul, who foretold of these “*traitors... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.*” (2 Timothy 3:4)

⁶² Schmemann, *The Historical Way of Orthodoxy*, 127. Author’s emphasis.

in Seleucus in the western part of Romania. This was followed by a general council in Constantinople in 360.) **The Emperor proclaimed Arianism as the faith of the Roman Empire.**"⁶³

However, shortly after the power of Arianism reached its peak, proponents put pressure on the whole Church to accept the "Sirmian" manifesto of 357. This document openly articulated the Arian faith. However, Arianism's main supporter, the Emperor Constantius, died soon after in 361. His successor was Julian the Apostate, who proclaimed full religious freedom. According to Alexander Schmemmann, this proclamation resulted in the disgrace and ultimate discrediting of the Christian faith in the eyes of society. At the same time, the introduction of equal rights for members of all religions resulted in a ban on proselytizing pagans with Christianity. Bishop Athanasius, after his triumphant return to Alexandria, yet again had to flee the city because of persecution from the new government on account of the conversion of several pagans to Christianity.

After the death of Julian in 363, the Roman legions installed Valentinian as emperor. Local bishops returned to the practice of the Nicene Creed, which had been banned by the former emperor Constantius, after a council presided over by Athanasius in 362. The prospects for the Nicene Creed were abetted by the new emperor Valentinian, who was undecided and impartial regarding religious controversies. On the other side, the entrance of the so-called "Great Cappadocians" - Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa changed the situation in the East. These three influential theologians along with Athanasius of Alexandria contributed to the ultimate triumph of the Nicene Creed at the so-called Second Ecumenical Council of 381 in Constantinople.

However, during the whole period that elapsed between the First and Second Ecumenical Councils, there prevailed an atmosphere of great debates, quarrels, threats, excommunications, and turmoil among the ecclesiastical leaders of the time. Alexander Schmemmann describes this era of church history and the immoral behavior of people who called themselves followers of Christ "*who when reviled, did not revile in return, and who suffered, but did not threaten*":⁶⁴

"Bishops were divided into theological 'parties' and continually formulated new definitions of faith, mutual excommunications, councils and assemblies. Later, the church historian Socrates compared this time **with a battle at night in which no one could discern friend from foe.**"⁶⁵

The Second Ecumenical Council

The Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople convened by the Emperor Theodosius resolved the Arian controversy once and for all. Specifically, during the decades that elapsed since the Nicene Council, a great struggle ensued between the

⁶³ Jovic, 43. Author's emphasis.

⁶⁴ See 2 Peter 2:21-3.

⁶⁵ Schmemmann, 128. Author's emphasis.

supporters and opponents of Arian teachings and gave articulation to specific theological views. One of those views consisted of the proper view of the Holy Trinity as represented by Athanasius the Great and other orthodox bishops. Leading members of these groups included the Syrian Apollinaris of Laodicea in Syria, an opponent of Arianism, and Macedonius of Constantinople, an advocate, or more accurately a sympathizer, of Arianism. The Second Ecumenical Council upheld the proper view of the Trinity but condemned the teachings both of Apollinaris and Macedonius as heresy. Let us briefly review the events leading to the convening of this Council as well as the teachings of the two rival groups.

The bishop Apollinaris wanted to prove the doctrine of the utter divinity of Jesus Christ at all costs. In his efforts to refute the Arian heresy that denied Christ's divine nature, Apollinaris went to the other extreme of denying the full humanity of Christ. The bishop believed that Christ in His conception and birth through the Virgin Mary only received from her a human body and mind, not the human spirit. Apollinaris instead taught that the divine Logos spirit, not the human spirit, indwelt Christ, such that Jesus' humanity was incomplete and differed from that of other people. Here is how one Eastern Orthodox author describes this teaching:

“Appollinaris, bishop of Laodicea, came from the ranks of the Orthodox party... Apollinaris believed that Christ received the incarnation of the human soul and body, but he did not receive one specific part of humanity - the human spirit, for this necessarily would have implied the freedom of the will, and with it the tendency to sin. The human spirit of Christ, in the view of Appollinaris, is the divine Logos, which replaced the primitive soul whose master is driven by evil inclinations’.”⁶⁶

A local church council held in Alexandria in 362 condemned this teaching of Apollinaris (who later died in 390). He was later condemned again by a council of bishops gathered in Rome in 375. The final declaration of his convictions and beliefs as heresy came at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381 in Constantinople.

On the other hand, given that the Arians at that time still outnumbered those who held to the Nicene Creed, Macedonius was appointed the bishop of Constantinople. He taught a diluted version of Arianism agreed to by a small number of other bishops. This view concerned the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. Specifically, the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea had not discussed the person of the Holy Spirit. Neither did the Nicene Council specify any dogmatic position on the Spirit in relation to the divinity of the Father and the Son in the dogma of the Holy Trinity. Thus, Macedonius was able to propagate his teaching until his ouster from Constantinople in 360 (soon after which he died). His teaching was spread further by the fiery monk and later bishop Marathon of Nicomedia. He went further and stated that the Holy Spirit was inferior to the Father and the Son, and that the Spirit actually was a creation of the Son of God:

⁶⁶ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, (Belgrade 2004) 24.

“Over time, the debate over the person of the Holy Spirit arose from the semi-Arian camp of the Macedonians, named after Macedonius, the bishop of Constantinople (355-359). This camp venerated the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, but they separated the Spirit from the essence of the First Two Personas, as they argued that the Holy Spirit was created and not God.”⁶⁷

Opposing the teaching of the bishop Macedonius and his followers (dubbed “pneumatomachi”, or “enemies of the Holy Spirit”) were the same people who fought for the Nicene Creed. The historian Eusebius Popovic explains:

“From 358, Athanasius the Great emerged as the first leader to oppose the pneumatomachi. He was joined by Basil the Great (died in 379), both Gregories, that is, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, and others. They defended both the full deity of the Son and the full divinity of the Holy Spirit as the outpouring of the Father and His homoousios (unity in essence) with the Father and the Son. However, there existed a great number of Macedonians amongst the bishops who professed Orthodoxy. Since there existed many such Macedonians who fully confessed to the divinity of the Son but rejected the divinity of the Holy Spirit and His unity in essence with the Father and the Son, Theodosius the Great, soon after becoming Emperor in Constantinople, convened a new Ecumenical Council, a general council for the Church of the Eastern Roman Empire. 150 Orthodox and 36 Macedonian bishops accepted the Emperor’s invitation to Constantinople in 381.”⁶⁸

So a relatively small number of bishops (compared to the total number in the contemporary Christian world)⁶⁹ attended this council over which the Archbishop Meletius of Antioch presided.

The first subject of discussion was the naming of a successor to the position as Bishop of Constantinople. In 380, Theodosius expelled Demophilus who was Arian. Up to the beginning of the council, the majority of the bishops supported the nomination by Theodosius of Gregory of Nazianzus, a bishop from the town of Sasim in Cappadocia. However, Gregory of Nazianzus was not the only “contender” for the permanent position as Bishop of Constantinople. There was another candidate, his so-called “friend” the philosopher Maximus the Cynic of Egypt.

A group of Egyptian bishops led by Peter of Alexandria ordained Maximus as Archbishop of Constantinople. They used the pretense that the naming of Gregory of Nazianzus as bishop violated canon law, since he was already bishop of another district. Specifically, the 15th Canon of the First Council in Nicaea states that a bishop is not permitted to transfer from one district to another:

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁸ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 556.

⁶⁹ The number of bishops in attendance at the Second Ecumenical Council was much smaller than that at the Nicene (First) Ecumenical Council.

“On account of the great disturbance and discords that occur, it is decreed that the custom prevailing in certain places contrary to the Canon, must wholly be done away; so that neither bishop, presbyter, nor deacon shall pass from city to city. And if any one, after this decree of the holy and great Synod, shall attempt any such thing, or continue in any such course, his proceedings shall be utterly void, and he shall be restored to the Church for which he was ordained bishop or presbyter.”⁷⁰

However, the bishops in Constantinople turned a deaf ear to the warning brought by the “holy fathers” little more than half a century earlier. These bishops chose to ordain Gregory as bishop of Constantinople. However, soon after he opened the Council, the bishop Meletius of Antioch died. The newly appointed bishop of “the New Rome”, Gregory, replaced Meletius.

However, it seems that fate did not favor this bishop in terms of allowing him to remain on the bishop’s throne. In fact, one of the problems that the Archbishop Gregory wanted to resolve in this Council was the vacancy in Antioch created by the death of Meletius.

At Antioch, in fact, there already existed a “shadow bishop” by the name of Paul, who acted as a kind of opposition government to Meletius.⁷¹ Gregory proposed not to name a new bishop to Antioch after the death of Meletius, but rather that bishops ordained by Paul should be legally recognized. However, the majority of bishops at the council opposed Gregory. They appointed Flavian, formerly a presbyter, as bishop of Antioch. At the same time, some bishops from Egypt and Macedonia arrived. They supported Maximus the Cynic and criticized Gregory Nazianzus for illegally becoming bishop of Constantinople.

“The rejection of his proposal for settling the schism at Antioch and the doubt of his legitimacy in becoming bishop of Constantinople led the sensitive and peace-loving Gregory to thank the bishops, ask their forgiveness regarding the matter of Constantinople, and returned to his homeland, where he spent the rest of his life in study and solitude.”⁷²

After Gregory’s resignation, the chair of Constantinople yet again was vacant. The Emperor Theodosius considered who was qualified to become bishop and able to continue to preside over the sessions of the Council. Among his candidates was one old senator named Nectarius, whom, it is critical to emphasize, was not baptized. Regardless, Emperor Theodosius chose to back this candidate. One Eastern Orthodox source describes the election and inauguration of this new bishop:

⁷⁰ *The Book of the Law*, 18. See also <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3801.htm> .

⁷¹ This schism appeared in Antioch in the decade of the sixties of the fourth century. Both Meletius and Paul operated in the same church, and “each side had its own strong supporters who maintained irreconcilable differences with the opposing party.” See *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 27.

⁷² Eusebius Popovic, vol, 1, 557.

“In June of 381, after saying farewell to the Council, Gregory returned to his native Nazianzus. The Council Fathers elected in his place the senator Nectarius, who himself has just been nominated. **Over the next few days, he was immediately baptized and ordained into all the ecclesiastical rites along with the episcopal. Even the bishop’s vestment that Nectarius wore did not completely cover the white robes of a newly baptized church member.**”⁷³

Not only was this appointment of Nectarius as a bishop contrary to the teachings of Scripture, but it also contradicted the principles established by the early church councils, including the Nicene Council. The Scriptures, the so-called apostolic rules formed in the era after the death of the apostles, and the canons of the First Ecumenical Council expressly forbid newly converted and baptized people to become elders and ministers (bishops) in the life of the Church. Here is a Scripture that was adopted by church canon:

*“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous... **not a novice**, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.”*⁷⁴

“It is not allowed that a man who has come over from an heathen life, and been baptized or who has been converted from an evil course of living, should be immediately made a bishop, for it is not right that he who has not been tried himself should be a teacher of others. Unless indeed this be done upon a special manifestation of Divine grace in his favor.”⁷⁵

“Forasmuch as, either from necessity, or through the urgency of individuals, **many things have been done contrary to the Ecclesiastical canon**, so that men just converted from heathenism to the faith, and who have been instructed but a little while, **are straightway brought to the spiritual layer, and as soon as they have been baptized, are advanced to the episcopate or the presbyterate**, it has seemed right to us **that for the time to come no such thing shall be done**. For to the catechumen himself there is need of time and of a longer trial after baptism. **For the apostolical saying is clear, ‘Not a novice; lest, being lifted up with pride, he fall into condemnation and the snare of the devil.’**”⁷⁶

In spite of this violation of church law, the “Holy Fathers” chose to “ordain” Nectarius as the new bishop of Constantinople. He also assumed presidency of the Council of Constantinople so it could continue its work.

⁷³ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 27. Author’s emphasis.

⁷⁴ 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 6. Author’s emphasis.

⁷⁵ *The Book of Law*, 13, Canon 80 of the Apostolic Law. See also <http://www.voskrese.info/spl/aposcanon.html>. Author’s emphasis.

⁷⁶ *The Book of Law*, 15., Canon 2 of the First Ecumenical Council. See also <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/canon%20law/nicea/CanonsCouncilNiceae.htm#CANON%20II>. Author’s emphasis.

In attendance at this session of the Council were 186 bishops, mostly from the East. 36 bishops sided with the teachings of Macedonius that the Holy Spirit was a “created” being, while the other 150 bishops opposed his teachings. Recognizing that they were outnumbered, these Macedonian bishops left the session. The rest of the bishops, however, condemned the teachings of Macedonius:

“Since those 36 Macedonian Bishops left the Council, the remaining 150 Orthodox Bishops condemned Macedonianism, Apollinarism, and Semiarianism, e.g., Anomoeanism and Eunomism⁷⁷ and expanded the Nicene Creed to better address current issues, including ecclesiastical practices against Macedonianism and other forms of heterodoxy. It became the Creed of Nicea and Constantinople, which still maintains its universal ecumenical reputation.”⁷⁸

“I believe in One God,
the Father Almighty,
Maker of Heaven and Earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages;
Light of Light;
True God of True God;
begotten, not made;
of one essence with the Father,
by Whom all things were made;
Who for us men and for our salvation
came down from Heaven,
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,
and suffered, and was buried.
And the third day He arose again,
according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into Heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father;
and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead;
Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
Who proceeds from the Father;
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
Who spoke by the prophets.

⁷⁷ Translator’s note: see Bright, *Notes on the Canons*, Canon I of I Constantinople, retrieved under <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.ix.viii.ii.html> .

⁷⁸ Eusebius Popovic, vol. 1, 557-8.

And in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.
I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.”⁷⁹

This Creed was accepted also by the churches in the West, although their representatives did not participate in the Council of Constantinople. However, in addition to accepting the Creed, the Western Synod initially opposed the solutions brought forth by the participants of the Council regarding the expulsion of Maximus the Cynic and the schism at Antioch. The Western bishops only accepted the Council’s solutions to these matters at a later date.

Regardless, the Council enacted four canons, although the literature to come out of this Council actually lists seven canons.⁸⁰

Summing up the events surrounding these major church councils, we can conclude that in spite of some deviations from the teachings of Scripture and the early First Ecumenical Council, the Fathers acted properly in condemning the teaching of the bishops Apollinaris and Macedonius. Even so, it is clear that church authorities in the past were merely fallible people who committed various omissions and errors against biblical teachings and against their fellow bishops with whom they shared similar religious principles.

The mistakes of bishops from the distant past will become even more obvious later in history, when significant changes in belief occur, including the authority of "the Church" in relation to Scripture and even sharper conflict ensued between members of conflicting theological currents.

The next section will relate the events and circumstances of the Third Ecumenical Council.

The Third Ecumenical Council

The theological dispute that led to the so-called Third Ecumenical Council originated in the conflict between the theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch. Specifically, Alexandria and Antioch clashed over their interpretation of Scripture and church tradition. After the death of the apostles, Christian churches were planted in different locations in the Roman Empire. These churches gradually began to succumb to the influence of non-Christian ideologies and philosophies. Different philosophical ideas

⁷⁹ Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 29. See also http://web.mit.edu/ocf/www/nicene_creed.html .

⁸⁰ “Although the Greek, Slovenian and Russian editions of the Second Ecumenical Council contain seven laws, the canons that actually belong to the Council include only the first four mentioned by church historians of the fifth century. The fifth and sixth rules derive from the Council of Constantinople in 382, while the seventh rule actually derives from brief epistles out of the Council of Trullo in 692 and sent to Martirius, the bishop of Antioch, from the Church of Constantinople.” *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 29.

gained influence over Christian thought to the extent of altering the understanding and interpretation of the original meaning of biblical teachings.

Alexander Schmemmann explains the origins of the Ecumenical Council in the dispute between the two main representatives of each school: Nestorius of Antioch and Cyril of Alexandria:

“Nestorius and Cyril belonged to two different trends or schools of Christian thought, two distinct attitudes toward Christianity itself, which had gradually formed long before the start of the Christological dispute. These were the schools of Antioch and Alexandria. The differences between them had many causes: different philosophical influences, that of Aristotle on the Antiochenes and of Plato on the Alexandrians; the opposition between Semitic realism and Hellenistic idealism; difference in religious practices and traditions. In interpreting Holy Scripture, the Antiochenes feared allegories, symbols, multiplications of ‘spiritual meanings,’ everything that so richly flourished in Origen’s theology.⁸¹ **They particularly sought literal meaning and historical accuracy in the understanding of the text and only later drew their theological conclusions.**”⁸²

While representatives of the Antioch school advocated the literal interpretation of Scripture, the Alexandrians were more inclined towards allegorizing and finding symbolism in biblical texts. To examine the study of religious teachings in the conflict between Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, and Cyril, bishop of Alexandria that led to the Third Ecumenical Council, let us analyze the cause of the conflict.

One of the main participants of the Second Ecumenical Council, Bishop Diodorus of Tarsus and his disciple Theodore Mopsuestia taught the doctrine of the divine origin of Jesus Christ in a way that differed from the teaching of the Council of Constantinople in 381. In contrast with Apollinaris who taught that a human spirit instead of the divine spirit of Christ was crucified, thus denying the humanity of Christ, the bishops Diodorus and Theodore primarily emphasized the humanity of Jesus. The beliefs of these bishops were further developed by a monk and presbyter from Antioch named Nestorius. In 428, Nestorius was appointed bishop of Constantinople. Nestorius preached the doctrine taught by Theodore Mopsuestia:

“Diodorus of Tarsus, by attacking Apollinarius’ opinion, sought to reinforce the view of Christ that He was more than a man. But his disciple Theodore Mopsuestia went even further. He argued that the nature of the union of God and humanity in Christ limited Christ’s deity. According to Theodore, this unity was only of an external, not an existential, nature... Thus, Theodore accepted the

⁸¹ Origen came from the school of Alexandria.

⁸² Schmemmann, 157. Author’s emphasis. Also see http://books.google.com/books?id=Bw5C8_fgQRYC&pg=PA122&lpg=PA122&dq=Alexander+Schmemann+Nestorius+Cyril+two+schools&source=bl&ots=3vpB3pPKOo&sig=PcFGfToB4ZYLqkXF2A6UwuEOog&hl=en&sa=X&ei=rSxdT56PLeLw0gHC-MjDDw&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false

supernatural birth of Christ, but he viewed Jesus only as a man who gradually found unity with the Logos through the trials and tribulations that he suffered as a human being, eventually attaining perfection only at the fulfillment of declaring ‘Thy will be done,’ and then at the moment of resurrection.”⁸³

Thus, the doctrine of Theodore and Nestorius taught that Christ has both a human and a divine nature (the nature of God the Logos), but these two natures were closely "associated" with one another:

“...as Nestorius saw it, what stood in the way of the teaching [of the bishop Apollinaris] was the strict distinction between God and man in Christ. While it proved the full deity and full humanity in Christ, he thought he could prove it in the best way. He said that one nature of the Son is God, and quite another is the humanity of Christ... Thus, he conceived of two natures of Christ, the divine and the human nature, among which there was constant contact.”⁸⁴

For this reason, Nestorius considered it erroneous to call Mary the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ as “Theotokos”. He believed that Mary, a human being, could not give birth to God, the Logos, but only to the man, Jesus. Therefore, Nestorius suggested a replacement for the term “Mother,” which had already entered into liturgical use. Instead, Nestorius proposed that the churches use the term “Christotokos” or “human bearer of Christ”. He believed this terminology would clearly emphasize the deity of Christ (in contrast with the Arians and others who denied His unity with the Father).

