

# The Seven Ecumenical Councils in Historical Context

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Davenant Hall, Hilary Term 2022

## Description of Course

From 325 to 787, major church councils were convened by Roman emperors and attended by as many bishops as possible (usually from the eastern half of the Roman Empire) from the known inhabited world, the *oikoumene*. Seven of these were recognised as being truly representative of the universal (or at least imperial) church. Each council was convened to deal with a potentially church-splitting theological crisis, but each also dealt with various administrative matters of the church in Late Antiquity. This course will consider each council in turn, considering the series of events leading up to the council, its decrees, a major theologian who represents its dogmatic definitions, and the aftermath of each.

These seven councils and their main dogmas are:

- The First Council of Nicaea (325, called by Constantine): Jesus is fully God, consubstantial with the Father
- The First Council of Constantinople (381, called by Theodosius I): Reaffirms Nicaea and pushes the divinity of the Holy Spirit
- The Council of Ephesus (431, called by Theodosius II): Rejects the unity-splitting teachings of Nestorius, affirming the full unity of the *hypostasis* or person of Christ
- The Council of Chalcedon (451, called by Marcian): Christ exists in two natures
- The Second Council of Constantinople (553, called by Justinian): To stave off accusations of Nestorianism, the teaching of the hypostatic union is fully and formally embraced
- The Third Council of Constantinople (680-681, called by Constantine IV): As good and necessary consequences of Chalcedon, argues for Christ to have two wills and two *energeiai*.
- The Second Council of Nicaea (787, called by Constantine VI and Empress Irene): The creation and veneration of images of Christ and the saints is allowable.

## Course Format

This course will meet once a week for two hours. The first hour will be a lecture, primarily about history and the history of theology. The second hour will be a discussion about what has been covered in the lecture and assigned readings. **For-credit students are required to participate in discussion.**

## Course Outline

Week beginning...	Lecture Topic	Documents	Other Readings
January 10	Introduction: What makes a council "ecumenical?"		Tanner, N. (2004). "The Book of the Councils: Nicaea I to Vatican II." <i>Studies in Church History</i> , 38, 11-21.
January 17	The Council of Nicaea (325)	Creed, Canons, letters surrounding council; Ancient descriptions of council	Athanasius of Alexandria, <i>On the Incarnation</i> .
January 24	The First Council of Constantinople (381)	Creed, canons, ancient descriptions	Gregory of Nazianzus, the Four Theological Orations
January 31	The Council of Ephesus (431)	Dogmatic decrees, canons, selections from council acts	Cyril of Alexandria, select letters
February 7	The Council of Chalcedon (451)	Dogmatic decrees, canons, selections from acts	Leo the Great, the "Tome" ( <i>Ep.</i> 28) and <i>Ep.</i> 124, select other letters and sermons on the Nativity
February 14	From 451-553: The Rise of the "Monophysite" Movement (necessary to understand the final councils)	<i>Henotikon</i> ; Evagrius Scholasticus on Justin and Justinian	Severus of Antioch, <i>Ad Nephaliium</i> , Or. 2; Synodical Letter to Theodosius
February 21	The Second Council of Constantinople (553)	Dogmatic decrees, selections from acts; Anti-Origenist statements	Justinian, Edict on the Orthodox Faith; Leontius of Byzantium, <i>Against the Nestorians and Eutychians</i>
February 28	The Third Council of Constantinople (680/81)	Dogmatic decrees, selections from acts	Maximus the Confessor, <i>Ambiguum</i> 7, <i>Ambiguum</i> 42, <i>Ad Thalassium</i> 60, <i>Opusculum</i> 6

March 7	The Second Council of Nicaea (787)	Dogmatic decrees, canons	John of Damascus, Three Treatises on Holy Images
March 14	Councils after 787: Canon law, consolidation, schism		Selections from Gratian, <i>Decretum</i>

## Readings

NB: Most of the readings under “Documents” can be found in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2 (NPNF2), vol. 14. Other readings will have a preferred translation and, if available, a link to a public domain translation online.

