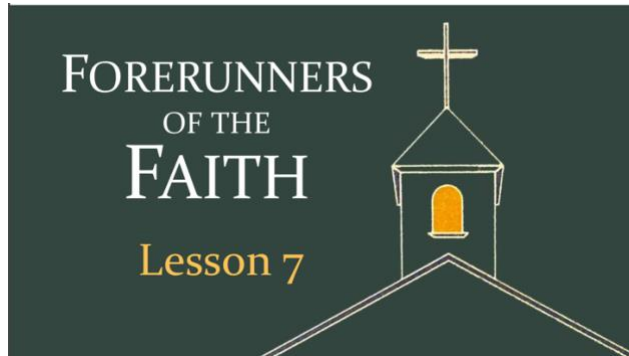


Forerunners of the Faith



Controversies and Councils

Key Passage

2 John 9

“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. The one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.”

Contending for the Truth

SETTING THE STAGE				
1 st Century	2 nd Century	3 rd Century	4 th Century	5 th Century
Apostolic Era	101–200	201–300	301–400	401–500
Pentecost Peter Paul John	Apostolic Fathers Justin Martyr Irenaeus	Tertullian Origen	Council of Nicaea (325) Athanasius	Chrysostom Augustine Fall of Rome
Ante-Nicene Period (1–3 Centuries)			Nicene & Post-Nicene Period (4–5 Centuries)	

- Scripture continually warns of false teachers (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:28-31; 2 Pet. 2:1; 2 John 7; Jude 4)
- As false teachers have arisen throughout history, true believers have defended the truth in the face of such attacks.
- Starting with Constantine in the fourth century, Christian leaders in the Roman Empire were able to meet publicly to discuss matters of doctrine by organizing _____ and _____.
- The seven most important councils are called the “Seven _____ Councils.”

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SEVEN MAJOR COUNCILS				
4 th Century	5 th Century	6 th Century	7 th Century	8 th Century
325 Nicaea	431 Ephesus	553 Constantinople II	680–681 Constantinople III	787 Nicaea II
381 Constantinople	451 Chalcedon			

Each council primarily focused on the person of Christ.

- They responded to doctrinal controversies that threatened the unity of empire.
- They were called by emperors, who summoned the bishops from across the Roman Empire to meet together to resolve specific conflicts.
- They involved representatives from both the Eastern and Western halves of Roman Christendom.
- Importantly, for believers today, these historic councils do not establish truth or determine sound doctrine.
- But they give us insight into how Christian leaders in the early church marshalled biblical truth to refute and reject false teaching.

The Seven Ecumenical Councils

- **Nicaea (325)**
- Key Issue: _____
- Nearly 320 bishops gathered in Nicaea, at the invitation of Emperor Constantine.
- The Council lasted more than _____ days.
- In addition to addressing the doctrinal issue of Christ's deity, the Council also addressed the date for celebrating _____.

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- **The First Council of Constantinople (381)**
- Key Issues: _____

- Even though it was denounced at the Council of Nicaea, Arianism continued to be a popular view in the Roman Empire.
- Arianism not only rejected the deity of the Son of God, but also denied the deity of the Holy Spirit.
- Another errant viewpoint was introduced by Apollinarus of Laodicea. He denied the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- Faithful Christian leaders found themselves defending both the true deity and the true humanity of the Lord Jesus.
- The issues motivated Emperor Theodosius I (d. 395) to convene a council in Constantinople in 381. The council lasted 3 months.
- Positions:
 - _____ - held to the “homoiousios” view of Jesus’ nature. They contended that although the Son of God possessed a “similar nature” to God the Father, He did not possess the “same nature.” They came to this conclusion because they denied the eternity of the Son, arguing instead that He was a created being.
 - _____ - Although Apollinaris affirmed the deity of Christ, he did not accept the full humanity of Christ. Instead, he saw Jesus’ human body as the physical shell in which His divine mind dwelt. His deity was like a letter being placed inside the envelope of His humanity. Thus, Apollinaris denied that Jesus possessed a human soul.
 - _____ - The orthodox position insisted that the incarnate Christ is both truly God and truly man. Hence, He possessed both a full divine nature and a full human nature. Moreover, with regard to the Holy Spirit, the orthodox position affirmed the full deity of the Spirit of God. The Trinity consists of three co-equal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- **Results:**
 - The council affirmed the Nicene Creed.
 - Arianism and Apollinarianism were denounced as heretical positions.
 - The Council expanded the Nicene Creed to explicitly affirm the deity of the Holy Spirit