But the public expression of this teaching by the bishop Nestorius and his presbyter Anastasius reminded many of the earlier teaching of the bishop Paul of Samostasi in the third century (260-9). Similar to Paul, Nestorius also was condemned.⁸⁵ Nestorius banished his opponents among the clergy and the monks from Constantinople. They found refuge in Alexandria, the base of the prominent bishop Cyril. They appeared before him to express their accusations of heresy against the doctrine taught by Nestorius. They aroused the Alexandrian bishops to action by urging them to stop the spreading of this doctrine. Bishop Cyril wrote his first “Epistle to the Monks” and vigorously defended the term “Theotokos” that included the belief in the incarnation of the Logos of God and His birth in the person of Jesus Christ through the Virgin Mary. Also, Cyril appealed to the bishop of Constantinople personally to repent and to return to the rightful confession:

“Constantinople greeted this protest with displeasure. There the sad case of Chyrostom was still well remembered; the bishop of Constantinople had been condemned unjustly and without a hearing by a council under the chairmanship of Theophilus of Alexandria, Cyril’s uncle, and Cyril himself had taken part in the condemnation. Those were the years when the bishops of Alexandria had

⁸³ Jovic, 73-4.

⁸⁴ Eusebius Popovic, vol. 1, 571-2.

⁸⁵ See Jovic, 74 in the footnote.

tried to put a limit to the uninterrupted growth of Constantinople's ecclesiastical influence. Theological dispute was again complicated by Church politics.”⁸⁶

Further correspondence between the Bishops of Constantinople and Alexandria followed. Neither side was willing to compromise its position. Finally, Cyril composed 12 chapters of anathemas. Though not directly mentioning Nestorius, this collection put an anathema, or a curse, upon anyone who did not believe in the literal essence of the Logos as God and His birth in the God-man of Jesus Christ.

The situation escalated to the point where Bishop Nestorius attempted to topple the Bishop of Alexandria from his position by convening his own general church council to condemn Cyril. Cyril wrote a letter to the Roman bishop Celestine to win his support.⁸⁷ The Bishop of Rome led the Westerners, who had previously opposed Nestorius for expressing his support for Pelagianism (which provoked religious riots in western Europe). After a detailed study of Nestorian teachings by John Cassian, the abbot of Marseilles, a council was convened in Rome in 430 which condemned the Bishop of Constantinople. The Council in Rome also gave Nestorius 10 days to recant his teachings and writings. After learning of the decision in Rome, Cyril convened some bishops in Alexandria and condemned the teachings of Nestorius. Letters with the edicts of these councils were sent to Nestorius along with his sympathizers, who included bishops John of Antioch, Juvenal of Jerusalem, and Acacius of Berea. Here is the reaction of Bishop Nestorius:

“Bishop Nestorius rejected the decisions of the two councils, and in the spirit of Cyril's anathemas, he composed his own anti-anathemas with the support of the bishops John of Antioch and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (Cyrrhus is located in Syria) and accused Cyril of Apollinarianism. This doctrinal controversy centered on the natures of Christ. It became an ideological conflict within the Church at large. The Emperor Theodosius II the Younger (408-450) called for a general council and convened the conflicting parties together.”⁸⁸

A church council was convened in the city of Ephesus on June 7, 431. This day commemorated the “Day of the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles.” In the opinion of Orthodox theologians, this city was not chosen by accident. The cult of the veneration of the Virgin, that is, the Mother of God, was particularly strong in Ephesus. There in the fifth century, a temple was dedicated to her. Tradition alleged that Jesus' mother spent part of her life in Ephesus.

⁸⁶ Schmemmann, 159-60. See

http://books.google.com/books?id=Bw5C8_fgQRYC&pg=PA122&lpg=PA122&dq=Alexander+Schmemann+Nestorius+Cyril+two+schools&source=bl&ots=3vpB3pPKOo&sig=PcFGfToB4ZYLqkcXF2A6UwuEOog&hl=en&sa=X&ei=rSxdT56PLeLw0gHC-MjDDw&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁸⁷ Up to that moment, Cyril did not have a good relationship with the Bishop of Rome. He considered the expulsion of his uncle Theophius, former bishop of Alexandria, by the Bishop Innocent as unfair. Now because Cyril's position was in danger, he turned to the Roman bishop in order to reconcile relations. See *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 37.

⁸⁸ Jovic, 77.

The start of the Council was delayed more than two weeks due to the late arrival of many of the bishops. Unfortunately, this Council did not take place in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect, but rather, as expected, in an extremely hostile and tense atmosphere.

The Council was to meet in the main temple of Ephesus “the Holy and Great Church of Mary”. Nestorius with his allies and Cyril with his bishops arrived. After having waited for more than two weeks for the other bishops who had not yet arrived, Cyril opened the Council on his own initiative:

“On June 22, 431, Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, opened the Council in the main temple of Ephesus. Present were no more than 160 bishops, mainly from Alexandria, Jerusalem, Palestine, and Illyricum. The followers of Nestorius, 68 bishops, protested against the opening of Parliament before the arrival of John of Antioch. The protest was supported by the emperor's official Candidianus.”⁸⁹

Although he was physically present in Ephesus with his supporters, Nestorius refused on three occasions to appear at the Council. He simply did not want to appear at the Council when his supporters were outnumbered. Nestorius awaited the arrival of his allies, the Syrian bishops. However, regardless of Nestorius's absence, and contrary to the will of the imperial officials who moderated the Council, the assembled bishops led by Cyril of Alexandria condemned and pronounced anathemas against the Bishop of Constantinople, his teachings, and all his followers:

“Nestorius was condemned as a heretic, a scoundrel, and severed from the church fellowship. The Fathers in unanimous condemnation uttered: ‘The letters and teachings of Nestorius are all accursed (anathematized); the heretic Nestorius is totally accursed, all teachings of Nestorius are universally accursed. Those who support Nestorius and his evil teaching are totally accursed. Anyone who does not anathematize Nestorius, let him be accursed.’”⁹⁰

“...the whole city was for Cyril. When the bishops emerged from the church where they had been in session until late at night condemning Nestorius, they were met by an immense crowd with flaring torches and escorted home in triumph.”⁹¹

Only after Cyril's condemnation of the teachings of Nestorius did the caravan of the archbishops of the East led by John of Antioch arrive in Ephesus. Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic narrates the situation following the arrival of Nestorius's allies:

“Cyril was very unfriendly in meeting some of the bishops representing Antioch. He bombarded them with insults and condemnations as enemies. John did not recognize the legitimacy of this council, which he considered to have acted in an

⁸⁹ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 44.

⁹⁰ Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 75-6.

⁹¹ Schmemmann, *The Historical Way of Orthodoxy*, 163.

utterly improper manner. He convoked his own second council of bishops, which excommunicated Cyril and Memnon [Bishop of Ephesus] because of their unjust, illegal and violent proceedings.”⁹²

After their mutual expulsion and excommunication, both the councils of Cyril and John reported to Theodosius through Candidianus, an imperial officer. Of course, each side portrayed its version of the events in a more favorable light. Although Theodosius sympathized with Nestorius until the Councils began, he bowed to public pressure and changed his mind. Holy liturgies in Constantinople and Ephesus backed Cyril’s position in dubbing Mary the “Mother of God”. They also condemned the teachings of Nestorius as a denial of the incarnation of the Logos of God in the birth and personality of Jesus Christ.

However, once the emperor received the third report, he decided to honor the decisions of both Councils. He ratified the decision to expel Nestorius as issued by Cyril’s council. However, the emperor also affirmed the expulsion of Cyril and Memnon. All three bishops were exiled.⁹³ However, after prolonged negotiations with supporters of both camps, Theodosius considered it expedient to release Cyril and Memnon and to banish Nestorius to exile in Egypt (where he died in 440 surrounded by supporters of Cyril).

After Nestorius was expelled from Constantinople, Cyril and his bishops returned to Egypt. There, Cyril enjoyed great popularity and the support of the people following his return. However, the bishops of the East also returned to their countries and remained hostile toward the bishops of Egypt:

“The bishops led by John of Antioch departed Ephesus and on the way home first in Tarsus and then in Antioch convoked another Council. They protested the expulsion of Nestorius and reaffirmed their desire to expel Cyril.”⁹⁴

It took a whole two years of frequent contact between the bishops of Alexandria and Antioch in order to repair this great schism. The bishop Paul of Emesa (Palestine) mediated between the two conflicting parties. His mission succeeded in that eventually the majority of Syrian bishops also joined the condemnation of Nestorius.

However, a sizable minority of Syrian bishops refused and continued to defend the views and beliefs of Nestorius. These bishops fell under the persecution of their opponents and were forced to flee east to Persia. Gradually, these Nestorians made a full impact on the Church in Persia to the extent that it became Nestorian itself. The Persian Church spread its doctrine further to the East even to India. Even today, these Christian churches have adhered to the same names and beliefs acquired from ancient times.

⁹² Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 574.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 51.

The Third Ecumenical Council passed nine canons.

The Third Ecumenical Council and the Orthodox Doctrine of the Mother of God

One of the key controversies at the Council in Ephesus concerned the definition of the dual divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. This controversy gave rise to the teaching of Mary as “the Mother of God” or simply “Theotokos”.

In a previous chapter on “Blessed Mary or Queen of Heaven”, we demonstrated that neither Christ nor the Apostles ever referred to Mary in such terms in the New Testament. Although the early Christians apparently did not call Mary “Mother of God” (contrary to what Eastern Orthodox tradition alleges they did), we saw that this term became fairly widespread among ecclesiastical circles at the start of the fifth century. Proof exists that the term “Theotokos” (Mother of God, the one who gave birth to God) was not invented and incorporated into church practice only at the Council of Ephesus. Indeed, this term existed before the Council of Ephesus. Nestorius’s protest against this term in opposition to Cyril (with the support of the Council of Ephesus) demonstrates this fact. Nevertheless, it begs the question: what was the reason that led to the introduction of this unbiblical vocabulary in the church at that time?

We showed earlier that during the post-apostolic epoch, many religious movements emerged. Led by various bishops or presbyters, these movements denied the divinity of Jesus Christ and the fact that He as perfect and complete God was born in a human body of the Virgin Mary. One clear example of heresy came from Arius, who denied the homoousios or same essence of the Father and the Son.

In response to Arius, the forceful contention of church leaders such as Athanasius of Alexandria to defend the doctrine that Christ was simultaneously completely God and completely human led to the idea of reinforcing this belief. These leaders introduced the term “Theotokos” or “Mother of God” into church vocabulary to refer to Jesus’ mother Mary. These church leaders considered it to be an elegant solution to silence disputes about the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ. By the reasoning of these church leaders, if the term “Mother of God” became generally accepted, then no one could argue that Jesus was not God. This term clearly distinguished the faith of the “faithful Church” in the full and actual dual nature of Jesus Christ in His birth as perfect God in human flesh.

Eastern Orthodox author Radomir Popovic tells us that the Blessed Athanasius the Great in the early fourth century was one of the first ecclesiastical authorities to use the term “Mother of God”. Athanasius in his Letter to the Monks also urges Cyril, his indirect successor to the bishop’s chair, in his conflict with Nestorius.⁹⁵ The reason why

⁹⁵ See: R. Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 75. Also see *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 33, for the Orthodox recognition that no examples of the use of the term “Mother of God” existed before the third and fourth centuries. This source cites Origen, the bishops Alexander and Athanasius of Alexandria, Saint Basil the Great, bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, and Gregory the Theologian.

Athanasius made use of this term is very clear. Athanasius felt compelled to use this term to oppose the Arian denial of Christ's divinity, just as Cyril used it to oppose the teaching of Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople. However, as the Orthodox author Schmemann admits, the meaning of the word "Mother of God" had nothing to do with the exaltation and glorification of Mary as practiced in today's Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Rather, this term was used only in defense of the belief in Christ's dual nature:

"However, in even using the expression 'Mother of God' before any theological refinements, **the Church was expressing its faith in the absolute unity of God and man in Christ** (so that everything that was said about Christ's humanity also applied to His divinity and vice versa), its faith in the absolute sense of the Gospel's claim – 'And the Word became flesh.'" ⁹⁶

However, at that time (from the fourth century onwards), as Ernst Benz wrote about such events⁹⁷, the church fell under the significant influence of the cult of the Mother Goddess (Queen of Heaven) resulting from the mass influx and baptism into the Church of unregenerate pagans. This resulted in the gradual merger of the "cult of the Virgin" with the Biblical personage of Mary mother of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the Church began to believe that which was alien to the early Church.

And although the motive for introducing the name "Mother of God" ("Theotokos") in Christian terminology was (partly) correct and rationalized in defending the teachings of Christ's dual nature, their beliefs about Mary that arose from this name do not correspond in the least to what the Bible teaches about her. It is important to emphasize that in the first century AD, even during the time of the apostles, there were many who publicly denied the divinity of Christ and his birth from the Virgin. However, the writers of the New Testament never once referred to Mary as the "Mother of God" in order to ostensibly defend the divinity of Christ. Of course, they knew that God does not nor could ever have a mother. In the New Testament, the only names in addition to Mary included "the mother of Jesus" and "Mary, the mother of James and Joses", famous teachers of the first Church.

Next we will survey some texts from Eastern Orthodox literature in order to better understand the evolution over the centuries of this unbiblical (antibiblical) doctrine of Mary as the Mother of God in the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox (and Roman Catholic) Churches. Following this survey, we will see the Bible's actual teaching.

Key Orthodox Doctrines about Mary, the Mother of Jesus

The only biblical text which Orthodox theologians have at their disposal to support their contention that the Bible itself calls Mary the Mother of God is found in the gospel of Luke. Here Luke describes the meeting of two pregnant women: Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus:

⁹⁶ Schmemann, *The Historical Road of Orthodoxy*, 158-9. Author's emphasis.

⁹⁷ See the chapter "Blessed Mary or the Queen of Heaven?"

*“Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that **the mother of my Lord** should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.’”⁹⁸*

So, as we see, at this point Elizabeth calls Mary the Mother of the Lord. The Eastern Orthodox would have us believe this to be sufficient evidence to call Mary the Mother of God (Theotokos).

Justin Popovic asks the question: "Where do the Scriptures call the Virgin (Mary) the Mother of God?" This Orthodox author cites several examples from the New Testament, such as the angels calling Jesus Christ the Lord after His birth in Bethlehem (Luke 2:11); the speech of the Apostle Peter (Acts 10:36) where he states that Christ is "Lord of all"; and the previously cited text in Luke of Elizabeth's greeting of Mary.⁹⁹ After mentioning these three examples (from which the only thing we can observe is that he was called Christ the Lord), Popovic concludes with the words:

“Who would be so foolish as to deny that the writers of the gospels to call the Virgin the Holy Mother of God?”¹⁰⁰

The question is, therefore, very clear! However, despite the knowledge of Jesus' Lordship, simply calling Mary the Mother of the Lord Christ (where the emphasis is definitely on the Lord and not His mother) does not suffice to prove that the Bible teaches Mary to be the “Theotokos” or “Mother of God.” In spite of their protests, the burden rests upon the Orthodox authors to show where the Bible specifically calls Mary the “Mother of God”. Why did not Elizabeth herself say to Mary, “And why has the Mother of God come to me?” Yet, she did not use that terminology.

The perfect Lord certainly inspired Elizabeth through the Holy Spirit to address Mary with such a greeting (Luke 1:41). Yet, she deliberately avoided the use of the words "Theotokos" (“Mother of God”), knowing that such words in the future would give birth to a variety of erroneous beliefs. After all, chronologically about 50 or more years after Elizabeth's greeting, the apostles themselves in describing the events from the life of Jesus and his closest relatives avoided calling Mary "the Mother of the Lord". Instead, they simply referred to Mary in the Gospels as "the mother of Jesus."

⁹⁸ Luke 1:39-45. Author's emphasis.

⁹⁹ Justin Popovic, *The Teaching of the Orthodox Church II*, 273-4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

Let us suppose, hypothetically, that the apostles actually believed that Mary gave birth to God in the flesh! So what if one were to concede to the Orthodox insistence that Elizabeth's mention of "the mother of my Lord" gave justification to calling Mary the Mother of God? By that logic, then we are free to call James the "brother of God". After all, the Apostle Paul in Galatians 1:19 called James "the brother of the Lord". What about Judas, Simon, and Joseph (Joses) whom Paul called "brothers of the Lord" in 1 Corinthians 9:5? Ought we also to call them "brothers of God"?! The apostles never ever dared to use such names, contrary to the logic dictated by Orthodox commentators.

The term "Mother of God" has more philosophical than theological connotations which Christianity found unnecessary and redundant. In the end, this demonstrates that such a term was not used neither by the apostles nor their successors in the next century. After all, the Orthodox insistence on the use of this term might confuse us at first (until we find out the rest of their beliefs about the Virgin Mary - which will be mentioned in more detail later), especially because they still have a proper idea of the true nature of the incarnation and birth of the Savior through the Virgin Mary. So, for now, let us read Justin Popovic's commentary on the incarnation of God the Word (which actually is a proper analysis of what the Bible says):

“The Virgin is sacred and called the Mother of **God not in the sense that she conceived the Lord Christ according to His divinity**, or that she gave existence to His divinity, for He is eternal and without beginning, **but in this sense, that she gave birth to His humanity** in the conception and birth, even as He was truly God... Because we say that she gave birth to God without her conceiving the Deity of the Logos... but holding that God the Logos, who centuries ago was begotten of the Father, who has no beginning and eternally dwelled with the Father and the Spirit, in the last days of our salvation lived in her womb, and embodied the immortal from her whom He was given birth.”¹⁰¹

This text shows why the apostles, while believing in the divine origin of Jesus Christ (incarnation of God the Logos), avoided calling Mary "Mother of God." Mary only gave birth to Jesus Christ's human nature (which she herself possessed) with no possibility of giving birth or adding anything to His divine nature. According to Justin Popovic, in accordance with the teachings of Scripture, God the Logos was begotten in the eternity of God the Father (in the sense that He did not have a "divine mother") and in time incarnate was conceived with human nature from an earthly mother (and He did not have an earthly father).

In this way we realize that Jesus Christ in respect of his divine birth had no mother, nor had a birth father in His humanity. Although she gave birth to God in a body, Mary gave birth only to His human nature – not His divinity. Therefore, correctly agreeing with the terminology used in the Scriptures, we concur with Mary's contemporaries who called her the "mother of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Luke 1:43), or simply as "the mother

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 264. Author's emphasis.

of Jesus" (John 2:3; Acts 1:14). They were completely accurate in avoiding names introduced in later centuries!

The Blessed One – Mary's Heavenly Name?

Orthodox theologians manipulate texts such as Luke 1:39-44 that speak of the Lordship of Christ to justify Eastern Orthodoxy's use of the term "Theotokos" ("Mother of God"). Some Orthodox theologians make certain adjustments in the translation of texts of the four gospels from the original Greek language to rationalize their teachings about the Virgin Mary. Such is the case with the translation of the New Testament made by the Synodic Commission of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This translation contains certain ambiguous terms that are not found in the original Greek text.

One of these terms is the word "blessed", a quality which the Orthodox allege Mary to have possessed. Yet, at first glance, it is quite unclear what this term means. Justin Popovic attempts to explain its meaning from the official translation of the Serbian Orthodox Church:

"No doubt, the Most Holy Mother of God is what her divine Son is, for in giving birth to Him, she received Grace, and Herself became 'Blessed'... The **Heavenly name** of the Mother of God is '**Blessed**'. She was given this name by the Divine Trinity through the Heavenly Archangel Gabriel. **This is how the Gospels call her.**"¹⁰²

*"And entering the angel said to her: **Rejoice, blessed one!** The Lord is with thee, blessed are you among women! And when she saw him, she was afraid of his words and thought, is this really true? And the angel said to her: Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*¹⁰³

This translation renders the command to the Virgin Mary as "*Rejoice, blessed one!*" Regarding this expression, the only translator to translate it this way is Vuk Karadzic (who did not know the Greek language, nor was able to translate it into Serbian).