Week 1: Tanner, N. (2004). “The Book of the Councils: Nicaea I to Vatican II.” *Studies in Church History*, 38, 11-21.

Week 2: Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*. Preferred: Translated by John Behr. Crestwood, NY: 2014. Online:

- Council documents available here: <https://www.fourthcentury.com/council-of-nicaea-ad-325/> [Creed and canons also in NPNF2 14, 1-60 (NB: **They are nowhere near that long; the notes are copious and can be skipped unless you’re really curious.**)]
- Ancient descriptions:
  - Socrates, *HE* 1.8-13 (NPNF2, vol 2): <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202/npnf202.ii.iv.viii.html>
  - Sozomen, *HE* 1.17-24 (NPNF2, vol 2): <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202/npnf202.iii.vi.xvii.html>
  - Theodoret, *HE* 1.6-9, 19 (NPNF2, vol 3): <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203/npnf203.iv.viii.i.vii.html>  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203/npnf203.iv.viii.i.xx.html>

Week 3: Gregory of Nazianzus, The Five Theological Orations. Preferred: *On God and Christ*. Trans. trans. Frederick Williams & Lionel Wickham. Crestwood, NY: 2002. Online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207/npnf207.iii.xiii.html>

- Creed: To be distributed by Dr Hoskin
- Canons and synodal letters: NPNF2 vol 14, pp. 170-189: <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.ix.viii.i.html>
- Ancient descriptions:
  - Socrates *HE* 5.8, 9 (NPNF2, vol 2): <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202/npnf202.ii.viii.ix.html>
  - Sozomen *HE* 7.7-11 (NPNF2, vol 2): <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202/npnf202.iii.xii.vii.html>
  - Theodoret *HE* 5.8-11 (NPNF2, vol 3): <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203/npnf203.iv.viii.v.viii.html>

Week 4: Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia on the Incarnation*:

[https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril\\_scholia\\_incarnation\\_01\\_text.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril_scholia_incarnation_01_text.htm)

Cyril, selected letters:

- First Letter to Nestorius: <http://www.voskrese.info/spl/cyr1.html>
- Second Letter to Nestorius:  
[https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/cyriofalex\\_second\\_letter\\_to\\_nestorius.htm](https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/cyriofalex_second_letter_to_nestorius.htm)
- Third Letter to Nestorius:  
<https://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/jesus/third-letter-to-nestorius>
- Letter to John of Antioch: <http://www.voskrese.info/spl/cyr4.html>

Council documents:

- Canons: NPNF2, vol 14, pp. 224-235:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.x.xvi.i.html>
- *Other council documents to be distributed by Dr Hoskin.*

Week 5: Leo the Great, *Tome* (Ep. 28): Preferred: trans. Bronwen Neil, *Leo the Great*. New York, 2009. Pp. 94-103. Online:

<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212/npnf212.ii.iv.xxviii.html>

---. Ep. 124: Preferred trans. Neil 2009, 104-112. Online:

<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212/npnf212.ii.iv.cxviii.html>

---. Select sermons on the Nativity. Sermons 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28. Preferred: trans. Jane Patricia Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway. Washington, DC, 1996. pp. 77-121.

Public domain: <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212/npnf212.ii.v.x.html>

Week 6: Severus of Antioch, *Ad Nephaliium*, Or. 2 and Synodical letter to Theodosius in Pauline Allen and C.T.R. Hayward, *Severus of Antioch*. New York: 2004, pp. 59-66 and 158-168.

- Text of the *Henotikon* in Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3.14:  
[https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/evagrius\\_3\\_book3.htm#p136](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/evagrius_3_book3.htm#p136).
- Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 4 (pp. 189-242):  
[https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/evagrius\\_4\\_book4.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/evagrius_4_book4.htm). {If the Age of Justinian interests you, there is another translation of Evagrius that Dr Hoskin will use, trans. Michael Whitby, Liverpool: 2000.}

Week 7: Justinian, Edict on the Orthodox Faith, in *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553*, trans. Richard Price. Liverpool: 2009, vol. 1: 129-159.