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- Expansion to the Nicene Creed:
“We believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.”
- *The phrase “and the Son” is included in brackets because it was not part of the original, Greek version of the Creed. Instead, it was added later by the western church to the Latin version of the Creed. This addition eventually led to controversy between the eastern and western halves of the Roman church.
- **The Council of Chalcedon (451)**
- The Council of Constantinople had affirmed the full deity and full humanity of Christ.
- He is truly God, being co-eternal, co-equal, and co-essential with the Father. In His incarnation, He became truly man, without ceasing to be truly God in any respect.
- But questions remained as to how the two natures related to one another in the person of Jesus Christ. This was the question addressed at the Council of Chalcedon.
- Emperor Marcian called the council. He had denounced an earlier council that met in Ephesus in 449 as being illegitimate. The Council of Chalcedon was convened to override it.
- 370 bishops attended. Leo I (bishop of Rome from 440-461) was unable to attend, but sent a letter (called his tome) to be read at the Council. The content of Leo’s Tome was approved by the Council as articulating the orthodox position.
- **The Positions:**
 - _____ - This view divided the two natures of Christ, putting a wall of separation between them to the point that He was viewed as two persons. There is debate as to whether Nestorius (the archbishop of Constantinople from 428-431) actually held the view associated with his name. In summary, Nestorianism asserted that Christ possessed two natures and was therefore two persons.
 - _____ - In response to Nestorianism, Eutyches emphasized that Jesus Christ was a single person with a single divine nature. The human nature was either eclipsed by the divine nature, or mixed together with the divine resulting in a hybrid nature. In summary, Eutychianism argued that Christ was only one person and therefore possessed only one nature.
 - _____ - Leo articulated a position that avoided the errors of both Nestorianism and Eutychianism. He affirmed that Christ, in His incarnation, possesses two natures (divine and human). If Jesus is both truly God and truly man, the integrity of each nature must be preserved. Yet, at the same time, Leo also affirmed that Christ is a single person. In becoming a man, Jesus did not become multiple persons. In summary, Leo's position asserted that Christ is a single person who possesses two natures.

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- **The Result:**
- Leo's position was affirmed by the Council as being biblical and the historic position of the church.
- The writings of Eutyches and his followers were condemned.
- The Council produced a creed to articulate the orthodox position:
 - **Chalcedonian Creed:**
 - "Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity; 'like us in all things but sin' He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the virgin Mary, the bearer of God.
We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation. The distinction between natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person and one hypostasis (or substance)."
- The reference to Mary as the "bearer of God" was a title affirmed by the Council of Ephesus in 431.
- The line that says that Jesus possessed "two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation" is a response to both Eutychianism and Nestorianism.
- In contrast to Eutychianism, the Creed explains that Christ possess two natures without confusion or change.
- Against Nestorianism, Chalcedon further teaches that Christ possesses true deity and true humanity without division or separation.
- These four fences of orthodoxy ("without confusion, change, division, or separation") provide guardrails for articulating the mystery of Christ's incarnation without falling into heretical error.

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The Other Four Ecumenical Councils

- _____ (431)
- At this council, the church sought to protect the doctrine of Christ's deity, even in His incarnation.
- Accordingly, they affirmed that a proper title for Mary is the term **theotokos**, meaning "bearer of God."
- The purpose behind this title was not to elevate Mary but to safeguard the deity of Christ.
- In the Incarnation, God the Son took on flesh and became human.
- When Mary gave birth to Jesus, the baby in the manger was God incarnate.

- _____ (553)
- In the East, even after the Council of Chalcedon, there remained a significant number of people who rejected the hypostatic union, insisting instead that Christ possessed a single nature.
- The advocates of this view were called "monophysites" (mono meaning "one" and physis meaning "nature"). Emperor Justinian convened a council to address the controversy over this issue.
- The council affirmed the Council of Chalcedon, but also condemned the writings of three earlier theologians who had been associated with Nestorius.
- By condemning these earlier theologians, Justinian hoped to improve relations with the monophysites.

- _____ (680)
- The primary question answered at this council was whether Christ possessed one will or two wills. In keeping with the church's teaching that Christ possesses two natures, the council affirmed that He likewise possesses two wills (divine and human). The council was careful to clarify that Christ's human will is always in perfect submission to and accordance with His divine will.

- _____ (787)
- In the seventh and eighth centuries, a major debate erupted in the East over the veneration of icons (or images) of Jesus and the saints.
- Some of the emperors were concerned that icons of Jesus, in particular, violated the Second Commandment (Ex. 20:4) and thus constituted idolatry.
- In 754, a council met in Hieria to condemn icons.
- But its rulings were overturned in 787 by the Second Council of Nicaea, which affirmed icons as being orthodox.
- Those who supported the use of icons argued that icons of Jesus do not violate the Second Commandment because Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

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Evaluating Councils and Creeds

- The seven councils listed above are considered "ecumenical" because they included representatives from both the eastern and western halves of the Roman church.
- As a result, they are accepted in both Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.
- Protestant groups have generally held varied opinions about which councils to accept.
- Many evangelicals, for example, would not accept the Second Council of Nicaea (787).
- That council, with its approval of the veneration of icons, is particularly troubling for evangelicals, who rightly view such practices as competing with the purity of worship that God requires.
- In learning about church councils and historic creeds, it is important to remember a simple principle: **God's Word is our authority over church history and church tradition.**
- That means that the decision of a church council is valid only insofar as it accords with what the Word of God teaches.
- Like the noble Bereans (Acts 17:11), believers ought to go to the Scriptures to evaluate the teachings and traditions of men. Paul told the Thessalonians to "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess. 5:21-22).
- We should be grateful for historic councils that affirm clear biblical truths, like the deity of Christ. But we should also remember that the authority for what we believe is not found in the councils of church history, but in the truth of God's Word.

ANSWERS:

1. synods 2. councils 3. "ecumenical" 4. The deity of Christ 5. 40
6. Resurrection Sunday (Easter) 7. The deity and humanity of Christ
8. The deity of the Holy Spirit 9. Arianism 10. Apollinarianism 11. Trinitarianism
12. The two natures of Christ (His deity and His Humanity) 13. Nestorianism
14. Eutychianism 15. Hypostatic Union 16. The Council of Ephesus
17. The Second Council of Constantinople 18. The Third Council of Constantinople
19. The Second Council of Nicaea