All other translators (including some prominent Orthodox theologians) translated this greeting more faithfully with the original Greek language. Later we will explain why this precision of translation is so important. Let us compare some translations of Luke 1:28:

*"And entering the angel said to her: Rejoice, **blessed one!** The Lord is with thee, blessed are you among women!"* (Vuk Karadzic)

*"And coming to her, the angel said: Greetings, **you who have found favor from God, the Lord (is) with you!**"* (Dr. Dimitrij Stefanovic)

¹⁰² Popovic, *Dogma of the Orthodox Church*, Volume III, 647-8. Author's emphasis.

¹⁰³ *Holy Scripture, New Testament*, Translation of the Commission of the Holy Archsynod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, fourth edition (Belgrade, 1998). Author's emphasis.

“And entering the angel said to her: **Rejoice, you who have found favor, the Lord is with you [blessed are you among women].**” (Dr. Emilian Charnic)

“When he came, the angel said to her: **Rejoice, you who have found favor! The Lord is with you!**” (Dr. Alexander Birvis)

“Having come to her, he said: **Rejoice that favor is shown unto you! The Lord is with you!**” (Mr. Miroslav Zivkovic)¹⁰⁴

As we can observe, most translators render this verse as Mary having “received the favor of God”, i.e., that God truly showed grace to her concerning the future birth of the Savior. We have to agree that to become the earthly mother of God's eternal Son would put Mary in a very blessed situation. The mother of the Savior was merely one of billions of women who had been living on Earth. However, the biblical text clearly shows that Mary had done nothing to give birth to Christ (that is, it was not the fruit of her good works or merits). Rather, Mary became the mother of Jesus as a result of God's grace and sovereign will. This is confirmed by the words of the angel who repeated that Mary “*found favor with God,*” i.e., that God had mercy on her. Indeed, Scripture says that “*if by grace, then it is not by works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.*”¹⁰⁵

However, despite the clarity of the biblical text, Eastern Orthodox (and Roman Catholics) with their “sacred tradition” added an utterly different meaning to this gospel that was never in the original text. Let us examine where *The Dogma of the Orthodox Church* stands with regard to its beliefs about “the Mother of God”, e.g., Mary, the mother of Jesus. These are texts not previously cited in the earlier chapter on “Blessed Mary or the Queen of Heaven?”

“The church could not even be conceived let alone exist without the Most Holy Mother of our Savior Christ. **The Most Holy Mother of God is the Church, and the Church belongs to the Most Holy Mother of God.** When the word ‘Mother of God’ is uttered, it embodies the whole idea of the Church, because in the very name of the Mother of God is expressed the entire divine mystery of Jesus Christ. Yes, yes, yes: **without the Most Holy Mother of God,** there would be no Incarnation = no Savior = no Church = **no salvation** = no theosis = no fulfillment of the Trinity. And the whole world would be transformed into the most futile horror, and man would be cast into the most terrifying Hell, Hell, Hell. **The Most Holy Theotokos is the Mother of God,** the Mother of the Incarnation, and thus **the Mother of the Church,** for She is the Mother of the body of the Incarnation. And the body of the Incarnation is the Church. Per the immortal proclamation of St. Cyril of Alexandria: the Most Holy Mother of God ‘established churches all over the Universe.’ And with it comes an even greater

¹⁰⁴ Author's emphasis in all cases.

¹⁰⁵ Romans 11:6. Author's emphasis.

truth: **salvation is wrought through the Mother of God**, for it is She ‘who works out our salvation.’”¹⁰⁶

“The Lord Christ and His miraculous Mother in the prayerful affection of the Orthodox Church are two inseparable beings. The saving redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ is inseparable from the Orthodox affection and awareness in New Testament faith out of the most holy, most pure, most blessed, praiseworthy Almighty, our Mother of God and Most Exalted Virgin Mary... **She gave birth to the Savior**, and thus **she herself became the salvation of the world**... She became the bridge that crosses over from death to life... She not only conquered death, but she opened the gates of Heaven... But not only that, but she also gave us Paradise, where there is the tree of life - the Lord Jesus... Whoever enters through her will be saved... She is the unshakable pillar of the Church... She gave birth to the Sinless One, **and therefore she herself became sinless**... Having given birth to God and Lord Christ, **the Most Holy Mother of God herself became All-Merciful**... **She can do everything**, because she gave birth to the Christ mighty in power... When she became the Mother of our merciful Lord, she herself became a ‘fount of grace’, ‘a source of mercy’. Her mercy is immeasurable... Having given birth to our God and Savior Jesus Christ, the Virgin herself became ‘the salvation of the Christian race’... **To the Orthodox people, she is: our only help, our only hope, our only glory**... The Most Blessed Mother of God is: heaven on earth... In considering the ‘time’ to perform the Divine Liturgy, the priest turns to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary as ‘the salvation of the Christian race.’... During the most important moment of the Divine Liturgy, the consecration of the holy Gifts, **we first pray to her and praise her** for giving birth to God...

Since the Most Holy and All Merciful Mother of God protects the whole life of the Orthodox Christian, after Communion, we address to her a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving: Oh, Blessed Almighty Virgin, you are the Light to the darkness of my soul, my hope, care, refuge, consolation, my joy. I express gratitude to you for having condescended to me, an unworthy partaker of the immaculate Body and Blood of your Son. But you, who gave birth to the true Light, enlighten the spiritual eyes of my heart, you, who gave birth to the fount of immortality, revive me by mortifying sins; you who are the tender, merciful Mother of the merciful God, have mercy on me and give me humility and contrition of heart and calmness in my mind, and redeem me from the captivity of my thoughts, and give me until my last breath the sanctuary of your most pure Mystery, the healing of soul and body, and give me tears of repentance and confession, that I might sing and rejoice all the days of my life so you will be blessed and exalted forever. Amen...

She is the mother of God, and hence the mother of all that is divine, all that is holy, all that is heavenly, all that is the best. From all that is good, she is the best; from all that is holy, she is the most holy; of all that is pure, she is the

¹⁰⁶ Popovic, *Dogmas of the Orthodox Church*, Vol. 3, 647. Author’s emphasis.

purest, of all that is wonderful, she is the most wonderful. She is the ultimate form of everything that is the best. Because when God entered through her into the world as a person, what else can she be but all that is Divine, all that is heavenly, all that is immortal, all that is eternal, all that is joy?”¹⁰⁷

The Orthodox Church disputes the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of “the Virgin”. Giving the “Orthodox” dispute, Justin Popovic adds that the Orthodox believe in the sinless perfection of Mary, only that she acquired it in a different manner:

“In being faithful to the God-revealed truth about original sin, the Apostolic Orthodox Church condemns the Roman Catholic teaching about the Immaculate Conception of the holy Virgin Mary and confesses that she was born of natural means from St. Joachim and St. Anne, which means that through her birth Mary was conceived in original sin... It is true that the Orthodox Church from ancient times names her in its liturgical books the Holy Mother of God: Most Holy, Most Pure, Most Blessed, Most Glorious, Most Innocent, and in the superlative as the Best, Cleanest, Holiest, the Greatest Worker of Good Deeds. But although the Orthodox Church does not refer to the absence of original sin in the holy Virgin, but rather **the absence of personal sins in Her, from which she was freed after the descent of the Holy Spirit at her conception of the Lord Jesus. Because of the descent of the Holy Spirit into her and the conception and birth of the Savior, she became freed from her personal sins. Because she gave birth to the Immaculate Child, she herself became sinless in a sense, that is, she was without personal sins,** not because she was born sinless without original sin.”¹⁰⁸

“After the Lord Christ – the total Gospel, the first Gospel, the first total Gospel? The Holy Mother of God! For she utterly fulfilled the gospel of Christ: **and therefore was the only sinless person in the human race** after the birth of the Only Perfect Christ. Although she was born in original sin, she was free from every personal sin by her virtuous life and free will. And she assumed her archangelic purity, holiness, perfection. So She after God is - the most divine, purest, holiest, most merciful, the most perfect being... **The Holy Mother of God is the only perfect human being** after the Incarnation of the Lord Christ.”¹⁰⁹

With regard to the bodily resurrection of Mary, Jesus' mother, about which Scripture says nothing, Orthodox tradition alleges:

“The true witness of holy tradition to the Church about the Blessed Virgin Mary consists briefly of this: as a descendant of Adam, born with original sin, she was subject to the law of death, **but as the sinless Holy Mother of God,** she was

¹⁰⁷ Justin Popovic, *Orthodox Dogmatic*, Vol. 2, 280-7. Author's emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 289-91. Author's emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Justin Popovic, *Dogma of the Orthodox Church*, Vol. 3, 650, 2. Author's emphasis.

resurrected by her divine Risen Son and **assumed in glory** above the Cherubim and Seraphim, and **seated on the throne** above the Holy Heavenly Hosts... The Complete Assumption of the Virgin is not what we call death, but rather a migration to the sphere of the Lord. The Blessed Mother of God's dead body was handed over to the grave, and after three days was exalted into heaven. Saint John of Damascus uttered: The body of the Holy Mother of God was taken into the glorious tomb; and from there after three days it was assumed into heaven. The Mother of God was exalted by Angelic Powers, She is "the worker of our salvation." The Lord Christ conveyed on the Mother of God salvation through her conception of the God-man. **Therefore, nothing is lacking in the Mother of God.**" ¹¹⁰

The belief of the Eastern Church in Mary's Assumption into heaven endows her with great power and dignity. She herself is positioned at:

"The throne of the King who sits above the Cherubim; the gates of Heaven, through which we approach Heaven... intercession... after the Trinity **she is the greatest Ruler of all**; after the Comforter, she is **the greatest comforter**; after the Mediator, **she is the greatest Mediatrix** for the entire world; the rays of the shining sun - the true light that enlightens every man that comes into the light; the sustainer of Him whose Word sustains all... mediation and prayer intercession for the world before the face of God... As the Lord Christ was first born of the Holy Spirit from the Holy Mother of God, **so the Mother of God is the Mother of all the Saints**, the Wife, Empress, and Ruler, and **all her Saints are her servants, servants of the Mother of God.**" ¹¹¹

To any competent and unbiased student of the Holy Scriptures, these descriptions of Mary, the mother of Jesus, sound utterly strange. The apostles inspired by God never ever wrote any of these descriptions about Mary in the Bible.

It is simply improbable that the apostles would omit this information necessary to their audience and thus disappoint their audience, believers in Christ. For what reason did neither the evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) nor any of the other New Testament writers (including great preachers such as the Apostles Peter and Paul) fail to tell us that Mary by having given birth to the Savior had become the "Mother of Salvation"? Or that they failed to mention that Mary is "All Merciful and the Source of Mercies", or that she is "the Church herself, and the Mother of the Church?" Did the Lord Christ bear false witness by saying He is the One who represents the "door" through which man enters into eternal life (John 10:9), if the "door" actually is His earthly Mother?

Also, did the Apostle Peter forget something? He taught, "*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:12: his teaching of course comes from the Lord Christ)

¹¹⁰

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 658-662. Author's emphasis.

Who are we supposed to believe?

Or do we believe the “God endowed” poet Saint Ephrem of Syria who tells us eternal truths about the Holy Mother of God, which allege that she was “his salvation?”

What about the “all true proclamation inspired of God” by Gregory Palamas that “No one comes to God except through the Holy Mother of God?”

Can we believe the Savior Himself said, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6)?

And, how could Mary be after our Lord Jesus Christ the “Mediatrix for the whole world” when the Apostle Paul clearly states:

*“For there is one God and **one Mediator** between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus?”*
112

How is it possible to believe the claims of Eastern Orthodoxy that Mary, though born with original sin and fallible until her conception of Christ, attained sinless perfection, when our Scripture gives many examples to the contrary? How could she have become infallible, when on several occasions she expressed an incorrect understanding and lack of spiritual discernment with regard to Christ’s ministry, and thus earned His rebuke?¹¹³

Is it possible to imagine that the Lord Christ, if he really were the actual source of Eastern Orthodox beliefs about the “Most Holy Mother of God” and dubbing her the “Queen of heaven and earth”, could have declared that there are many people who are “*more blessed*” than her?

*“And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘**Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!**’ But He said, ‘**More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!**’”*¹¹⁴

Do the Orthodox realize that the Lord Christ said that any woman in her later years who honors Him and lives as He did has the right to be called Christ’s mother? If this statement sounds like blasphemy to my readers, listen to what the Lord Himself says:

*“While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His **mother** and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, ‘Look, **Your mother** and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.’ But He answered and said to the one who told Him, ‘**Who is My mother** and who are My brothers?’ And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, ‘**Here are My mother** and My*

¹¹² 1 Timothy 2:5. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹³ For example, see the wedding at Cana (John 2:4) and at the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:48-50).

¹¹⁴ Luke 11:27-8. Translator’s emphasis.

*brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.”*¹¹⁵

In this passage, the Lord mentions all of his earthly blood relatives, including his mother (for whom we have already proved that His disciples gave no special mention in the first century). Notice that Jesus did not say: "... this is my brother and sister **and father** and mother", because He had no earthly father.¹¹⁶ Jesus never dared to compare any earthly creation (not even a righteous believer) to His Heavenly Father! However, in contrast, Jesus did compare simple human believers in His Word – not just religious people or great ascetics – **on the same level** as His mother!

These examples demonstrate that Holy Scripture does not teach or make mention of anything close to the Eastern Orthodox teachings on Mary as having divine attributes. Thus, a faithful Christian must reject as unbiblical and unfounded what Eastern Orthodoxy teaches about Mary.

However, Eastern Orthodoxy distorts the Bible because of its beliefs about Mary, which is entirely the result of teachings from the later church fathers (some of whom were cited previously). Thus, the Eastern Orthodox translate Luke 1:28 as “Rejoice, **blessed one!**” (which, according to Orthodox teaching, implies that Mary is the **source of blessing**) rather than the faithful rendering of “Rejoice, you who **have received mercy!**” (The original text shows Mary to be the undeserving recipient of God’s mercy.)

What Is the Biblical Meaning of the Phrase: “Blessed Are You among Women”?

Another verse from the Bible that the Orthodox hope to establish their belief of the superiority of Jesus's mother Mary over all other women (and over God’s entire creation) is the opening part of Elizabeth’s speech, parts of which we have previously examined. Specifically, it is the moment when Mary comes to visit in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Elizabeth herself was pregnant with the future prophet and the Lord’s forerunner, John the Baptist.

Although during Elizabeth’s entire pregnancy, her husband, the priest Zacharias, was unable to speak (Luke 1:20, 64), he was able to write on a tablet (Luke 1:63) a detailed proclamation of the angelic message of the future birth of their boy and his role in proclaiming the future coming of Israel’s Messiah.¹¹⁷ Elizabeth certainly considered it a blessing to be the mother of the precursor (the prophet who will announce His arrival) of the Messiah. However, without a doubt, she also knew that her joy was small compared with the blessing of the mother who would carry the fetus of the Messiah in her womb and eventually give birth to the divine Logos as an infant human.

¹¹⁵ Matthew 12:46-50. Author’s emphasis. See also: Mark 3:31-5; Luke 8:19-21.

¹¹⁶ Although a few places in the New Testament call Joseph the father of Jesus (Luke 2:33, 48), it is quite clear that Joseph only exercised the role of earthly guardian for Jesus, since Joseph was also the husband of Mary.

¹¹⁷ See: Luke 1:15-7; 67-8.

As a woman who herself was about to become a mother, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She spoke very powerful and significant words when her young cousin Mary arrived. Unfortunately, millions of people over many subsequent centuries have misunderstood her words so badly. Let us read the text one more time:

*“Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, ‘**Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.**’”*¹¹⁸

Some who are not familiar with the Scriptures might perceive Elizabeth’s declaration to imply some special exaltation of Mary (similar to the way that Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic teachers think). However, Elizabeth’s intent was meant only to acknowledge the merciful gift of God to bear the divine Logos in her womb – which only one woman among millions in the world could do. To carry in her womb the future Savior of the world was indeed a great blessing. Mary rightly is considered to have been “*blessed among women*”. Many women throughout history have become mothers of God’s great servants and prophets, including in the Old and New Testament periods. Yet, only one woman could become the mother of the Son of God.

However, the term “*blessed among women*” was a common phrase among the people of Israel in biblical times. This title which expressed a unique type of ministry belonged to various women. Among them we find a lady who lived during the time of “the Judges” (roughly 1300 years before Christ). She was of excellent character and a very unusual woman who justly received such praise. Let us examine the biblical text that describes the events spoken in narrative and then a hymn to the Lord by this judge and leader of the Jewish people, the prophetess Deborah:

*“Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?’ So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left. However, **Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear.’** And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket. Then he said to her, ‘Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.’ So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a*

¹¹⁸ Luke 1:39-45. Author’s emphasis.

drink, and covered him. And he said to her, 'Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' you shall say, 'No.''' **Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.** And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, 'Come, I will show you the man whom you seek.' And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan... Then Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying: 'When leaders lead in Israel, When the people willingly offer themselves, Bless the LORD... **Most blessed among women is Jael, The wife of Heber the Kenite; Blessed is she among women in tents.** He asked for water, she gave milk; She brought out cream in a lordly bowl. She stretched her hand to the tent peg, Her right hand to the workmen's hammer; She pounded Sisera, she pierced his head, She split and struck through his temple. At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; At her feet he sank, he fell; Where he sank, there he fell dead.'" ¹¹⁹

Another example of one who was "blessed among women" included Leah, a wife of Jacob. After her maid Zilpah gave birth to a son, Leah said joyously:

"Then Leah said, 'I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed.' So she called his name Asher." ¹²⁰

As you can see, the term "*blessed among women*" was a common expression to describe the special joy experienced by certain women of Israel. Thus, we see that Elizabeth's words to Mary in no way were meant to be some exaltation of Mary to a heavenly status (as the Orthodox would infer). Otherwise, using this flawed logic, the Orthodox would also have to exalt Jael – whom was celebrated for her killing of Sisera, the enemy of Israel – and Leah – whose maid gave birth to another son.

After all, Christ the Lord Himself used the phrase "*blessed among women*" with wide application to the question of who truly enjoys blessings from the God of heaven. Specifically, Luke 11:27-28 describes Christ's encounter with an Israeli woman. She was inspired after hearing the Lord's teaching to utter, "Blessed among women is Mary, the mother of Jesus," only she used slightly different words:

"And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!'" ¹²¹

However, although Jesus could have accurately agreed that Mary was truly blessed by God for having Him in her womb, He was more interested in the woman's proper response to His teaching:

¹¹⁹ Judges 4:14-23; 5:1-2, 24-27. Author's emphasis.

¹²⁰ Genesis 30:13. Author's emphasis.

¹²¹ Luke 11:27. Author's emphasis.

*“But He said, ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”*¹²²

Although this response, which refers to Mary's position among the people of God (the New Testament Church), goes against the teachings of the Orthodox Church, it is the Lord Himself who says it. Consequently, the faithful Christian must accept Jesus's word unconditionally. Jesus clearly indicates that those who honor God and obey His will are far more blessed than His mother (in His humanity). Today's Eastern Orthodox followers would do well to listen to what Jesus says.¹²³

There is yet another interesting aspect of Elizabeth's declaration to Mary. In fact, some translations (such as the translation of Vuk Karadzic and the Serbian Orthodox Church) render this part of the sentence ("*blessed among women*") as having being spoken by the angel Gabriel during his first visit to Mary and the announcement of Jesus' birth in Luke 1:28.