- Leontius of Byzantium, *Against the Nestorians and Eutychians*, in Leontius of Byzantium, *Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Brian E. Daley. Oxford, 2017. Pp. 129-265 (NB: This is English translation facing original Greek text, so it is less than 100 pages!)
- Dogmatic decree of council, NPNF2, vol 14, 306-311:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xii.vi.html>
- Anathemas against Origen, NPNF2, vol 14, 318-19:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xii.ix.html>

Week 8: Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7, *Ambiguum* 42, *Ad Thalassium* 60, *Opusculum* 6, in Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*. Crestwood, NY: 2003, pp. 45-74; 79-95; 123-129; 173-176.

- Decree against Monothelites, NPNF2, vol 14, 342-43:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xiii.viii.html>
- Definition of the Faith, NPNF2, vol 14, 344-46:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xiii.x.html>
- Canons of the Quinisext Council, NPNF2, vol 14, 358-408:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xiv.iii.i.html> {NB: The canons are not this long; as with Nicaea I, there's a lot of commentary.}

Week 9: John of Damascus, Three Treatises on Divine Images. Preferred: Andrew Louth, *Three Treatises on Divine Images*. Crestwood, NY: 2003. Online:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/49917/49917-h/49917-h.html>

- Dogmatic decree: NPNF2, vol 14, 549-51:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xvi.xii.html>
- Canons: NPNF2, vol 14, 555-570:  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.xvi.xiv.html>

Week 10: Gratian, *Decretum*, Pars Prima, DD. 15-20 (**to be distributed**)

## Assessment

**Attendance and participation:** 10%

For-credit students are required to attend the course live and to participate in discussion. Non-participation in discussion will result in a lower grade.

**Emperor Study:** 40% (2000 words)

Choose one emperor from the list below and discuss his ecclesiastical policy, drawing on ancient, primary sources as well as modern studies:

- Constantius II
- Theodosius II
- Anastasius
- Justinian I
- Heraclius
- Charlemagne

**Final Essay:** 50% (4000 words)

Choose one of the seven ecumenical councils and analyse either its dogmatic statement or its canons, considering its place in the history of church order and/or dogma, or its

ramifications or some other angle of study. Topics should be approved by Dr Hoskin by Week 8.

## Further Reading

### Primary Sources

The acts of five of the seven ecumenical councils survive, along with those of the Lateran Council of 649 and the Quinisext Council of 690/1, and all but one of these (as well as those of the Council of 869) have been translated by Richard Price with related documents and commentary:

Price, Richard, trans., with introduction and notes by Thomas Graumann. *The Council of Ephesus of 431: Documents and Proceedings*. Liverpool, 2020.

Price, Richard and Michael Gaddis. *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*. Liverpool, 2005.

Price, Richard. *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553*. Liverpool, 2009.

Price, Richard, Phil Booth, and Catherine Cubitt. *The Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*. Liverpool, 2014.

Price, Richard. *The Canons of the Quinisext Council (690/1)*. Liverpool, 2020.

Price, Richard. *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*. Liverpool, 2018.

Price, Richard, trans., with introduction and notes by Federico Montinaro. *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 869-70*. Liverpool, 2022.

Tanner, Norman P., ed. and trans. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. 2 vols. Washington, DC, 1990.

*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series 2, Volume 14: *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*. –Various publishers over the years, same book.

### General Secondary

Davis, Leo Donald. *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990.

von Hefele, Charles Joseph. *A History of the Councils of the Church from the Original Documents*. 5 vols. Trans. William R. Clark. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896. (NB: In German the author is Karl Joseph von Hefele, if you want to read the *Conciliengeschichte* in the original. There are 9 volumes in total going up to 1541.)

L'Huillier, Peter. *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils*. Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.

Tanner, Norman P. *The Councils of the Church: A Short History*. New York: Crossroad, 2001.