

Introduction

This book is about the seven ecumenical councils of the early Church and what they had to say about Jesus Christ in the context of the developing trinitarian theology of the time. The seven councils took place between 325 and 787 in the following four cities of the Christian East: Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. A council was a meeting of bishops and other Christian leaders called by the emperor in order to solve theological and practical problems in the Church and to bring religious unity to the Christian world. Although there have been many different councils in the history of Christianity it is these seven that are the most important in terms of the person of Jesus Christ. Originally they were thought of as ‘ecumenical’ (‘of the whole inhabited world’) because it was hoped that representatives from the Church everywhere would be present and because the ‘whole world’, or much of it as then known from a Roman perspective, had become Christian under the Christian emperors from the time of Constantine. In reality, these councils were largely Eastern affairs with little or no representation from the West. The emerging concept of a ‘universal church’ also played a part in the idea that they were ecumenical. In addition, it is worth noting that these seven councils are regarded by many today as an important basis for ecumenical discussion and debate.

The seven councils discussed in this book arose out of the many trinitarian and christological controversies of the first eight centuries of Christianity and produced much of the language and terminology that has been used of Christ ever since. Indeed, it was these councils that established the notions of orthodoxy and heresy that are still current. These councils are crucial, therefore, to an understanding not only of Christian history but also of Christian identity today. The concern of the seven ecumenical councils was with the relations between the three persons of the Trinity and especially with the divine and human natures in Christ. It was at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, a turning point in the series, that Jesus Christ was proclaimed as ‘truly divine and truly human’.

In the Orthodox churches of the East today the seven ecumenical councils are well known. Indeed, the Orthodox Church is often called the ‘church of the seven councils’. Other churches acknowledge different numbers of councils. In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) likened the first four councils to the four New Testament Gospels in terms

of their importance and authority and those four are still central to Western Christianity today. In fact, the statement produced at the Council of Chalcedon, the so-called ‘Chalcedonian Definition’, remains the official teaching on Christ in all the Western churches, including both the Roman Catholic Church and those churches that arose out of the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe. The Anglican Communion accepts the first four ecumenical councils as the most important. The Roman Catholic Church accepts all seven councils but also acknowledges another 14, including the more recent Second Vatican Council of 1962–5, making a total of 21 in all. For reasons that are made clear in this book, some of the Eastern churches did not and still do not acknowledge the Council of Chalcedon and only accept the first three councils, while one accepts only the first two. Wherever contemporary Christians stand in relation to the seven councils, a clear understanding of their content and significance can only help clarify what Christians believed about Christ in the past and how that might influence Christian belief today.

The story of the councils begins with the faith of the first Christians. They had come to know God in Jesus of Nazareth and sought to find the most appropriate language in which to express and articulate their new-found faith. Much of the language they used was later to become central to the deliberations and decisions of the seven councils and was to remain in use throughout Christian history. The idea of God as a Trinity developed during the period of the councils and formed the context in which questions about Jesus were asked and answered. Trinitarian theology and Christology were intertwined as the early Christians sought the most appropriate language to use in worship and reflection.

The opening chapter of this book deals with major ‘titles’ of Jesus found in the New Testament, such as Lord, Christ and Son of God. The second chapter deals with the historical, geographical, philosophical and theological backgrounds to the councils and introduces readers to some of the key theologians of the period. Chapters 3 to 8 then work chronologically through the seven councils from Nicaea I (325) to Nicaea II (787), placing each one in its historical context, addressing the key doctrinal issues it dealt with, and noting other disciplinary decisions that it made. Individual theologians whose work played a part in the controversies that led up to the councils are discussed in detail. There is no discussion of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), held in about 50 CE, as this was not counted in the series by the later Fathers of the Church and in any case did not deal with the triune nature of God or with the divinity and humanity of Christ. The final chapter addresses questions relating to the councils

today. It considers the attitudes of the mainstream and other churches to the councils and includes a brief overview of some of the ecumenical statements that have been made by some of the churches which are still divided by the theology of the councils. Finally, an outline of some developments in modern Christology is provided, showing how serious the challenges to the councils have been since the Enlightenment.