However, other Serbian translations such as those of Dimitri Stefanovic and Emilijan Charnic place brackets around this portion of the angel's speech. They indicate that this text does not exist in the most reliable and oldest manuscripts of the New Testament discovered thus far.

It is interesting to note that even some of the official Roman Catholic translations (in Croatian) do not have this part of the verse - as well as the Protestant translations. This part of the verse exists neither in the very precise English translations of the New International Version nor in the New American Standard.

¹²² Luke 11:28. Author's emphasis.

¹²³ It is interesting to note that some Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic translators of Luke 11:28 render a somewhat different translation and thus completely alter its meaning. For example, the Commission of the Holy Arch Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church renders this verse as such that Jesus affirms the "highest blessing" of His earthly mother (as taught by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches). Here is their translation of Luke 11:28: "And he said, **Truly, blessed** are those who hear the word of God and keep it." (Author's emphasis.) This is also how the archbishop of Verkhbosan John Saric translates the verse (with the caption "A woman exalts the Mother of Jesus", New Testament, Fifth Edition, Salzburg 1969). The latest edition of the Orthodox Holy Scriptures (The Voice of the Church, Sabac - Valjevo - Belgrade, 2005), which includes the translation of the Holy Arch Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, also notes the text of Luke 11:27-8 has "corrections and translations of the Holy Bishop Nikolai" along with the caption "The Blessing of the Mother of Jesus" and maintains the previously quoted translation.

However, this translation is seldom found in Serbo-Croatian versions of the Bible. The majority of translations conform to the rendering discussed in the argument of this chapter. Orthodox theologians such as Emilijan M. Charnica, Roman Catholic translations Duda-Fucak (New Testament: Christianity Contemporary, 1993) and Lyudevrit Rupcic (Bible: Christian Contemporary, 1983), and Protestants Alexander Birvis, M. Zivkovic, and Branko Dakovic agree with the translation in the text. (The Orthodox Charnica considers the blessedness of Mary to be subordinate to that of a person who conforms and obeys the Word of God.) Mary's "equality in blessedness" with other male and female servants of God is attributed to Luke 11:28 by translators such as Dimitri Stefanovic, Louis Bakotic, and Vuk Karadzic.

Based on the facts just cited, it becomes clear that the original text of the New Testament written by Luke never contained this part of the angel addressing Mary as “*blessed among women*”. Yet, it represents only part of Elizabeth’s speech. But, apparently those who worked on the official translation of the Serbian Orthodox Church ignore these details and included it in their version. They added the word “*blessed*” rather than “*you who have gained favor*” in a flagrant effort to manipulate the sacred text to allegedly “teach” Orthodox beliefs. Such efforts have falsely made the Bible to appear as if it were teaching that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the very same as represented by the teaching of the traditional church of the East.

So we have just examined the teachings of the Orthodox Church regarding Mary, the mother of Jesus. Once again, we demonstrate that the Scriptures do not support most of Orthodoxy’s teachings on Mary, including everything related to the introduction of the term “theotokos” (Mother of God) and its official ecclesiastical use in the Third Ecumenical Council. We will carefully examine the succession of events that occurred in a subsequent Council that was of critical importance to the church. We will also see the results that came as a result of the brutality and ruthlessness of the participants in this so-called “Robber” Council.

The Robber Church Council

The Third Ecumenical Council in 431 resulted in the expulsion of Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, and the anathematizing of his teachings. It also formed a “union” between the theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch, which recognized each other’s orthodoxy two years later in 433. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria and one of the major proponents of the teaching about the incarnation of Jesus Christ (including the incarnation of God the Logos and his appearance in a human body), died. Although the majority of the bishops who had attended the Council of Ephesus agreed with those teachings, one group allied with Cyril was dissatisfied with the “union” with representatives of the Antioch group (which conceded its beliefs and affirmed the absolute divinity of Christ and His humanity). This group consisted of radical opponents of Nestorianism, who disagreed with Cyril regarding the union with Antioch, but they had restrained themselves from a public display of their discord while Cyril was still alive. Once Cyril had died, the situation changed.

Nestorius and his followers believed that Jesus had two different personalities, the man Jesus and God the Logos. This conflicted with the official teachings of the Church as taught by Cyril that in Him was the union of two natures in the Incarnation of Christ.

There appeared a third group that opposed the Antiochean school that taught the full belief in the “dissolution” of the human nature of Jesus Christ. This group believed that Jesus Christ originated “out of two natures” (divine and human), but that after His full incarnation, His divine nature prevailed, in a sense “annulling” the reality of His human nature acquired through Mary of Nazareth.

The most ardent proponent of this new religious movement was an archimandrite of the monastery in Constantinople named Eutyches. He advocated a position called “monophysitism”, the belief in a single, divine nature of Jesus Christ.

Eutyches dissented with the conclusions issued at the conclusion of the union. He did not recognize the orthodoxy of Antioch to be equal with that of Alexandria. In many ways, he sought to prove the heresy of Antioch, especially Theodoret of Cyrhus (who was a former ally of Nestorius). On the other side, Theodoret did not just sit idle. He wrote treatises to attack the teachings of the Archimandrite of Constantinople.¹²⁴

After Eutyches incited theological conflict with Antioch, the bishop Eusebius of Dorylaeum opened a local church council to investigate the teachings of Eutyches. After noticing deviations in the teachings of Eutyches, a church council in Constantinople was convened under the leadership of Archbishop Flavian. Only 31 bishops attended this council (either those who lived near the capital or else were visiting there for some other reason). This Council intended to suppress Eutychus’s heterodoxy quietly without causing a larger, more public ruckus. Eusebius was nominated to deal personally with Eutyches. However, despite several visits by Eusebius to the monastery, Eutyches refused to recant his teaching. Then the Council chose to send a delegation to invite Eutyches to defend his teachings before the whole group.¹²⁵

However, Eutyches declined the invitation and rationalized his absence by citing his frail health and solemn vow to remain at the monastery except in the case of extreme danger. However, Eutyches changed his mind after further persuasion by the bishops as well as the threat of confiscation of the monastery by church authorities. Eutyches accepted the invitation. Accompanied by a large number of monks, soldiers, and government officials, he arrived at the synodic session. During the synod’s investigation and hearings, they read the works of Archbishop Cyril of Alexandria, and especially his “tome of unity” from the year 433, which established union with the school of Antioch and recognized its proper faith. This “tome” was used by the bishops to condemn Eutyches’s heresy, because it contains a glaring statement of belief in two natures in the Incarnation of Christ.

Eutyches made confession to the proper faith and correctness of the decisions made in the previous three Ecumenical Councils (in Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus), as well as to acceptance of the sacred teachings of the Fathers, Holy Scripture, and sacred tradition. Nonetheless, he was condemned for his teaching that Christ had two natures, not one. Here is the climax of the deliberations between the bishops and Eutyches:

“Archbishop Flavian asked him, ‘Tell us, do you confess that Christ is the union of two natures?’ ‘Yes, of two natures.’ Eusebius of Dorylaeum: ‘Do you, Lord Archimandrite, confess that He has two natures after the union? Can you tell us if Christ is of one essence in His body or not?’ Eutyches: ‘I confess that our

¹²⁴ See Schmemmann, 167-8.

¹²⁵ See *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 56.

Lord was of two natures before the union, and after the union I confess one nature.”¹²⁶

31 bishops and 23 archimandrites signed Eutyches’s condemnation. However, this Council achieved only a temporary victory for orthodoxy. First of all, this council did not have a far-reaching ecumenical scope, but only a local one. On the other hand, the Churches of Alexandria and Jerusalem did not recognize its decision. The Church of Rome did not immediately accept its authority, but later it did. The same response came from the churches of Asia Minor and Syria, which had previously sympathized with this teaching on the union. Neither did this Council receive any significant support from governmental authorities, especially because Emperor Theodosius II sided with Eutyches. Theodosius’s bias was flamed by his senior official and eunuch Chrysaphius, who was a close ally of Eutyches (and also an enemy of Flavian). The condemned Eutyches influenced Chrysaphius to convene a new Ecumenical Council to consider his teachings in a “different” light.

The new Council convened in the year 449 in Ephesus at the very same temple of the holy Virgin Mary where a previous council met in 431. An imperial decree banned the bishop Theodoret of Cyrhus, Eutyches’s bitter enemy. Presiding over the Council was Dioscorus, Archbishop of Alexandria, who belonged to the same extreme faction as Eutyches. The Parliament by special decree summoned the Archimandrite Barsuma of Syria, whose entourage of 1,000 monks would later contribute to the tragic developments in this so-called Fourth Ecumenical Council. 130 bishops, most of whom supported the Monophysite teaching, attended the Council.

In addition to banning Theodoret, bishop of Cyrhus, a special edict of the Emperor also condemned the Archbishop Flavian and others who participated in the council of 448 and anathematized Eutyches. Instead, Flavian, the Archbishop of Constantinople, and his supporters found themselves on trial for heresy. The temple where the Council convened was guarded by a multitude of soldiers with drawn swords and monks who arrived from all quarters with rods in their hands, ready at all times to deal with the opponents of Eutyches and Dioscorus.

The Council read and examined the condemnation of Eutyches by the previous synod. During the reading of this condemnation, the Archbishop Dioscorus stirred the crowd of Monophysite monks into a rage. They demanded the murder of those who condemned Eutyches, including the absent bishop Eusebius of Dorylaeum and anyone else who held to the same confession of the “heretical” teachings about the two natures of Christ.¹²⁷

The Council concluded with these results: the Archimandrite Eutyches was rehabilitated as purely orthodox and a great opponent of the heresies of Nestorius. On the other side, the Archbishop Flavian, the bishop Eusebius of Dorylaeum, and their allies were deemed agitators of Nestorianism and deposed from their church positions on the basis of holding illegal proceedings contrary to the previous Ecumenical Councils. Here is an

¹²⁶ Radmoir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 78.

¹²⁷ See *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 77-8 and Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 87-8.

excerpt from the speech of Archbishop Dioscorus where he condemns their “heretical teachings” about two natures in the person of Christ:

“It follows that Flavian of Constantinople and Eusebius of Dorylaeum must be deposed from their ecclesiastical dignity.’ Dioscorus’s utterance was unanimously accepted by all the Monophysites and signed by every member of the Council. Flavian and Eusebius forfeited their ecclesiastical dignity. **In addition, Flavian was banished in exile where he died. Eusebius of Dorylaeum after this Council had suffered so much hardship that they later called Dioscorus his murderer.** The deacon Hilary, an envoy from the Pope of Rome, ‘barely escaped’ the Council only by fleeing through back roads to Rome. The Blessed Theodoret, who did not attend the Council, was deprived of his rank and imprisoned in a monastery. Iva, the Metropolitan of Edessa, was anathematized.”¹²⁸

But Archbishop Flavian, the main opponent of Eutyches, not only was expelled from his position of leadership, but he also at that very Council suffered a violent beating from the Monophysites. Before he died (from the wounds of his beating),¹²⁹ he managed to write the Roman Pope Leo and sent it with some delegates of the Archbishop of Alexandria who were forbidden to attend the Council.¹³⁰ Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann describes these events:

“What took place in Ephesus on August 8, 449, has been known throughout history as the ‘**Synod of Robbers.**’ **Everything transpired under conditions of sheer terror.** Dioscorus reigned, relying on the band of fanatic monks who flooded the city... **The Church had never before experienced such shame...** The emperor ratified this disgrace with state sanctions, and all the enemies of Eutyches started on the bitter road of exile. Again force and heresy triumphed over the Eastern Church.”¹³¹

The verdict of the Council was affirmed by the emperor Theodosius II, who was convinced that it was justified by the canons of earlier Ecumenical Councils that opposed the spread of “renewed Nestorianism”¹³² allegedly propagated by Flavian, Eusebius of Dorylaeum, and others. Anatolius was appointed as the new Archbishop of Constantinople under the influence of Dioscorus.

¹²⁸ *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 79-80. Author’s emphasis.

¹²⁹ “Not only was Flavian expelled, but the allies of Eutyches had beaten him to such an extent that he died three days after having been banished.” Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 578.

¹³⁰ These delegates were to have delivered a long, dogmatic letter written by the Roman Pope Leo that condemned the Monophysite teaching at the Council. However, it was never allowed into the Council because it opposed the teaching advocated by Dioscorus and Eutyches.

¹³¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Orthodoxy*, 168-9. Author’s emphasis.

¹³² “One of the decision of the Council states: ‘No one is allowed to read the writings of Nestorius and Theodoret, but they are to be handed over and burned. No one is allowed to hide and protect the **Nestorians**, not in the city or in the village. Whoever hides them will be killed and deprived of his property, to be exiled for eternity.’” Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 87. Author’s emphasis.

Despite the protests of the Roman Pope Leo and others against the decisions, the emperor did not change his stance on the edicts from the Council at Ephesus.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council

However, this situation did not last too long. After the death of Emperor Theodosius in 450, one year after the Synod of Robbers, his sister Pulcheria and her husband Marcian succeeded him. (Pulcheria succeeded Theodosius because he had no son.) They did not support the theological power of Eutyches and Dioscorus and convened a new Council to examine the orthodoxy of their teachings. At first, they planned to hold the Council in Nicea, but they soon abandoned that plan. They opted instead to hold it in Chalcedon, a suburb of Constantinople.

The Council opened on October 8, 451. Its 17 sessions were held in the spacious cathedral of St. Euphemia the Martyr. A record number of bishops (between 600 and 630) attended this Council. The Emperor Marcian presided over much of this Council, although in his absence, his ministers would preside, and in their absence, Anatolia, the bishop of Constantinople, would preside. For the first meeting, Dioscorus, Archbishop of Alexandria, was denied the right to vote. Instead, he was seated in the defendant's chair.

After Eusebius of Dorylaeum read the opening charges against Dioscorus, he persuaded the Council to reconsider the condemnation of Eutyches at the local council in Constantinople and to reject the edicts of the synod of robbers at Ephesus. During the reading of these charges, there was fierce argument between both sides of bishops (i.e., those who supported Dioscorus and others who agreed with the dogmatic epistle of Bishop Leo of Rome). These arguments among "the servants of God" were stopped only with the intervention of laymen – imperial officers and senators, who "in the name of God" asked them to stop fighting.¹³³

The ensuing assemblies reviewed many of the deeds instigated by Dioscorus and committed by his supporters at the Council of Ephesus. Many bishops, who themselves bore part of the blame for the lawlessness committed, repented and asked for forgiveness. Only Dioscorus along with several of his allies defended their actions. At the end of the Council, they were condemned and exiled to Gangra Island. Dioscorus died there in 454. Surprisingly, the assembled bishops did not discuss Eutyches, the founder of the doctrine of the Monophysites, but at the end of the session, he too was banished into exile.

This very important gathering in the history of the Church made a very significant articulation of the faith known as "the Chalcedonian Oros." Some Orthodox authors equate the significance of this creed to the Nicene Creed.¹³⁴ It is important to note the

¹³³ See *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 83.

¹³⁴ But the events leading up to this creed did not proceed so smoothly. Here are some excerpts from the literature that describe the atmosphere reigning in the camp of the faction of the true believers (i.e., the

difference in how each of these creeds named Mary, the mother of Jesus. Whereas the Nicene Creed called her simply “the Virgin Mary”, the Chalcedonian Oros officially introduced for the first time the term “Mother of God.”¹³⁵ The Chalcedonian Oros consisted of these statements which had the purpose of rejecting the teachings of Eutyches and Dioscorus:

“We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.”¹³⁶

“The Oros of faith was enacted and read at the Council during the week of October 22, 451. During the next and sixth session on October 25, the Oros of faith was officially proclaimed in the presence of Emperor Marcian, Empress

“Orthodox”) who composed the “Chalcedonian Oros.” “Finally, the Council decided to compose a confession of faith related to the Orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation. During this process, there ensued many arguments and disputes which revealed a deep level of resentment and distrust... They were able to read the Oros (e.g., confession) of faith only at the fifth session of the church fathers. Indeed, this reading did not occur in the presence of the entire Council or even during its official meetings. The mention of this confession of faith provoked **lengthy and contentious debates** across the aisles of the Council... Seeing that the **contention among the bishops intensified** and was not yielding a satisfactory outcome, the Emperor chose to include some of his imperial officials at these meetings.” *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 87-9. Author’s emphasis. Only through the persistent efforts of imperial officials and the Emperor himself did the bishops conclude peacefully. A second attempt was made to introduce the “Chalcedonian Oros”, this time with amendments to incorporate terminology used by Pope Leo the Great in relation to the existence of “two natures” in Christ’s Incarnation (as opposed to the terminology of the Archimandrite Eutyches). This time, the Fathers at the Council calmed down and accepted this compromise.

¹³⁵ However, the introduction of this term in the “Chalcedonian Oros,” despite the existence of certain incorrect beliefs about Mary at that time, was intended primarily to prove that Jesus Christ truly possessed “two natures” (divine and human - as opposed to the teaching of Eutyches about one nature), not that Mary herself deserved various heavenly veneration - of which we discussed earlier. Such a claim is supported by the Orthodox, stating their interpretation of the bishop who composed the Oros: “May the Holy Virgin be called ‘Mother of God’; this should be included in the creed.” The demand to include the term ‘Mother of God’ **merely reflected the bishops’ desire to emphasize the inseparable union of the two natures in Christ.**” *Ibid.*, 88. Author’s emphasis.

¹³⁶ http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/chalcedon/chalcedonian_definition.shtml .

Pulcheria, and a large number of court officials... The Emperor's speech was accompanied by the joyous cries of the fathers. Then followed the reading of the Oros of faith, after which the Emperor asked the Fathers: 'Let the holy council say whether the definition which has now been read has been pronounced in accordance with the consensus of all the most sacred bishops.' 'We all hold the same! We have all assented and signed! To Marcian, the new Constantine, the new Paul, the new David! The years of David to the emperor! You are the peace of the world. You have strengthened orthodoxy. Pulcheria the new Helena! To Nestorius, Eutyches, and Dioscorus, anathema! The (Holy) Trinity condemned those three.'¹³⁷

One of the most important rules (canons) of the 30 passed at this Council was Canon 28. Specifically, Canon 28 placed the Patriarchy (Archdiocese) of Constantinople as second in importance and honor to the Archdiocese of Rome in the Empire. The Roman legates who represented the Roman Pope Leo pushed their agenda through the Council in spite of others' dissenting protests.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Orthodox Church ended on July 16.

The Fifth Ecumenical Council

The outcome of the Fourth Ecumenical Council caused negative reactions among the supporters of Dioscorus, Archbishop of Alexandria, particularly among the Egyptian monks. People in Egypt considered the condemnation of the archbishop and his supporters of Monophysitism as a condemnation of the teachings of Cyril of Alexandria. Indeed, the Monophysites considered Chalcedon to be a "synod of robbers", since it contradicted the edicts of the second council of Ephesus in 431 and introduced a new religion. The Monophysites condemned Chalcedon not only for not condemning the teaching of Nestorius's spiritual teacher, Theodore of Mopsuestia, but also for reinstating the formerly expelled bishops Isa of Edessa and Theodoret of Cyrhus. The Council of Chalcedon affirmed the Nestorianism that was anathematized at the Third Ecumenical Council. Thus, the Monophysites exerted all possible efforts to defend what in their view was their orthodoxy under attack by the heresy of Chalcedon.

In addition to extreme opposition from numerous Egyptian monks, Syrian and Palestinian monks also opposed Chalcedon. Orthodox historians provide some analysis of the forcible imposition of the edicts of Chalcedon on people by the imperial authorities:

"When the bishops returned from Chalcedon, they were met in many places by popular opposition. In order to bring the Patriarch Juvenal to his city of Jerusalem, troops had to intervene. In Alexandria the soldiers who were guarding Patriarch Proterius, appointed by Constantinople to replace the deposed

¹³⁷ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 94.

