

## **THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS AND AUTHORITY IN AND OF THE CHURCH**

1. The Church's authority is grounded in God's saving revelation in Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and Holy Tradition bear witness. Moreover the Church as the body of Christ is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Joint Commission in Allentown, 1985, stated: "God's revelation in Jesus Christ is realized and actualized in the Church and through the Church as the body of Christ. The paschal and pentecostal mysteries instituted the Church of the New Testament in which revelation is lived, proclaimed and transmitted. The Holy Spirit sustains the Church's life and growth until the last day through the proclamation of the Gospel in the fullness of the apostolic tradition and its transmission from place to place and from generation to generation, not only by words but also by the whole life of the Church" (par. 4).

2. The nature of the Church's authority differs from worldly authority. Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27). All authority in and of the Church is rooted in the saving work of Christ who gave his life for us. Authority and soteriology are indivisible. Christ's authority, present in the Church's mission (Mt 28:18-20), is undergirded by the Paraclete who leads the faithful into all truth (John 14:26; 16:7-14) and through the apostles and their successors it is given to the whole Church. Both Orthodox and Lutherans affirm that apostolic authority was exercised in the ecumenical councils of the Church in which the bishops, through illumination and glorification brought about by the Holy Spirit, exercised responsibility. Ecumenical councils are a special gift of God to the Church and are an authoritative inheritance through the ages. Through ecumenical councils the Holy Spirit has led the Church to preserve and transmit the faith once delivered to the saints. They handed on the prophetic and apostolic truth, formulated it against heresies of their time and safeguarded the unity of the churches.

3. The seven ecumenical councils of the early Church were assemblies of the bishops of the Church from all parts of the Roman Empire to clarify and express the apostolic faith. These councils are Nicaea (325 A.D.), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680/81), and Nicaea II (787). Of the councils it was stated at Crete, 1987: "The Holy Tradition as ongoing action of the Holy Spirit in the Church expresses itself in the Church's whole life. The decisions of the ecumenical councils and local synods of the Church, the teaching of the holy fathers and liturgical texts and rites are especially important and authoritative expressions of this manifold action of the Holy Spirit" (par. 8). Ecumenical councils are the epitome of biblical theology and they summarize main themes of the Holy Tradition. They are not merely of historical significance but are irreplaceable events for the Church's life. Through them the apostolic faith and tradition, brought about by the saving revelation of God in Christ, was confirmed by the consensus of the gathered representatives of the Church led by the Holy Spirit.

4. The teachings of the ecumenical councils of the early Church are normative for the faith and life of our churches today. The trinitarian and christological formulations of these councils are an indispensable guide for understanding God's saving work in Christ and are the foundation of all later dogmatic clarifications. The Creed of Nicaea/Constantinople is the best known statement of faith from the ancient councils, and now that its original form is increasingly common in the West, it is an ever more living bond between our churches. It shapes the language of prayers and

blessings in our worship, and by its use the Church has remained faithful to the revelation of the Triune God.

5. The ecumenical councils did not only take decisions on doctrinal problems which threatened the integrity of God's revelation and the Church's unity; they also issued "canones" (canons) for good order within the Church. These "canones" establish a close relation between the faith once for all delivered to the saints and the necessity of ordering the Church's life and structure. The "oroi" (doctrinal decrees) safeguard the teachings of the Church concerning salvation; the "canones" order various aspects of the Church's life. They are practical applications of the "oroi." The two belong together as aspects of the same reality. All the same, not all decisions on canonical matters have the same authority as the doctrinal decisions and their reception and use in the Orthodox and Lutheran churches differ.

6. The ecumenical councils were called together to deal with specific problems that had arisen in the churches. They were not an ongoing ecclesiastical institution regularly convoked but ad hoc gatherings which met only as occasion required. The ecumenical councils were charismatic events. The statements of the bishops illuminated by the Holy Spirit went through a process of reception in the years that followed. Reception has taken place in the whole range of the Church's life, worship, catechesis, and service even when those councils are not explicitly named. Reception also took place through subsequent theological discussions which clarified the meaning of the terms and expressions formulated at prior councils. A notable example is the theological discussion after Nicaea which culminated in the decrees and creed of the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

7. As Lutherans and Orthodox we affirm that the teachings of the ecumenical councils are authoritative for our churches. The ecumenical councils maintain the integrity of the teaching of the undivided Church concerning the saving, illuminating/justifying and glorifying acts of God and reject heresies which subvert the saving work of God in Christ. Orthodox and Lutherans, however, have different histories. Lutherans have received the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed with the addition of the filioque. The Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, which rejected iconoclasm and restored the veneration of icons in the churches, was not part of the tradition received by the Reformation. Lutherans, however, rejected the iconoclasm of the 16th century, and affirmed the distinction between adoration due to the Triune God alone and all other forms of veneration (CA 21). Through historical research this council has become better known. Nevertheless it does not have the same significance for Lutherans as it does for the Orthodox. Yet, Lutherans and Orthodox are in agreement that the Second Council of Nicaea confirms the christological teaching of the earlier councils and in setting forth the role of images (icons) in the lives of the faithful reaffirms the reality of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, when it states: "The more frequently, Christ, Mary, the mother of God, and the saints are seen, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these icons the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration. Certainly this is not the full adoration in accordance with our faith, which is properly paid only to the divine nature, but it resembles that given to the figure of the honored and life-giving cross, and also to the holy books of the gospels and to other sacred objects" (Definition of the Second Council of Nicaea).

8. Agreement on authority of the ecumenical councils requires us to discuss at future meetings the Orthodox and Lutheran understanding of salvation in light of these councils.

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