The aim of this book is to provide introductory overviews of the theological controversies that led up to the councils, of the councils themselves, and of the decisions they made. Three main theological issues are identified throughout the book and are drawn together in the final chapter: Christology, language and salvation. It is suggested that these three elements are central to the concern of all the councils and constitute an essential part of their contribution to contemporary theology. The word 'Christology' is used by Christian theologians in a number of different ways. Its primary sense is the relation between the divinity and the humanity within the person of Christ himself. It is in this sense that the word 'Christology' is used in this book. Although all Christology throughout the period of the councils had its roots in wider trinitarian theology, the main interest of this book is in how the divinity and the humanity within the person of Christ were seen to relate to each other during the period of the councils. The concern with human language is then simply with the language used of that relation. This dimension became particularly problematic in the controversy between Cyril and Nestorius in the fifth century. Salvation has also been understood by theologians in different ways. In the East, where the councils took place, the idea of humanity 'participating' in the divine life and even becoming 'divinized' has been important. In the West, salvation has been understood more in terms of 'deliverance' from sin. In this book the Eastern sense is largely in mind although there have been different senses and emphases even there. In addition to matters concerning the Trinity, Christology, language and salvation the councils addressed a number of other matters, some of which will be noted and discussed.

Many Western Christians and others have never heard of the first seven ecumenical councils of the Church, let alone understood their meaning and significance. Others see them as purely political events. Obviously there is a limit to the detail that can be included in a book of this size, especially as its scope stretches across eight centuries. Scholars hold a wide range of different views on most of the issues dealt with and often approach the basic subject matter in fundamentally different ways. They disagree about how best to think of the different theologies of the

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period, and even argue over basic historical facts because of conflicting ancient sources. No attempt is made in this book to articulate all possible views and interpretations.

In general, I have decided to characterize the basic christological controversies of the period by seeing them in terms of two traditions, associated respectively with the ancient cities of Antioch and Alexandria. This characterization provides a guiding principle which will help readers with little or no knowledge of the subject to find their way through a long and confusing period of church history and to get a grasp on some of the main issues involved; it should not be taken as a definitive categorization of all the material concerned. As will be seen, there was a great deal of diversity of Christian belief in the early centuries, stretching across a wide geographical area. Furthermore, I have used words such as 'Arian', 'Monophysite' and 'Nestorian' frequently throughout the book, with broad meanings. These words are often rejected these days on the grounds that they are misleading and pejorative. But I have kept them as part of a framework designed to help readers with no background find their way through some highly complex developments. It will be helpful to bear in mind throughout that key words like these have meant different things at different times and in different places.

In the end, anyone reading this book should be able to see what the seven ecumenical councils were basically all about and why Jesus Christ gradually came to be portrayed as 'truly divine and truly human'. While most of the discussion is philosophical or theological it is also historical and geographical and I hope that readers will get a sense of the individual cities in which the councils were held through the 'Historical excursus' boxes and the photographs.

This book has arisen out of teaching Early Christianity in colleges for more than 25 years, and more recently to groups in Turkey, where the locations of some of the ancient councils can still be visited. I would like to thank my colleagues and students at Chichester Theological College (1984–90) and La Sainte Union College (1990–9) in the University of Southampton, and those at St George's College, Jerusalem (1996–), for stimulating questions and discussions. A number of individuals have been particularly helpful during the time of writing, including the Revd Dr John Binns, Dr Brad Nystrom and the Revd Canon Hugh Wybrew. I would like to thank them for their comments on various drafts of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Mr Mehmet Tanriverdi for his enthusiastic guide-work at sites in Turkey related to the councils. In addition, thanks must go to Rebecca Mulhearn and various readers at SPCK who have helped

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