Dioscorus, were locked in the Caesarium by an inflamed mob and burned alive.”¹³⁸

After the death of Emperor Marcian in 457, the advocate of the separate Council of Chalcedon, Emperor Leo I (457-474), another ally of the Council, ascended the throne in Constantinople. This emperor demanded that all the bishops sign a renewed affirmation to the orthodoxy of the canons of the Chalcedonian Council. Some 1,600 bishops reaffirmed their fealty to the Oros of faith in another church gathering. After this, Leo ruthlessly overthrew Monophysite bishops and installed ones more sympathetic to his views.¹³⁹

Continuing support for the Council of Chalcedon came from subsequent emperors Leo II and Zeno (474-476). However, Basiliscus, who seized power from them in a military coup and expelled them, issued an "Encyclical Letter" in which he condemned the Council of Chalcedon. This document, which was signed by between 500 to 700 bishops, declared Monophysitism as orthodox doctrine. As a consequence, Monophysite bishops replaced former incumbents who were removed in certain regions.

After he regained power from Basiliscus with the help of Acacius, patriarch of Constantinople,¹⁴⁰ Zeno restored the creed which he had earlier repealed. However, seeing that the power of the Monophysites was still expanding, an issue that he considered to be a threat to the Empire, the Emperor Zeno along with Acacius in the year 482 issued an "Henotikon", a dogmatic decree that attempted to harmonize the views of the Monophysites and the Diphysites to achieve some sort of union among them.¹⁴¹ The unintended outcome of this "Henotikon", however, ended up creating a third faction instead of uniting the other two. The first faction consisted of the supporters of the policy of compromise advocated by the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople. The other two factions consisted of the radical elements on both sides, neither of which was ready to compromise.

Some of the Monophysite patriarchs who signed the "Henotikon" included Peter Mongus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, and Peter Fulon, Patriarch of Antioch. However, after the signing of the compromise agreement with the "Chalcedonians", the radical

¹³⁸ Schmemmann, *The Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 182-3.

¹³⁹ See Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 581-2.

¹⁴⁰ Since the Fourth Ecumenical Council, new vocabulary in ecclesiastical circles arose, such as the titles for certain bishops. The variation in titles depended upon the prestige of the bishop's city in the Empire. "The center of government administration was given the honorary title of papacy, which applied to Rome, from where we get the name of its head – Pope... The bishops in the important centers of the provinces were given the names of metropolitans, i.e., archbishops. From the year 451, the title of **Patriarch** was reserved for the bishops of large cities: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem... All bishops with titles were called either Metropolitans or Patriarchs, both on an equal level and in keeping with the honors and obligations given to the administrative authorities... The titles: metropolitans, archbishops, exarchs, patriarchs (and, of course, Pope) show mere variations in name among the bishops, not hierarchical degrees. Thus, it is not an error to call any church leader (of large or small cities) using the title 'bishop.'" Momir Jovic, *Early Christianity in the Balkans*, 86. Author's emphasis.

¹⁴¹ See Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Volume 1, 582, and Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Way of Orthodoxy*, 183.

wing of the Monophysites split from these Patriarchs and demanded their renunciation of the "Henotikon". In Alexandria, nearly 30,000 monks gathered to make such demands on their religious leaders.

Neither were the supporters of the Chalcedon confession satisfied with this compromise solution. The shadow Patriarch of Alexandria (e.g., parallel or opposition patriarch) John Thalia, a supporter of Chalcedon and opponent of Monophysitism, sent a complaint to Pope Felix against the "Henotikon" and its spiritual author, Acacius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. Pope Felix threw in his backing to the supporters of Chalcedon and in 484 deposed Acacius for betraying "orthodoxy". In turn, Acacius responded in a similar way by calling for the excommunication and deposition of Pope Felix. (In practical terms, nothing really happened as both men retained their positions.) This conflict gave rise to the first major schism between, at that time, the Roman Church and the heretical church of the east, which lasted 35 years (known as the Acacian schism).

The successor to the throne of Zeno in the East was Anastasius, who openly supported the Monophysites:

"Emperor Anastasius I (491-518) openly supported the Monophysites; in 496 he deposed the patriarch of Constantinople, Euphemius, for refusing to compromise with the Monophysite patriarch of Alexandria. In 511 Macedonius of Constantinople shared a like fate for faithfulness to Chalcedon and was replaced by the declared Monophysite Timothy. In 512 Anastasius appointed to the seat of Antioch the leading Monophysite theologian, Severus of Antioch, who solemnly condemned Chalcedon at the Council of Tyre in 518. Every year the division between orthodox and Monophysites became more profound and impossible to retrieve. In Palestine and Syria, it is true, some of the monks under the leadership of St. Sabas, founder of the famous Palestinian monastery, remained faithful to orthodoxy and did not recognize the Monophysite hierarchy, but the main mass of Syrians and practically all Egypt were ready prey to heresy."¹⁴²

On the other hand, the orthodox West also was adamant. Only the Pope Athanasius II (496-8) expressed a desire for reconciliation between Western and Eastern Christianity during the schism that lasted for 35 years. However, this western patriarch faced great opposition from the Easterners (mostly Monophysites) and even accusations of heresy after his death. The Acacian schism ended only when Justin I (518-527) ascended to the Eastern throne and in a rather humiliating way admitted to the proper faith of the Roman church:

"The Pope Hormisdas (514-523) demanded that the Byzantine emperor to sign a pledge that recognized the orthodoxy of the Roman Church and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church as the only correct teacher of Christianity as a whole."¹⁴³

¹⁴² Schemann, *Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 183-4.

¹⁴³ Jovic, 91.

The accession of Justin reestablished communion between Rome and Constantinople and resulted in the expulsion of Monophysite bishops and the instatement of the supporters of Chalcedon.

Although our review of the history of the Church with regard to Ecumenical Councils has already shown the interference of Byzantine emperors in influencing the dominance of one theological current over another, one emperor stands out in this regard: Justin's nephew, Justinian I (527-565):

“G. Ostrogorski made the precise assertion that the Christian Church found an ardent backer in Justinian's personality, but he also **became her master**. Hence his numerous interventions in religious problems became normal policy for Justinian and ‘represented a culmination of imperial influence on church life.’”¹⁴⁴

Thanks to the practice which, according to Alexander Schmemmann, derived from a purely pagan theory of the "symphony" of the Church and state,¹⁴⁵ where all that proceeds in the Church must serve "for the well-being and strengthening and blessing of the empire, the ultimate and absolute value."¹⁴⁶ Christian empire under Justinian returned to the ancient pagan absolutism and eradication of all that belonged to different religious beliefs. In the first years of his reign, he first attacked and sought to destroy the last remnants of pagan culture:

“Stern measures were taken against all possible heretical sects, the remnants of ancient schisms and disputes. Justinian resolved to settle still more firmly with paganism and with its citadel, the university at Athens, which had recently been basking in the glory of the last of its great pagan philosophers, Proclus. In 529 the university was closed and replaced by the first Christian university, in Constantinople. Campaigns of mass conversion began in the capital and Asia Minor. The few remaining pagans were obliged to go permanently underground.”¹⁴⁷

After his war against the heathen, Justinian supported the theology based on the Chalcedonian confession. With brute force, he sought to replace the Monophysite bishops with men in favor of Chalcedon. However, Justinian realized that violence did not render the results he desired. He turned to politics of compromise and tried on several occasions in 531 and 533 to organize “meetings of reconciliation” in an effort to reconcile the two parties of the Orthodox (or diphysites, those who supported the teaching of 2 natures of Christ based on Chalcedon) and the Monophysites. However, these meetings failed to yield significant results. Several years later, the Monophysites

¹⁴⁴ Jovic, 97. Author's emphasis.

¹⁴⁵ Schmemmann's theory states: “The priesthood controls divine and heavenly matters, while the empire directs what is human and earthly. **But at the same time the empire takes full care of preserving Church dogmas and the honor of the priesthood.** And the priesthood with the empire directs all public life along ways pleasing to God.” Schmemmann, *Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 193. Author's emphasis.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

reestablished a base of power in the capital owing to the sympathies of the emperor's wife Theodora, who herself was a secret Monophysite. She managed to install Anthimus, a Monophysite, as Patriarch of Constantinople in 536. However, in that same year, the Roman Pope Agapetus arrived in Constantinople and recognized Patriarch Anthimus to be a Monophysite. He exposed the patriarch's heresy, who was subsequently expelled and replaced by Menas, who subscribed to Chalcedon. After settling matters with the patriarch, the emperor again changed course and resumed the violent persecution of the Monophysites:

“In an edict of 536 Monophysitism was once more solemnly condemned, the books of Severus of Antioch were removed from circulation, and entry to the capital was forbidden to heretics. He resolved on an even more drastic step: after so many years of almost official recognition of the Monophysite hierarchy in Egypt, he now **sent an orthodox bishop there with unlimited powers, and a wave of terror once more rolled through the country.**”¹⁴⁸

However, in spite of all the Emperor's efforts to forcibly impose the confession of Chalcedon throughout his empire by appointing bishops, a “parallel hierarchy” of Monophysite bishops and priests who faced persecution for their beliefs arose.

The Orthodox Church experienced a split that exists up unto this day.¹⁴⁹

The Debate over the Orthodoxy of Origen and the Three Chapters

Concurrent with the dispute between the Monophysites and the Diphysites, another contention arose particularly among the monastic cells of Palestine. This contention pertained to the teachings of Origen.¹⁵⁰ Some considered him to be orthodox, while others considered him as a heretic. Conflicts between the two monastic factions arose only after the death in 532 of St. Sava the Sanctified, the founder of their monasteries. The Monophysites, the residents of the old cells, supported Origen's teachings. They clashed with the opponents of Origen and ended up destroying the new cells. The

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 198. Author's emphasis.

¹⁴⁹ Today in the 21st Century, Monophysite churches still exist in Africa and the Middle East.

¹⁵⁰ Origen lived in the second and third centuries A.D. In many ways, Origen was a controversial figure. Specifically, his method of interpreting the Scriptures was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. He was a disciple of Ammonius Saccas along with Plotinius the Neoplatonist. Later, Origen studied under the bishop Clement of Alexandria in his catechetical school in 203. Origen was named presbyter in 228 by the bishops of Jerusalem and Caesarea without the knowledge and consent of the competent Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria. In the years 231-232, local councils convened in Alexandria that condemned Origen and expelled him from the church in Alexandria because of his mishandling of Christian teachings. He was a very prolific writer. His interpretations of the Bible stirred either ardent support or fierce opposition. Thus, even in the fourth and fifth centuries, sharp disputes over the writings of Origen ensued among supporters such as John, bishop of Jerusalem, and opponents such as Epiphanius, bishop of Cyprus, and Theophilus of Alexandria. See: Jovic, *Early Christianity in the Balkans*, 62-66. Alexander Schmemmann claims that tradition asserts St. Pachomius the Great forbade his students to read Origen's works. On the other hand, St. Basil the Great and his friends, the founders of monasticism in Greece, and that Origen's influence was felt in the individual works of Athanasius of Alexandria (and also in the life of St. Anthony). See: Schmemmann, *The Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 200.

Monophysite supporters of Origen were backed by the Empress Theodora and two prominent religious figures, Theodore Askidas, the bishop of Caesarea, and Domitian, the Metropolitan of Ancyra.¹⁵¹

However, the opposing Diphysites accused the emperor of supporting heresy in tolerating the actions of the Monophysites. At the urging of Patriarch Mennas of Constantinople, Patriarch Ephraim of Antioch, and the papal envoy Pelagius, Justinian in 543 issued an edict that condemned Origen's teachings as heretical. However, this condemnation of Origen did not stem from the Emperor's desire to attack the Monophysites who believed in Origen. Justinian's ultimate goal was to reconcile the Monophysites and Diphysites. Instead, Justinian considered it a concession to the Diphysites so they would feel indebted to the Emperor.

Naturally, the Monophysites were displeased. In retaliation, Theodore Askidas, one of the emperor's friends whom he personally appointed as bishop of Caesarea Cappadocia, devised a scheme. He sought to reinstate the excommunication of some recently deceased Nestorians who had been exonerated by the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon. This was his attempt to challenge the validity of other decisions taken at the Council. Here are some details about the "Three Chapters" which he and other Monophysites disputed:

"These three points or chapters, or 'headings' included: (1) the writings of Theodoret of Cyprus against Cyril the Great and the Council of Ephesus, (2) the letter of Ibas of Edessa against Cyril and the Council of Ephesus Parliament addressed to the Persian bishop Maris, and 3) the person and writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Askidas alleged that all these writings and personalities, e.g., the personality and thinking of Theodore of Mopsuestia, were Nestorian. Askidas alleged that since the Council of Chalcedon did not condemn them, but in fact returned Theodoret and Ibas to their positions as bishops and considered them under its wings as orthodox, **the Monophysites considered the Council of Chalcedon as Nestorian.** Thus, they demanded to carry out that which the Council of Chalcedon had failed to do in condemning the three points or chapters or headings... Thus, in the next year (544), Theodore Askidas went to the Emperor to develop the new theological edict that would condemn the three chapters."¹⁵²

And so, while the condemnation of Origen did not cause any severe reactions, the Emperor's edict led to new conflicts and divisions within the Church. When the Emperor called upon the Patriarch of Constantinople, it was logical that the Patriarch would be the first to sign the Emperor's decree. Patriarch Mennas hesitated to sign the document, fearing that doing so would condemn the three deceased theologians of Antioch who had died in peace with the Church along with the Council of Chalcedon. However, Mennas ended up signing the decree with the proviso that his subscription

¹⁵¹ See Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 591.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 592. Author's emphasis.

would be nullified if the Roman Pope disapproved of it. Other Eastern patriarchs acted in a similar manner.¹⁵³

While the Eastern bishops one by one consented to the decree condemning “The Three Chapters”, those in the West refused. African bishops and the Roman envoy to Constantinople protested openly in communication with Patriarch Mennas. The Roman Pope along with bishops in other Western cities also condemned the decree. However, the Emperor sought to convince the Roman patriarch in order to gain the West’s approval. Justinian summoned the Roman Pope to Constantinople in 547 and gave him all kinds of honors upon his arrival. However, the Pope did not give in right away. Upon his arrival in “New Rome”, the Roman Pope condemned and excommunicated Patriarch Mennas and others who had signed the decree because of their condemnation of the Council of Chalcedon (as was understood in the West). Patriarch Mennas retaliated by excommunicating Pope Vigilius.

Nevertheless, three years after the edict against the "Three Chapters" was issued and one year after the Pope's arrival in Constantinople, Justinian managed to persuade him to sign the decree. On this occasion, Vigilius acted contrary to his prior behavior and specifically brought a document called “Iudicatum” which supported the Emperor's edict. However, people from the immediate papal entourage, one of whom was his nephew, opposed the Roman patriarch and condemned his decision to toss aside the previous decisions of Chalcedon. As news of the Pope’s assent to the imperial edict went out to the West, so discontent among the local bishops spread:

“The well-known African theologian, Facundus of Hermiane, published a book *In Defense of the Three Heads*, which produced a sensation. Locally council after council opposed the condemnation, and in Africa matters went so far that the pope himself was solemnly anathematized.”¹⁵⁴

After the Pope saw the negative reaction of the West to his decision to sign the decree, he asked the Emperor to return the Iudicatum and to convene an Ecumenical Council to resolve the issues of the "Three Chapters". The emperor responded positively to the Pope's request, but on the same occasion in 551, he issued a new decree which confirmed the provisions of his earlier decree. Pope Vigilius went from one extreme to another. He now denounced the emperor's new edict and threatened excommunication to anyone who did not listen to him – even before waiting for the decisions of the new Council. Having issued this proclamation, the Pope fled to the Church of St. Peter in Constantinople out of fear of the emperor’s retaliation. The Pope believed that the church was a holy place that would offer him protection from the government. It is obvious that a well-considered the danger, because shortly after that event took place as follows:

“On the emperor’s orders the police broke into the church to arrest the pope. He resisted so energetically that the columns over the altar collapsed and almost

¹⁵³ See *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 99 and Schmemmann, *Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 203.

¹⁵⁴ Schmemmann, *Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 203.

crushed him. The assembled crowd began stormily to express their outrage, and the police were obliged to withdraw ineffectively.”¹⁵⁵

In subsequent years, during preparation of church facilities for the new Council, Justinian initiated persecution of those bishops who opposed him and appointed new bishops who shared his theological views. In this manner, he could secure the parliamentary majority needed to ratify his decisions:

“Justinian understood the preparation for a council in his own way. In Africa, for example, where opposition to the edict was particularly strong, the main bishops were arrested at the emperor’s order, including the archbishop of Carthage, and replaced by others. Still the outcome of the council seemed unclear.”¹⁵⁶

The Council was convened in 553 in Constantinople and brought together 164 bishops. Most of them were from the East. Except for a few bishops, the Westerners did not attend out of fear that they would be outnumbered. Pope Vigilius, who at that time was in Constantinople, did not want to attend the Council. Instead, he addressed the Council in writing to communicate his views on the contentious issue of the "Three Chapters". However, although he sent his written declaration, it did not reach the assembled bishops. Emperor Justinian and his officials replaced this recent papal letter (in which he argued against the conviction of the three deceased seminarians) with the earlier letter in which Vigilius expressed his condemnation of the “Three Chapters”.

As a consequence of his alleged inconsistency about the "Three Chapters", the name of the Roman Patriarch was excluded from the diptychs and never mentioned again in the liturgy. On the other hand, the Council denounced the person and deeds of Theodore of Mopsuestia and declared him a heretic. The Council also condemned individual acts by Theodoret of Cyrhus and Ibas of Edessa. It also condemned Origen and his teachings. Justinian affirmed all of the Council’s decisions. He also sought Virgilius to affirm them. However, the Pope refused. Consequently, Justinian banished the Roman Patriarch into exile. After six months, once again exhibiting his vacillating character, the Pope changed his mind and issued a new document in which he said that "after mature reflection on the issue, he withdrew his opinion and agreed with the decisions of the Council. Furthermore, he would excommunicate anyone who would not condemn the Three Chapters." ¹⁵⁷

Pope Pelagius, the successor to Vigilius, accepted the decision of the Council. However, the West was not so accommodating to the Council’s decisions. There was great opposition in Africa, Gaul, northern Italy, Venice, and Istria. Bishops from these areas refused cooperation with Rome and Constantinople. Instead, they established a new patriarchy:

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁵⁷ See E. Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 594.

“The Diocese of Venice held its conviction until Pope Boniface III came to power in 607. Istria held its independence until Pope Sergius I (687-701). These bishops rejected the authority of the Patriarchs or even the Pope. They appointed the archbishop of Aquileia as their leader. He moved his residence to a city not far from Aquileia. It originated in the administrative structure of the Church, a new patriarchy, in Aquileia.”¹⁵⁸

The Eastern Orthodox Churches observe the Fifth Ecumenical Council on June 25.

The Sixth Ecumenical Council

Although the Fifth Ecumenical Council had condemned the Monophysites, a group of professing Christian churches that taught the existence of a single, divine nature of Jesus Christ still remained in the East. Of course, their relationships with the Diphysites were strained. This had the impact of dividing the Empire on a religious basis. The first attempts to reconcile these two opposing theological currents were undertaken by the emperor Heraclius. In the first half of the seventh century, Heraclius fought against the Persians for the liberation of the eastern provinces of the Empire. Most of these provinces consisted of Monophysites. During his stay in the East, Heraclius met with some moderate leaders of the Monophysite churches who expressed a willingness to establish a union with the Diphysites. The Emperor himself aspired to establish religious unity in order to stabilize the Empire. He accepted the idea of the union (“unia”).

The Monophysites made a proposal to the majority Diphysite church. They wished to establish new religious definitions that would confirm the decisions of the Fifth Ecumenical Council of the existence of two natures in Christ, human and divine. However, the Monophysites wanted the concession that Christ possessed only one divine will manifested in the energy resulting from the complete subjugation of the human will and actions in Christ to the divine will of God the Logos. Emperor Heraclius was presented with this definition by Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople along with Cyrus of Phasis and Theodore of Faran. These bishops saw nothing heretical or contradictory to the decisions of the Fifth Ecumenical Council. After Emperor Heraclius gave his consent, Patriarch Sergius and Bishop Cyrus of Phasis discussed further steps concerning the establishment of union. In 631, Cyrus became the Patriarch of Alexandria¹⁵⁹. His mission was to achieve these goals:

“The decision regarding union – that is, the merger of the Orthodox and Monophysites on the basis that both sides would consent to Monothelitism – began in Egypt, where at that time, there lived 300,000 Orthodox and 5 or 6 million Monophysites... Under the supervision of Heraclius and Sergius, Cyrus, a capable man, undertook the task. In Alexandria, thousands of Monophysites accepted the union: clerics, officials and military commanders of the people came together. As a sign of their reconciliation to the Church, they received the

¹⁵⁸ Jovic, *Early Christianity in the Balkans*, 103.

¹⁵⁹ See: E. Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 757.

Eucharist from the hands of the Patriarch Cyrus. In Alexandria, almost all Egypt, Libya, and the Thebaid ‘provided the hand of fellowship to the Orthodox.’”¹⁶⁰

One of the biggest opponents of this Union with the adoption of Monothelitism was a learned Palestinian monk named Sophronius. When he arrived in Egypt, Sophronius spoke to the Alexandrian Patriarch and begged him to abandon the doctrine that defined Christ with “one will” and “one energy”. In response, Cyrus sent Sophronius to Constantinople to visit Patriarch Sergius and commanded him to submit and not to disturb church reconciliation. After receiving this advice, Sophronius obeyed with monastic silence. However, after he became Patriarch of Jerusalem, which happened shortly afterwards, Sophronius decided to speak again about the controversial subject. He objected to the betrayal of the Diphysite (Orthodox) teachings of the Fifth Ecumenical Council:

“Among other things [Sergius] told the Pope that thousands upon thousands of Monophysites had come to Orthodoxy, and the emperor Heraclius enjoyed much success in negotiations with the Monophysites. The only one who rose up against the doctrine of one energy in Christ was Sophronius. He further said: ‘In accordance with the teachings of all the Ecumenical Councils, One Lord, our Lord Jesus Christ, carried out all His operations. Therefore, we ought not to consider whether there was one or two energies. **Instead, we must give recognition to the single will of Christ.** The explanation which prevails among some Fathers derived from an ignorant, terrible misinterpretation... and the expression "two operations" causes many to stumble, for it is not used among any of the Fathers, and misleads one to the conclusion of two wills that oppose each other.... which is ungodly.’ So in response to this letter, Pope Honorius told Sergius, ‘**Let us confess the single will of the Lord Jesus Christ.**’ ...The doctrine of two energies was called Nestorianism by Honorius.”¹⁶¹

After the death of the patriarchs Sophronius of Jerusalem and Honorius of Rome in the same year of 637, the emperor Heraclius under the influence of the Patriarch Sergius (who lived until the following year 638) issued a “formula of religion” called the “Ecthesis”. This edict proclaimed the Monothelistic belief of a single will in Christ and expressly prohibited any further dispute on the issue. The successor to Sergius, Pyrrhus, affirmed Heraclius’s edict, as did Cyrus of Alexandria. On the other hand, the successor to Honorius, Pope John IV of Ravenna along with a council of Western bishops condemned the “Ecthesis” in 641 along with Honorius’s assent to the Eastern patriarchs on Monothelism.¹⁶² Even before the issue of the “Ecthesis” edict, and especially afterward, a great opponent of Monothelism appeared with one of the monks of Constantinople named Maximus. After Constans II, the grandson of Heraclius, ascended the throne and ruled from 641 to 668, he abolished the “Ecthesis” and replaced it with another religious edict called the “Typos”. Maximus (later called “the Confessor”)

¹⁶⁰ *Seven Pillars of Orthodoxy*, 123-4. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁶¹ Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 149. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁶² See Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 151.

opposed the “Typos” along with the Roman Pope Martin I. Those who refused to submit to the “Typos” were threatened with great punishment both in this world and the next:

“It is forbidden for anyone to enter into a debate about one will and one energy. Whoever violates this edict will **face terrible judgment before the almighty God**, and he also **cannot escape the penalties proscribed for offenders of the imperial law**. If the offender is a bishop or priest, he shall be dismissed from his office, if he is a monk, he will be condemned by the church and expelled from the monastery, even if he is an official, he shall be deprived of his prestige, if he is a noble, he will be penalized by losing his property, and if he is of lower origin, he will be physically punished and **sent to eternal exile.**”¹⁶³

Since Maximus the Confessor and Pope Martin disagreed with the “Typos” which established Monothelism, they held a local council in Rome in the year 649 with about a hundred other bishops. They condemned the Eastern Patriarchs.

Later, they themselves came under attack under the strict laws of this edict. In fact, several years later in 653, the Emperor Constans sent a new exarch Theodore Caliopas to Rome. He arrested the ailing pope with his collaborators in faith. He conducted them by ship to Constantinople.

After their arrival, the pope was subjected to humiliation and interred in the city jail where he spent three months under very difficult conditions. After a trial before a judge, Martin physically could not stand and was carried away on a stretcher. Martin was returned to prison again, where he was forced to walk on foot bounded with chains and escorted by soldiers with drawn swords.

On the other hand, Pyrrhus, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who himself was about to die, took perverse enjoyment in watching the sufferings of the Roman Patriarch. Having received a report that the Pope was sentenced to the death penalty, Pyrrhus asked the Emperor to spare Martin’s life – so that his suffering would last longer. Finally, as a martyr for the faith, Pope Martin died in exile in the Crimea in the year 655.

As for Maximus the Confessor, he suffered a similar fate in Constantinople. During his stay in prison, the Monothelistic regime on several occasions demanded that he accept the doctrine of one will of Christ in the Incarnation. Moreover, he was given the offer to accept a compromise definition, which read:

“We confess that Christ had two wills and two energies according to the differentiated nature, but one will and one energy according to their union.”¹⁶⁴

However, since Saint Maxim rejected this offer and persisted in his opposition to Monothelism, the government cut off his tongue and right hand in order to prevent him

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 152. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁶⁴ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 133.

from preaching and writing works of theology any more. He died in exile in the Caucasus in the year 662.

Friction and fighting between members of the two conflicting religious factions lasted until the convocation of the Sixth Ecumenical Council by Constans' successor, the Emperor Constantine Pogonatus. This Council began in November 680 and lasted until September 681. Between 153 and 174 bishops and their representatives convened.¹⁶⁵ Members of the two opposing theological parties attended, though supporters of Monothelitism were a significant minority. Amongst others, they were represented by Macarius, the Patriarch of Antioch. He neither wanted to change his practice nor did he wish to condemn Monothelitism and declare it heresy.

Macarius, the Patriarch of Antioch, was toppled as president of the Council. He was replaced with Theophanes, who resumed the Council. The bishops gathered at the Council officially condemned Monothelism, but with some deficiencies as noted by Orthodox authors:

“The council anathematized the leaders of the heresy, the four patriarchs of Constantinople — Sergius, Paul, Pyrrhus, and Timothy — as well as Cyrus of Alexandria and Pope Honorius... On the other hand, those mainly responsible, the emperors Heraclius and Constas, were passed over in silence! Nor was mention made of the two martyrs for the truth, St. Martin the Pope and St. Maximus the Confessor; formally they were political criminals. Both names were added to the list of confessors and teachers of the Church only later, and this silence gives a rather unfortunate color to the final victory of Orthodoxy in the Christological dispute. The truth continued to conquer, **but men were unfortunately becoming accustomed to the double bookkeeping of Byzantine theocracy.**”¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, it is important to note that the Sixth Ecumenical Council did not achieve ultimate victory over Monothelitism. Hardcore Monothelites retained their control over the Levant and set up their own "Patriarchy of Antioch" in choosing as their center the Monastery of Saint Maron, from which the modern-day Maronites derive their name. They held it until the second half of the twelfth century, when they entered into communion with Rome under the influence of the Crusaders. However, Monothelitism made a short-lived comeback in Byzantium early in the 8th century. Eusebius Popovic elaborates on this comeback:

“In the Byzantine Empire, Monothelitism reemerged during the reign of Emperor Philippicus (Philippikos Bardanes) from 711 to 713. He attempted to forcibly introduce Monothelitism again. Unfortunately, **many bishops suffered under his reign.** He annulled the decisions of the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 712 and declared Monothelitism as established orthodox teaching. Fortunately, his reign

¹⁶⁵ Various Orthodox sources have different numbers. See: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 135 and R. Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*. 152.

¹⁶⁶ Schmemmann, *The Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 219. Author's emphasis.

ended quickly, such that he could not inflict permanent damage. After his downfall and death, everyone who had confessed Monothelitism out of fear of the Emperor repented and returned to Orthodoxy. **This course of events left a deep blemish of weakness and shame on the reputation of the Eastern bishops.**¹⁶⁷

The deliberations of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680-681) are closely related to the activity of the so-called "Fifth-Sixth Council" (i.e., the Council of Trullo) held from 691-2 during the reign of Justinian II. A total of 213 bishops attended this Council. Paul, the Patriarch of Constantinople, presided over the Council. The Eastern Church fully recognizes the decisions of the Council of Trullo and considers them as equal to decisions of other Ecumenical Councils. On the other hand, the Western Church does not observe the canons of this council, because some of the canons contradict Roman Catholic customs and beliefs - such as the prohibition of fasting on Saturday, opposition to priestly celibacy, and other issues.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council

Before examining the historical circumstances that directly affected the proceedings and resolutions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council confirmed by many centuries of the practice of icon veneration and iconography, let us briefly recall the historical facts detailed in the previous chapter on "Veneration of Sacred Icons". As discussed previously, these facts date from the beginning of the Christian era and relate how the practice of icon veneration was introduced into the Church after its first centuries.

Specifically, members of Christian churches based on Biblical principles reject practices that for more than a thousand years have been conducted in the traditional Christianity of the East and West. Among others, these practices include the portrayal and veneration of images of saints from the past. The Bible, which Evangelical Christians recognize as their sole authority in matters of doctrine and practice, offers a strong argument against such practices. We analyzed this argument in the chapter on icons. This section of the chapter on Ecumenical Councils will analyze historical arguments as to the validity of icon veneration and iconography.

One special section in the previous chapter on icons described clear historical facts known and recognized by Eastern Orthodox historians. These historical facts demonstrate that religious paintings existed neither in apostolic times, nor up to the end of the first century A.D.¹⁶⁸

Also, we learned that at the end of the second and third centuries, the Church began to introduce paintings within church gatherings. These paintings were used merely as a means for spiritual instruction - and certainly not for icon veneration that we see today. These symbolic images used exclusively for religious instruction included representations of Noah's Ark, the shepherd with the sheep, vineyards and grapes, and

¹⁶⁷ E. Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 760. Author's emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ See: Sergey Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 10.

other portraits that were used for explaining deeper spiritual truths. Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic showed historical data that the further development of religious art fell under the direct influence of pagan inclinations toward icon veneration. This pagan influence stemmed from the traditional pagan use of a multitude of religious paintings which represented "a natural Old Testament for Christian icon veneration."¹⁶⁹

We also learned that iconography (which itself was no longer symbolic) of certain biblical figures and icons of saints began to appear until the early fourth century and later. Veneration of icons similar to what is practiced today developed only in the fifth and sixth centuries. Therefore, the introduction of iconography and icon veneration occurred several centuries after the death of Christ's apostles - through whom, even in their time, God established the faith "*once and for all delivered to the saints.*" Consistent with the faith previously taught by the apostles, we should not be surprised to see that in the first four centuries of the Church most church authorities opposed the portrayal of religious images and their veneration.

Of course, since the veneration of church iconography fell under the influence of paganism, it is logical to expect that the church would also accept Neoplatonist philosophical thought and its application in the concept of icon veneration. In the previous chapter about the icons, we cited the text by Ernst Benz, a renowned author and expert on Eastern Orthodoxy. He defended the idea that veneration and adoration of icons directed toward the subject of that icon derived from Neoplatonism.¹⁷⁰

With overwhelming evidence that no teaching on icon veneration exists in the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles on the one hand, and the fact that this practice originated and developed with the abetting of pagan religions and philosophies, it comes as no surprise that the particular historical movement called the "Iconoclasts" appears in the Church. Members of this Iconoclastic movement opposed the deeply rooted practice of icon veneration. This movement consisted of members of the church elites. As Florovski states,¹⁷¹ many of the learned bishops of the Eastern churches opposed icons and developed very strong theological arguments against them. Not even the most ardent proponents of icon veneration could undermine these arguments.

Arguments of the Eastern Bishops against Icon Veneration

All the writings of the Iconoclasts were later destroyed by the supporters of icon veneration,¹⁷² who achieved their victory mainly thanks to the political situation in the Byzantine Empire. However, the arguments of the Iconoclasts against icons can be partially found in the literature of their persecutors. This literature reveals a movement that emerged among the Eastern bishops against icons. They expressed and defended

¹⁶⁹ See Sergey Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 8 and Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 423, 652-3.

¹⁷⁰ See: Ernst Benz, *Spirit and Life of the Eastern Churches*. 16.

¹⁷¹ See: Georgi Florovski, *Christianity and Culture*, 92.

¹⁷² See: *Ibid.*, 86.

their opposition to iconography and icon veneration on the great deviation between the revelation of the Bible and the attitudes of the early church fathers toward icons on the one side, with a counter force from a very noticeable impact from paganism as the only support for iconography and a theological rationalization for this practice.

Although he did not know what the “focal points of the Iconoclastic view were”¹⁷³ because of the lack of firsthand literature, Florovski believed that the Iconoclasts were reacting to the influence of Greek culture on Christian faith.¹⁷⁴ Writing about the sources which describe the summoning of Iconoclasts to present their positions, Florovski writes:

“Let us begin with the specific question: what was the strongest argument in favor of the Iconoclasts? It was in reference to antiquity which, apparently, represented their strongest weapon for both attack and for self-defense. It was a double reference: to the Scriptures and Tradition. Modern interpretations of iconoclasm usually preferred to take their evidence from the Scriptures. Iconoclasts largely neglected to rely on the Holy Fathers. Modern historians also consider them less relevant and persuasive. However, in the eighth and ninth centuries, patristic evidence held great weight.”¹⁷⁵

At this point I would like to state that it is very important to discern in this study, with one hand, theological dispute between the Iconodules (those who advocated icon veneration) and their opponents and, on the other hand, the impact of this conflict on the situation in the former Byzantine Empire. Let us consider the historical juncture that at the end led to the promulgation of icon veneration as legitimate and God-honoring religious practices.

As for the arguments of the opponents of icons, which are related to the conception of the personality of Jesus Christ (which was actually the central issue of dispute), Sergey Bulgakov cites Professor I.A. Andreev as valid in saying that “the evidence of the Iconoclasts was masterfully composed. As far as accuracy, consistency, clarity and strength, the Iconoclasts did not leave out anything lacking [in their arguments].”¹⁷⁶ Bishops who argued that it is forbidden to paint Christ did so because they believed that they could not represent the human side of Jesus (e.g., His human nature) without also depicting His divine nature – which is unable to be portrayed with material resources (such as lines and color):

“The basic idea of the Iconoclasts consists in the fact that, according to the Orthodox conception of the Incarnation, Christ as the God-man, was never pictured: His

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁷⁴ Florovski writes: “Iconoclasm, thus, appears simply as **Oriental resistance** more or less to the drastic **Hellenization of Christianity**... Iconoclasm was born in the Orient, and its first proponents were Phrygian bishops (Constantine of Nakoleia and Thomas of Kladiopolis).”*Ibid.*, 88-9. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

¹⁷⁶ Sergey Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 12. (See footnote.)

Divinity was never seen (1 John 4:12), and though His humanity could have been seen, there are no physical representations of Christ. If the representation of the human flesh of Christ could portray the person of Christ himself, it would lead to one of two conclusions: either that the flesh could be separable from the Divinity and thus in that separation could be depicted, or else that the Deity is inseparably fused with the flesh, such that a physical representation of the flesh also portrays God.”¹⁷⁷

Due to the aforementioned reasons, the Iconoclasts considered the Iconodules who venerated icons of Christ to be agents of ancient, condemned heresies: Nestorianism and Monophysitism (which propagated false teaching about Christ and his Incarnate nature – the separation of the confluence of two natures in Christ). The Iconoclasts among the bishops had great influence on the Byzantine emperor of that time, Leo III the Isaurian (717-741). In 726, this emperor issued an edict that all icons in the churches were to be physically elevated to a higher level so that the people could neither bow down nor kiss them. Later in 730, after protests from the Iconodules, Leo III issued an even harsher decree calling for the complete expulsion of icons from the churches and their destruction.

The emperor’s decrees provoked disobedience among the people in that they continued to venerate the icons.¹⁷⁸ One incident resulted unleashed the fury of a crowd of Iconodules who killed and then chopped to pieces soldiers who had been ordered to remove the icon located above one of the gates of the imperial courtyard.¹⁷⁹ The major defenders of icons in this period were monks, among whom was the famous John of Damascus (St. John the Damascene), whom Orthodoxy considers to be one of the greatest theologians on icons of all time.

The main argument on which the defenders of icons (among others the German patriarch of Constantinople, the Roman Pope Gregory and John of Damascus) focused in the period before the Seventh Ecumenical Council consisted of the real embodiment of the Logos of God - which God made visible in the person Jesus Christ. Alexander Schmemmann cites the rationalization for icon veneration by John of Damascus:

“When He Who is without a body and without form, Who has neither quantity nor magnitude, Who is incomparable with respect to the superiority of His nature, Who exists in Divine form — **accepts a bond-servant’s appearance** and

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷⁸ Alexander Schmemmann admits that at that time, as now, most people who venerated icons were very ignorant, and that to the majority of people, icon veneration was flat-out idolatry: “...the veneration of icons very soon became perverted in many places and took on improper forms. The seventh century, as already indicated, was simultaneously the time of astonishing fruits of Orthodox spirituality **and of an indisputable coarsening of the mass of Christians**. Among the latter the veneration of icons **was sometimes marked by crude and sensual superstition...** the honor paid to icons was often close to idol-worship, and the honoring of their material substance was permitted.” Schmemmann, *The Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 246. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁷⁹ See Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 765-6.

arrays Himself in bodily form, then do thou trace Him upon wood, and rest thy hopes in contemplating Him, Who has permitted Himself to be seen.”¹⁸⁰

The First Council on Icons in 754

However, despite the efforts of John of Damascus and his like-minded Iconodules, during the reign of Leo's son, Emperor Constantine V, whom the Iconodules nicknamed "Kopronim" (which means "dung") probably because he himself wrote a treatise against icons, convened the first great church council which considered the validity of icon veneration. The Parliament began in Hieria at the imperial court and finished its work in Vlaherina church in Constantinople, bringing together 348 church fathers.¹⁸¹ Under the Presidency of Theodosius, Bishop of Ephesus, the assembled bishops unanimously condemned the veneration of the icons in every aspect. This sentence, as we mentioned earlier, was based on the premise that iconographic depiction of Christ pictured His human nature but not His divinity. Therefore, the two separations of inseparable natures in Christ resulted in iconographers and venerators falling into multiple Christological heresies earlier condemned in history. Here are the anathemas issued from this Council. These summarize the theological arguments of the opponents of icons:

“...If anyone ventures to represent the divine image of the Word after the Incarnation with material colors, let him be anathema! (2) If anyone ventures to represent in human figures, by means of material colors, by reason of the incarnation, the substance or person (ousia or hypostasis) of the Word, which cannot be depicted, and does not rather confess that even after the Incarnation he [i.e., the Word] cannot be depicted, let him be anathema! (3) If anyone ventures to represent the hypostatic union of the two natures in a picture, and calls it Christ, and falsely represents a union of the two natures, etc.! (4) If anyone separates the flesh united with the person of the Word from it, and endeavors to represent it separately in a picture, etc.! (5) If anyone separates the one Christ into two persons, and endeavors to represent Him who was born of the Virgin separately, and thus accepts only a relative union of the natures, etc. (6) If anyone represents in a picture the flesh deified by its union with the Word, and thus separates it from the Godhead, etc. (7) If anyone endeavors to represent by material colors, God the Word as a mere man, who, although bearing the form of God, yet has assumed the form of a servant in his own person, and thus endeavors to separate him from his inseparable Godhead, so that he thereby introduces a quaternity into the Holy Trinity, etc... (8) If anyone shall endeavor to represent the forms of the Saints in lifeless pictures with material colors **which**

¹⁸⁰ Schmemmann, *The Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 249. Author's emphasis.

¹⁸¹ See Sergey Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 12. (Translator's note: see also <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/icono-cncl754.asp> .)

are of no value (for this notion is vain and introduced by the devil), and does not rather represent their virtues as living images in himself, etc.”¹⁸²

The period after the great Church Council which condemned icon veneration and anathematized the defenders of icons resulted in the persecution of and Imperial prohibitions against icon veneration. These actions lasted until the death of Emperor Constantine Kopronymus. Eusebius Popovic cites a passage written about Constantine’s attitude toward Iconodule monks:

“The clergy lost the battle, and only a few of them still struggled for icon veneration, but for this they were persecuted in all possible ways. Prominent among the clergy were the monks, who strongly opposed the conclusions of the Council in 754 and the violence rendered on behalf of the Emperor. Some had their eyes gouged out, while others had their ears, noses, and hands cut off. Others were set on fire with pitch. Heads of icons were decapitated. Constantine even wanted to exterminate monasticism and commanded the monks to marry. He paired the monks up with women and forced them to walk together in the streets of Constantinople. Their monasteries were converted into barracks or stables.”¹⁸³

After the death of Kopronymus in 775, it appeared that icon veneration was almost completely suppressed, for no icons appeared in public. However, when his son Leo IV the Khazar found icons under the pillow of his wife Irina found icons a few years into his reign, he conducted an investigation which showed that the imperial court still had secret Iconodules. After his discovery, the emperor Leo IV died shortly afterwards under mysterious circumstances. Eusebius Popovic believes that Leo was poisoned (presumably by his opponents, the Iconodules). After his death, his son Constantine VI Porphyrogenitus ascended to the throne. Since Constantine was still a minor, his mother Irina, a supporter of icons, became regent. Once in power, she replaced the church bishops, who were Iconoclasts, with Iconodules.¹⁸⁴ Irina then got the idea to convene a new church council in which the majority of the assembled bishops favored the icons. This Council would undo the decisions of the previous Council in 754.

To implement the plan, she appointed Tarasius, secretary to the Emperor, as Patriarch of Constantinople in 784. He was a man of expediency (some would say he was a man who could appease any authority), who distinguished himself as a reliable statesman during the persecution of the icons at the court of Constantine Kopronymus. This time, Tarasius, who most likely had helped to carry out the persecution and destruction of icons (since he was the minister of the court of Constantine), switched roles. Now Tarasius would become the patriarch of Constantinople – under illegitimate circumstances. Firstly, he did not belong to the clergy as he was not a bishop, but a layman. The naming of Tarasius as patriarch violated the so-called 80th Canon of the

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 16. Footnote. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁸³ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 767.

¹⁸⁴ See: *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 160.

Holy Apostles as well as Canon 2 of the First Ecumenical Council. Both these Canons prohibited an unordained layman from assuming episcopal office.

The Proceedings of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

Regardless, the Empress Irina and the Patriarch Tarasius began preparations for a great new Church Council. Invitations were circulated to all parties, including the Roman Pope Adrian. The Council had first been scheduled to begin in the summer of 786, but due to some unrest, it was delayed to the fall of the following year. Besides the Roman bishop, representatives of those patriarchs who either refused to or were unable to attend (such as Pope Adrian and the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) arrived.

The Iconodules argued the validity of iconography and icon veneration stemmed from the fact of Christ's incarnation. They further contended that those who do not venerate icons of Christ do not believe in His incarnation:

“The main argument of these apologists, which they constantly repeated, consisted of the point that if Christ had truly become a man, then He can be pictured, and his image is worthy of adoration; whoever, in turn, rejects the image of Christ nor renders icons veneration, rejects His incarnation and confesses to Docetism or some other Christological heresy.”¹⁸⁵

For this reason, the Council of Nicaea (e.g., the Seventh Ecumenical Council) devoted special attention to demonstrating the validity (which the Iconocolasts repudiated) of venerating icons. The participants at this Council claimed that icon venerators show respect for the prototype (i.e., not the icon itself, but the person represented by the icon). The Ecumenical Council adopted this dogma:

“We define the rule with all accuracy and diligence, in a manner not unlike that befitting the shape of the precious and vivifying Cross, that the venerable and holy icons, painted or mosaic, or made of any other suitable material, be placed in the holy churches of God upon sacred vessels and vestments, walls and panels, houses and streets, both of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, and of our intemperate Lady the holy Theotokos, and also of the precious Angels, and of all Saints. For the more frequently and oftener they are continually seen in pictorial representation, the more those beholding are reminded and led to visualize anew the memory of the originals which they represent and for whom moreover they also beget a yearning in the soul of the persons beholding the icons. Accordingly, such persons are prompted not only to kiss these and to pay them honorary adoration, what is more important, they are imbued with the true faith which is reflected in our worship which is due to God alone and which befits only the divine nature. But this worship must be paid in the way suggested by the form of the precious and vivifying Cross, and the holy Gospels, and the rest of sacred institutions, and the offering of wafts of incense, and the display of beams of light, to be done for the purpose of honoring them, just as it used to be the

¹⁸⁵ Sergey Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 13.

custom to do among the ancients by way of manifesting piety. For any honor paid to the icon (or picture) redounds upon the original, and whoever bows down in adoration before the icon, is at the same time bowing down in adoration to the substance of the one therein painted.”¹⁸⁶

However, it is very interesting to consider carefully the arguments of the Iconodules. As we examine them, did their dogmatic theology truly triumph over Iconocolasm? Undoubtedly, the Iconodules won a victory at the political level. Historical circumstances favored them with the Empresses Irina and later Theodora. Yet the question remains: did the supporters of icon veneration truly achieve a theological victory solely through their arguments? Did the Iconodules successfully validate icon veneration based on God’s eternal and holy will? The next section will consider these questions.

Events after the Council

Firstly, it is critical to note that out of the 348 bishops attending the Second Council of Nicea in the year 754, 307 bishops¹⁸⁷ voted in favor of the dogmas of icon veneration. This majority bound the opposition to submit to icon veneration in their churches. Regardless, the political conditions were such that the Iconodules held power in the Byzantine Empire. Thus, victory belonged to them. The victory only lasted for the next 25 years.

After the death of Empress Irina in the year 802 and then her successors Nikephoros in 811 and Michael Rangabe in 813, Leo V the Armenian came to the throne. Against the wishes of Patriarch Nikephoros,¹⁸⁸ he sought once again to remove icons from the public life of the church. Leo sacked Nikephoros in 815 and appointed Theodotos Kassiteras who submitted to the emperor’s wishes. That same year, he convened a new church council, which once again condemned icon veneration and reversed the decisions of the Council of 754.

The successor to Leo the Armenian, Michael II (820-829) was a little more lenient and allowed private veneration of the icons. His son Theophilus II (829-842) opted for a tougher course and reintroduced penalties for icon veneration.

However, the scenario that occurred 50 years ago would repeat itself again. After the death of Theophilus II, his wife Theodora (842-856), instead of his young son Theophilus III, ascended the throne. She put an end to the government’s fight against icons and restored full freedom to venerate them. She quickly dismissed John VII

¹⁸⁶ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 167.

¹⁸⁷ See: *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁸⁸ Patriarch Nikephoros the Confessor, an Iconodule, following his predecessor Tarasius from the time of the Empress Irina, was selected as Patriarch of Constantinople in a "noncanonical" manner. He came from the ranks of the laity and not the clergy. So then we have a situation that a patriarchs, who was a representative and defender of the icons, was in fact chosen contrary to the edict of previous Ecumenical Councils. (See: E. Popovic, *General Church History*, 773.)

Lekanomantis, an opponent of icons, as Patriarch of Constantinople. She replaced him with the Iconodule Methodius. Many of the bishops in the capital opposed icons, and they also were replaced with men who supported icons. Soon after in 842, a new Council convened in Constantinople and ratified once again the decisions of the Second Nicene Council of 787. Victory was declared over the Iconoclasts once and for all. The commemoration of this is Council is celebrated in Orthodoxy as “the Sunday of Orthodoxy” during the first week of Lent.

It is even more interesting to note that the “more remote parts” of the Christian Church did not immediately accept the decisions of the Second Nicene Council of 787. Parts of the Church in the West under the leadership of Pope Adrian reacted quite negatively. Here is the reaction to the Council’s decisions that occurred in Franconia:

“The conclusions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in fact were transmitted in an errant translation to Pope Adrian I in the Frankish state. Charlemagne had not seen them, but he was offended, as the Ecumenical Council was held without his consent, **nor the consent of his bishops and theologians. They viewed icons only as long as they were a means of instruction and decorations rather than objects of veneration.** In 790, Charlemagne compiled under his own name a manuscript known as the *Quattuor libri Carolini*, or the four books of Charlemagne. These books directed that icons should not be removed, but neither should they be venerated. Only the cross itself, holy vessels, the Gospel, and relics deserved veneration. **The Frankish episcopate at the Synod of Frankfurt in 794 argued against the conclusions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council** by opposing iconoclasm, but also opposing icon veneration... Pope Adrian I tried, however, to dissuade the Franks from their views. Even so, their opposition continued into the first half of the 9th Century. During the reign of the pious Louis (814-840), **the Council of Paris in 825 once again rejected icon veneration.**”¹⁸⁹

To sum it all up, icon veneration in the traditional Christianity of the East and West was formally established in councils during the VIII and IX centuries. The dogmas of icon veneration continued to develop in new and interesting ways. The next section of this chapter will introduce arguments in favor of icons used by Theodore the Studite and Nikephoros the Confessor. We will see their failure to overcome the theological views of the Iconoclasts, as well as some new teachings invented centuries after the Seventh Ecumenical Council. It will become clear that even Eastern Orthodox teaching on icons, which in itself is paradoxical, contains contradictory ideas advocated by the defenders of icons from the time before and after the Council.

¹⁸⁹ E. Popovic, *General Church History*, 770-1. Author’s emphasis.

The Unsuccessful Effort to Defend the Doctrine of Icons during the Turbulence of the VIII and IX Centuries

Earlier we read the statements of some Orthodox theologians who respected the high level of theological thought among the Iconoclasts during the time of the Seventh Ecumenical Council – even to the extent that the Iconodules admitted their lack of success in debating the Iconoclasts. The main objection of the Iconoclasts that pertained to pictures of Christ consisted of the impossibility of using material elements to portray His immaterial divinity. Simply put, physical representations of Christ on icons (pictures) in the form of a person would appeal much more naturally to people who did not believe in His divinity. In other words, such people only considered Christ to be an ordinary human being. However, the learned bishops – Iconoclasts – considered the opposite case of someone who believes in the divinity of Christ. Such a person undoubtedly would never even dare to attempt to portray Christ’s Incarnation (divinity and humanity) in a physical form visible to the human eye. Here is the essential argument of the Iconoclasts – to which even the most clever theologians in favor of icons have been unable to refute even after decades of thinking:

“The basic argument of the Iconoclasts, which presents an aporia [impasse] to icon veneration, can be presented in the following schematic:

- (A) The theological argument: the inability to portray divinity and thus His indescribability and invisibility. “No one has ever seen God.” (John 1:18) According to His Divinity, Christ does not have an image – the great premise, e.g. major premise.
- (B) The Christological argument: according to the inseparability and unity of the natures of Christ (the Chalcedonian dogma), depictions of His flesh in no way can appear together with depictions of His Deity, thus such depictions are not icons of Christ – the lesser premise, e.g. minor premise.

Conclusion: Icons of Christ contain a triple theological – Trinitarian – Christological heresy (the depiction of the indescribable God, the division of the Holy Trinity, and the denial of the Chalcedonian dogma).”¹⁹⁰

Eastern Orthodox author Sergey Bulgakov thoroughly examines the issue and admits that the arguments of the Iconodules were very weak. In fact, he believes they actually support the claims of the Iconoclasts. On the other hand, some apologists like John of Damascus fell into the trap of their own theological reflection and eventually came to the conclusion that they could not justify their support for icons.

But first things first. Let us read some more statements from Bulgakov, the famous Orthodox seminarian of the first half of the twentieth century. These statements will illuminate the compelling arguments of the Iconoclasts:

¹⁹⁰ S. Bulgakov, *Icons and Iconography*, 16-7.

“Those arguing in favor of icon veneration actually took another path: they wanted to overcome the aporia [impasse], so to speak, not from the outside, but from the inside, by accepting the major premise as inarguable, but they tried to shoot down the minor premise. Let us examine how they managed.

First of all, with regard to the Seventh Ecumenical Council, where the objections to the theses of the Iconoclasts were considered, as read by the deacon Epiphanius, though they belonged to the spiritual leader of the Council, the Patriarch Tarasius, **it must be said that in general they were a failure...** So it is not surprising that after the Seventh Ecumenical Council, where the theological objections to icon veneration were argued against by St. John of Damascus, **that these same objections of the Iconoclasts remained and were never truly put to rest.** So what arguments do we find in later defenders of icon veneration, such as the Blessed Theodore the Studite and the holy Patriarch Nicephoros?...

Let us start with the Blessed Theodore the Studite (759-826), a major advocate of icon veneration. He wrote three rebuttals against the Iconoclasts, seven chapters against them, a series of letters with dogmatic content, and others. What kind of response do we find against the Iconoclasts’ main argument, which appeals to the indescribability of the Divine Essence and the inseparability of Christ’s divine nature from his human nature? **It amazes me that the Blessed Theodore not only does not refute this argument, but he actually acknowledges both of its premises...**

If we compare the theology of the Blessed Theodore the Studite with that of the opponents of icons, then **we will be left essentially in the same dogmatic position as the Iconoclasts...** Despite being a great champion of icons and an advocate for icon veneration, the Blessed Theodore gave for icons his life and exploits of faith, **but he did not deliver convincing arguments to refute the Iconoclasts.** Thus, the argument of the Iconoclasts remained unrefuted...

We will not find any new arguments against the Iconoclasts with the other great champion of the icons after the Seventh Ecumenical Council, specifically, the holy patriarch Nicephoros. In general, he did not add anything new to the dispute. He also conceded the indescribability of Divinity in the ability to depict human nature... Generally, this issue left him in the same position as the Blessed Theodore the Studite.”¹⁹¹

The citations above inform us that Theodore the Studite and the Patriarch Nicephoros, as well as other less important defenders of the icons, affirmed the views of the Iconoclast bishops, who claimed that Christ’s divinity could not be depicted on icons, only His humanity. However, half a century earlier, John of Damascus in his apology insisted on something which, apparently, his future colleagues never remembered nor confessed to.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 17-23. Author’s emphasis.

In fact, John of Damascus claimed that the "body of God is God" ¹⁹² in trying to justify the creation of images and prostrating oneself before the icon of Jesus Christ - which presented only his human form. On the other hand, the Damascene is trying to rationalize icon veneration with the pretense that we as "weak and foolish" people need images before whom we can bow down – for the reason that we cannot comprehend nor fully realize the depth of an unknowable divine being. After stating John the Damascene's argument, Bulgakov admits that his argument has many problems. Indeed, John's arguments actually point more in favor of the Iconoclasts, not the Iconodules. Bulgakov concludes his summary of the arguments posed in favor of icons before and after the Seventh Ecumenical Council. He reluctantly declares:

"We arrive at the general conclusion that the defenders of icons did not achieve theological victory over their opponents." ¹⁹³

However, if what Bulgakov says is true that the theological arguments for icon veneration were so weak, then how has icon veneration endured to this day? What are the reasons, except the contemporary Byzantine politics at the time, that icon veneration remains adopted in both traditional Eastern and Western Christianity?

The Distortion of the Holy Scriptures and the Subsistence to Church Tradition and Pagan Philosophy as the Cornerstone for Iconography and Icon Veneration

To place context on the other arguments used in favor of icon veneration at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, we will first learn about the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the biblical prohibition against constructing religious images and their veneration. Although we have already dealt with these issues earlier in the chapter on icons, it is important to reemphasize the importance of these issues. After this reexamination, we will attempt to understand the subtle arguments used by Eastern Orthodox teachers in differentiating veneration from worship of icons.

The Distortion of Holy Scripture

The Scriptures of the Old Testament are very clear in their prohibition of depicting religious figures for the purpose of veneration and worship:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." ¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 25. Author's emphasis.

¹⁹⁴ Exodus 20:4-6. Author's emphasis.

*“Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.’ Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, **but saw no form; you only heard a voice...** Take careful heed to yourselves, **for you saw no form** when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, **lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female...**”¹⁹⁵*

God’s commands to Moses and His people reveal His clear prohibition on depicting God in any visible manner, as well as the visual representation of other heavenly beings (angels) or people or the earth. That is to say that the Lord made a general prohibition on any image related to idolatry - the adoration of material objects, which at that time was widespread among the pagans. Thus, God’s commandments are related primarily to the prohibition of visible images (in any form or shape) that attempt to portray the invisible God, the Creator.

However, theologians in favor of icon veneration during the Seventh Ecumenical Council, as well as modern Orthodox theologians, recognizing themselves as lawbreakers, declared these commandments to be temporary. Yet, God here strictly commands them to be observed by members of all future generations. Here is one example of an Eastern Orthodox theologian attempting to ignore the clear teaching of the Bible:

*“Similarly, with regard to the Old Testament prohibition on inventing images, this overlooks **the fact that this prohibition**, like many others in the Old Testament, **had a temporary meaning**, which applied only to the Jewish people in order to prevent them from worshiping false gods and idols. However, **they do not apply to Christians who are freed from idolatry by the redemption of Christ**. Moreover, the icon as a visible image of the presence of God has a purely formal role in the Old Testament, such as in the making of the Ark of the Covenant when God commanded Moses to paint cherubim on it. (See Exodus 25:10; Deuteronomy 10:1-5; Leviticus 10:34.)”¹⁹⁶*

Using this “interpretation” to overcome the Old Testament prohibitions, the fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (the Iconodules) legalized the use of holy icons and

¹⁹⁵ Deuteronomy 4:9-12, 15-6. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁹⁶ Bozhidar Mijac, *Icons the Holy Images*, 68-9. Author’s emphasis.

commanded their veneration – by calling prostration before them "respectable veneration" (proskunesis), not "adoration" (latreia) - which belongs to God alone.¹⁹⁷

So let us dwell for a moment on the distinction between the terms "proskunesis" and "latreia". Where in the Scriptures do we find anything about this "respectable veneration" before the icons of God and Christ and the Virgin Mary and the saints? Naturally, the answer is simple - nowhere! This is certainly the reason that during biblical times (the Old Testament and during the writing of the New Testament), we find no examples of icons nor people venerating them. But what about biblical figures in the New Testament like Christ, the apostles and other eminent servants of God? Did they allow people to pray for them during their earthly ministry? Does the New Testament describe even one case of "respectable veneration" before angelic beings that is accepted and blessed?

Since we already know that Orthodox believers communicate respect (proskunesis) before the icons of the apostles, saints and angels (St. Michael and others), we should seek the confirmation of the Holy Scriptures for such practice. Indeed! We find at least two places in the New Testament of cases when people bow before holy men and angels - moments when a person in expressing such veneration was fully aware that he venerates creatures rather than God. In a real sense, this is the meaning of "proskunesis" or bowing in respect before the holy servants of God, not "latreia" – bowing down to the one and true God. Allow God's Word to speak for Him about how He thinks about "proskunesis" before His servants:

*“While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.’ Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, ‘Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?’ And they said, ‘Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.’ Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. **As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I myself am also a man.’**”¹⁹⁸*

*“And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunders, saying, ‘Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!’... Then he said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, ‘These are the true sayings of God.’ **And I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, ‘See that you do not do that! I***

¹⁹⁷ See Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 5-6.

¹⁹⁸ Acts 10:19-26. Author's emphasis.

am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”¹⁹⁹

“Then he said to me, ‘These words are faithful and true.’ And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent **His angel** to show His servants the things which must shortly take place. ‘Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.’ **Now I, John**, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, **I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel** who showed me these things. Then he said to me, ‘**See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.**’”²⁰⁰

As the Bible passages showed us, the Apostle Peter and the heavenly angels made it clear to their “venerators” the only One Who is worthy of veneration. These passages do not use the word “latreia”, but veneration (“proskunesis” in Greek). The captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man, was fully aware that Simon Peter was a plain human being. However, perceiving Peter to be especially blessed and holy, Cornelius welcomed him as a distinguished and noble saint. Yet, Peter’s answer was more than clear.

The same answer was given not once but twice to John the Apostle. When he was filled with great joy, he fell at the feet of the angel to venerate him. John was fully aware that he was an angel – not God. John stated these words: “**Now I, John**, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, **I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel** who showed me these things.” So John knew that he was an angel and in no way intended to show the angel “latreia”, but only to bow in veneration before him (“proskunesis”). However, the holy people of God and the angels affirmed that as created beings (even if they have a special ministry before God), they do not deserve veneration (proskunesis) from other servants of the Lord. What Peter and the angel affirmed is entirely consistent with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ who said:

“*Worship the Lord, your God, and serve Him Alone!*”²⁰¹

Now we understand the position of Holy Scriptures on the issue of veneration, particularly that neither the holy apostles during their lives nor the heavenly angels accepted veneration. Thus, the Eastern Orthodox practice of “holy veneration” to icons of these same figures in their religious art – icons – appears even more absurd. After all, since the early Church, true Christians know and obey the Lord’s teachings that “*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.*”²⁰² The first century Church utterly rejected the possibility of iconography and icon veneration.

¹⁹⁹ Revelation 19:6, 9-10. Author’s emphasis.

²⁰⁰ Revelation 22:6-9. Author’s emphasis.

²⁰¹ Matthew 4:10; also see Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20.

²⁰² John 4:24.

Even Eastern Orthodox authors admit the fact that icons were foreign to the early Church.²⁰³

The Statement of Church Tradition

Since the debate against the Iconoclasts did not result in a theological victory, the fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, whom are still believed to the modern day, appealed to church tradition and various miraculous signs alleged to show the “God inspiration” of their practices. Specifically, during the proceedings of this Council in Nicea, Pope Adrian sent letters to the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople. An Eastern Orthodox author comments on the contents and outcome of this letter:

“These letters unveiled a curtain before us **from the deepest of apostolic antiquity** and explained how the holy Church at that time viewed icons. After reading both these letters, the papal representatives wanted to know whether the patriarchs and all the members of the Council agreed with them. Tarasius said that he accepted everything the Pope had written.

‘It follows,’ he said, ‘that to contradict him (the Pope) would be illogical. And we, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, conclusions, and proofs, **searching for truth and knowing that it is based on the teachings of the Fathers**, firm and unwavering, **according to the ancient tradition of the holy fathers**, confess and will confess to the life-portraying icons, bowing before them with a fiery love, for they represent the Lord God and the incorruptible Ruler, our Holy Mother of God, the holy apostles and all the saints, but we give worship and faith to the one and only true God.’

‘Thus the Holy Synod teaches this’ – came the answer in these words from the members of the Council.”²⁰⁴

The previous chapter in our book on “Veneration of the Holy Icons” gave historical proof that the allusion to “deepest apostolic antiquity” for the use of icons would have come no earlier than the IV century. That is to say that it could not be dated anywhere near the apostolic era of the Church in the first two centuries AD.

Yet, this excerpt suggests that the Iconodules from the 8th Century alleged that their veneration of icons came from their belief that they learned it from the holy apostles themselves. In spite of their allegations, the New Testament Scriptures written by the holy apostles contain no such practice of icon veneration. Furthermore, icon veneration is entirely inconsistent with the spirit and letter of God’s Word, as shown previously.

But this was not the end of the case for icon veneration at the Seventh Ecumenical Council carried out by the assembled Iconodules. They considered the

²⁰³ See: S. Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, 10 and following in the chapter “Veneration of the Holy Icons”.

²⁰⁴ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 162-3. Author’s emphasis.

alleged miracles of the holy relics and sacred icons. In the absence of persuasive and biblical theological arguments, these “miraculous” factors have brought extra weight to the views of the Iconodules:

“At the beginning of the next session of the Council, the patriarch Tarasius decided to examine all places in Holy Scripture, in the acts of the Holy Fathers, and **the Lives of the Saints**, in order to determine **the basis for dogma on icon veneration**. Among the last sources, there were **many tales of miracles** that emerged from the holy icons and relics. Here are some of them:

In the chronicle of the martyrdom of St. Anastasius of Persia (d. 628), it is said that during the transfer of his relics to Caesarea of Palestine, people from all sides came to see them. One woman named Areta fell into doubt and said:

‘Why should I bow down to some relics from Persia?’

After several days, the holy martyr appeared to Areta in a dream and asked:

‘Do you suffer from pain in the thighs?’

Areta did not come to him and felt healthy. Suddenly, she fell ill. She suffered in her illness. She thought about it for four days. On the morning of the fifth day, the holy martyr told her:

‘Go to Tetrabil. Pray to the holy Anastasius and you will be healthy.’

When they brought her to the designated place and she saw the icon of the holy martyr, she loudly cried out:

‘He is the one whom I saw in my dream!’

She fell to the floor and cried for a long time with tears of repentance. She was healed.

After the Council read the story about this miracle, the papal envoys declared that the icon of St. Anastasius was held in a monastery in Rome. The bishop John of Tavromen added that he knew a woman from Sicily who came to Rome and was healed by the icon of the holy martyr.

Then Peter, the bishop of Nicomedia, announced that a miracle happened with the icon of the Lord in Beirut, which came from Evagrius about the story of the Shroud of the Savior Not Made by Human Hands in Edessa. This was the story:

Once, Edessa was besieged by Chosroes, king of Persia. They raised a huge tower from which the soldiers shot arrows over the walls of the city residents.

The Edessans planned to dig a tunnel and set fire to the siege works from below the ground. But the fire was extinguished due to a lack of air. Then they took the Shroud not made by human hands, brought it into the tunnel, doused it with water, and sprinkled the wood. The wood burst into fire. The fire went to the top of the siege tower and destroyed all the siege works of Chosroes.

When they read these reports, the reader of the great Constantinople church proclaimed:

‘I, an unworthy servant, when I went to Syria with the imperial delegation, I was myself in Edessa and saw the image Not Made by Human Hands; I venerate and worship it.’

At subsequent meetings of the Council, **other similar examples from the writings of the holy fathers were read.** According to the fathers of the Council, as the Patriarch Tarasius explained, ‘We are sated with testimonies from the holy fathers.’ In the midst of the Council, they presented a highly venerated icon, before which all of the fathers present bowed and kissed it.²⁰⁵ They pronounced 22 short statements and repeated them each 3 times. These sayings condemned and anathematized all the major edicts of the Iconoclasts.”
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The passage above affirms that the holy fathers were unable to find support for icon veneration in God’s Word. Thus, they had to resort to the Lives of the Saints to find rationalization for icons. We have examined in previous chapters the dubious basis of the Lives of the Saints and will not repeat them here.

The Powerful Influence of Pagan Philosophy in the Establishment of the Doctrine of Icon Veneration

We have discussed much about the significant influence of paganism as a religious and philosophical force for icon veneration. This next passage will only summarize and confirm points made earlier in the book. Specifically, the last sentence of the dogma on icon veneration from the Seventh Ecumenical Council states:

“Those who gaze upon these icons are moved to offer incense and to burn candles in their honor, just as in ancient times, because honor given to the icon

²⁰⁵ This statement that “all the fathers present” kissed the icon demonstrates my earlier point that the so-called Seventh Ecumenical Council did not include members from both sides of the argument on icons. Only the Iconodules would have given unanimous support to bow down and kiss an icon.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

(image) transfers to its Original (prototype), and whoever venerates the icon venerates the one to whom the icon portrays.”²⁰⁷

The previous chapter on “Veneration of the Holy Icons” cited Ernst Benz who derives the origin of icon veneration from the Neoplatonic view of images. Excerpts from Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic showed the relation of burning incense and candles before the icons to the identical practice of ancient pagans to the images of their deities.

The end of that chapter considered the issue of how icon veneration flourished. Once again, we defended the view of evangelical Christians well-supported by Biblical evidence that icon veneration in Eastern Orthodoxy goes against God’s Word. Even Orthodox teachers such as Russian Georgi Florovski admit to this fact. They admit that the centuries of icon veneration in the Eastern (and Western) Churches have been based not on the Word of God, but rather on totally different bases. Specifically, they rest on the bases of the Neoplatonist Plotinus, under whose influence the theology of St. Augustine developed. Florovski explains that his teaching later became the basis for icon veneration:

“Plotinus himself put forth the following analogy of two men living in the same house. One curses the builder and his work because the house is built of heartless stone and wood. The other praises the wisdom of the architect as the building is so skillfully designed. For Plotinus, this world is not evil. Rather it is the ‘image’ or reflection of the heavenly world, perhaps the best of all images. Nevertheless, one must strive toward that which is behind all the pictures. **He must go to the archetype of the image**, from a lower to a higher world. This means that **Plotinus magnified the image as the archetype, not just a copy.**”²⁰⁸

Right near this text, this distinguished Orthodox theologian makes the following point:

“**Usually, everyone agrees that the theological defense of the holy icons, especially those of St. Theodore and St. John of Damascus before him, are based on Neoplatonist assumptions.** The whole concept of ‘archetype’ and ‘image’ (which indicates a lower level) was Platonic. Generally speaking, this view is correct... At this point, the teachings of the Iconodules do not concern us. We admit that they were Platonists or at least Proplatonists... **The Iconodules were most certainly Platonists.**”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁰⁸ G. Florovski, *Christianity and Culture*, 100. Author’s emphasis.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 99, 101. Author’s emphasis.

General Conclusion

This chapter gave a modest review of the history of traditional Christianity in the first nine centuries of its existence. From it we learned that the Church had passed through turbulent times in the first three centuries during the reign of the pagan Roman emperors. Also, we saw the development and definition of Christian theology during later times and became acquainted with many church teachers and saints. We also realized that many of the saints were not so “saintly” compared to the impressions given by the size of the halos on their icons. We examined the ways in which the Byzantine rulers interfered with theological matters of which they understood little and thus ended up significantly influencing the adoption of certain decisions of councils which were later declared ecumenical.

Some doctrines, such as the beliefs about the Blessed Virgin and icon veneration, which are considered part of the sacred tradition of the Church, demonstrated that these councils were not defined solely by positive teaching based on the Bible. (One example was the teaching on Christ’s divinity at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325.) In many cases, teachings did not line up with the original doctrines of Christ and the Apostles. Just as the Lord Jesus foretold, as more time passed since His death and ascension, Christianity adopted more teachings from extrabiblical sources.

However, the Orthodox Church believes that the decisions of church councils (later dubbed Ecumenical) are God-honoring and proper. They consider the Councils to apply to the religious life and teaching of believers. This belief in the inerrancy of the decisions of all Ecumenical Councils is based upon the dogma of the infallibility of the Orthodox Church and its inability of the bishops of these Councils to make wrong decisions contrary to God’s will. This is what Archbishop Averkije says about the infallibility of the Orthodox Church:

“The Seven Ecumenical Councils, after the Gospel of Christ, are the foundation and confirmation of our Orthodox-Christian Faith, **for our faith not only itself is Apostolic**, that which was preached by the Holy Apostles, the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, **but our faith is also Patristic, for its meaning was revealed to us by the Holy Fathers** as legitimate and blessed successors to the Holy Apostles... Moreover, in our Orthodox Church, we do not have any atheistic doctrine of personal infallibility, **because infallibility belongs only to the entire ecumenical Orthodox Church**... which in its external expression comprised the Ecumenical Councils which boldly repeated the words of the apostolic pronouncements of the decisions of the First Apostolic Council in Jerusalem in the year 51, the prototype for all future Councils that please the Holy Spirit and us (Acts 15:28).

Thus, we should bear in mind that **not every Council is infallible**, but only those expressed and confirmed by the conscience of the Ecumenical Church and which the entire Church accepts as ecumenical.”²¹⁰

However, this idea of the "conditional infallibility" of an Orthodox Council spoken of by the Archbishop needs clarification. In fact, throughout history, there have been numerous smaller, so-called “local” councils. The Orthodox believe some of these councils rendered decisions partially or totally wrong.²¹¹

They respect only the smaller councils whose decisions agree with those confirmed by the Ecumenical Councils. Of course, it is very difficult to understand how it is possible that some local councils came to the wrong conclusions (i.e., those that are against the teachings of the holy fathers) though their participants were exclusively Orthodox bishops. How could these men – super spiritual, blessed, apostolic successors that should guarantee the infallibility of transferring only the true and apostolic teachings – go wrong?? Does not apostolic succession exist in Orthodoxy, and thus guarantee the infallibility of the teaching of an Orthodox bishop?²¹²

But, nevertheless, how did the Orthodox come to learn about the infallibility of the church? Earlier, we learned that past Councils with many attendees had teachings that were still rejected in part or in full! Examples included the Council of Ephesus in 449, or councils held by the Iconoclasts in the VIII and IX century. The reason that these councils are not accepted as Ecumenical is very simple. Given that the victors “write history”, certain religious currents thanks to personal sympathies or the support of Byzantine rulers became dominant in the empire, just as Councils revoked earlier decisions and declared opposing groups as "robbers" or heretical. Such examples in the history of the Orthodox Church abound, especially in recent times between opposing Synods and schismatic councils in the Orthodox Churches.²¹³

²¹⁰ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, text of the Archbishop Averkije: “The Meaning of the Ecumenical Councils”, 169. Author’s emphasis.

²¹¹ One example concerns the local council in Moscow in 1666. Nearly 100 Orthodox bishops attended. This gathering condemned icons of God the Father in spite of their existence for centuries in the Eastern Church. Here is what Orthodox priest Bozhidar Mijac writes: “The relationship of other iconographic categories beyond Christ – angels, God the Father, the Holy Spirit – comprised a special case, different but not less important. In the new theology, there has been resistance to the depiction of these images. Even one local church council in Moscow in 1666 **decided to ban icons of God the Father**. They argued that such icons were based on Neoplatonism, which by their reasoning, is unfathomable. **We (as the true church, especially church practice) cannot agree with such argumentation...**” *Icons Holy Images*, 96-7. Author’s emphasis.

²¹² The Rev. Dr. Dimitrius Staniloje says this about this subject: “*Apostolic succession of the episcopate is guaranteed by the thorough preservation of apostolic teaching*, thus not only in its particular form in the New Testament, but also in its explicit form called *Sacred Tradition*. Thus apostolic succession is preserved both in its applied and spoken version.” *Orthodox Dogma*, vol. III, 105. Author’s emphasis.

²¹³ For example, from July 21 to August 3, 1983, there was a Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile in Mansonville, Canada. It condemned ecumenism and modernism of other Orthodox churches. Particular emphasis was placed on the official Russian Orthodox Church (ROC - Moscow Patriarchate), which for decades was considered by the Russian Church in Exile (ROCOR) to be removed of grace and possession of apostolic succession that was discontinued after the October Revolution. Patriarch Tikhon of the ROCOR led the Council. However, after the schism occurred in the ranks of the

So when they exclude councils with which they were displeased and considered their participants as heretics (including many Eastern patriarchs in Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem), then it is quite logical for Eastern Orthodoxy to declare itself infallible in its religious tradition.

On the other hand, we should note the fact that the Ecumenical Councils not only never convened the total number of bishops from the known Christian world, but in fact the number of bishops was still far less than half. During our studies in this chapter, we noted that all the Ecumenical Councils were held in the East, and that hundreds of Western bishops almost never attended them.

On the other hand, there were not only hundreds of bishops in the East who never participated in the Ecumenical Councils, but some branches of the church were completely uninformed about the convocation of such important Councils.²¹⁴ For example, Eusebius Popovic says that in the years after the Council of Chalcedon, 1600 bishops were in favor while 500 remained opposed – even though only 630 bishops attended the actual Council. In fact, the number of 630 is really great when it comes to the Ecumenical Council, because at some of them significantly fewer numbers were present. For example, the Councils of Constantinople (the so-called Second, Fifth, and Sixth Ecumenical Councils): in the year 381, there were barely 150 bishops, in 533, there were only 160, and in 680, there was a total of 170, which would mean that the total number of bishops that gathered regularly was less than 10%. Almost regularly before convening a Council, the Byzantine Emperor would perform a massive purge of those bishops not to his liking.

The actual history and circumstances of the Seven Ecumenical Councils bear witness that this period was filled with events that do not reflect strong piety and holiness of its participants. It is indisputable, however, that some of the decisions taken at these gatherings of the Bible were truly reasonable and justified. However, many of them were products of later development of so-called “Christian” thought, which in reality was substantially infiltrated by polytheistic religious systems (customs and beliefs), pagan philosophy, and other elements that have almost no point of contact with the divine revelation of Holy Scripture.

For this reason, we must conclude that the decisions of church council do not carry the authority of infallibility and perfection. The only authority that is a measure of consistency and is pleasing to God remains the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in his 66 books as inspired by the Holy Spirit. There is no other authority.

ROCOR, its new chief, Metropolitan Lavrov, declared the Council of 1983 as a “Robber Synod”. Together with other Bishops, Lavrov began steps toward unification with the Moscow Patriarchate. This unification of the ROCOR and the RPC finally occurred in 2007. Part of the ROCOR remained aloof from the newly established Holy Synod because they consider the Moscow Patriarchate to be a false Church which united with the apostates and accursed ecumenists of the ROCOR headed by Metropolitan Lavrov. See: *Kiss of Judas*, 193-200.

²¹⁴ One good example is the bishops of Ermen who were not even invited to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. They obeyed its decisions only after a slow recognition of its authority. Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 586.

Scripture alone is proven to be the reliable and uncontroversial source of infallible divine message of salvation. No other source possesses such qualities, and certainly not some earthly spiritual authority. Thus, we can evaluate the Ecumenical Councils on the basis of their agreement with God's Word. Where they concur with God's Word, they are valid. Where they diverge from God's Word, we must reject them. The Lord Himself affirms:

“The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.” ²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Isaiah 40:8.