

Ecumenical council

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An **ecumenical council** (or **oecumenical council**; also **general council**) is a conference of the [bishops](#) of the whole [Christian Church](#) convened to discuss and settle matters of Church doctrine and practice. The word derives from the [Greek language](#) "Οικουμένη", which literally means "the inhabited world", which first referred to the [Roman Empire](#) and later was extended to apply to the world in general.

Due to [schisms](#), the acceptance of these councils varies widely between different branches of Christianity. Those churches that parted ways with the others over christological matters accept the councils prior to their separation; the [Assyrian church](#) only accepts the first two, the [Oriental Orthodoxy churches](#) the first three, as Ecumenical. Prior to the [East-West Schism](#) the united [Western](#) and [Eastern](#) Churches held the first eight Ecumenical councils (meeting from the 4th to the 9th century). They accept as Ecumenical the same first seven but differ on the identity of the eighth. While the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#) has not generally accepted any later synod as Ecumenical, the [Roman Catholic Church](#) continues to hold Ecumenical Councils of those bishops in [full communion](#) with the [Pope](#) and has counted twenty-one to date.

[Anglicans](#) and some [Protestants](#), most commonly Lutherans, accept either the first seven or the first four as Ecumenical councils.

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Council documents

Church councils were, from the beginning, bureaucratic exercises. Written documents were circulated, speeches made and responded to, votes taken, and final documents published and distributed. A large part of what we know about the beliefs of [heresies](#) comes from the documents quoted in councils in order to be refuted, or indeed only from the deductions based on the refutations.

Most councils dealt not only with doctrinal but also with disciplinary matters, which were decided in [canons](#) ("laws"). In some cases other survives as well. Study of the canons of church councils is the foundation of the development of [canon law](#), especially the reconciling of seemingly contradictory canons or the determination of priority between them. Canons consist of doctrinal statements and disciplinary measures — most Church councils and local synods dealt with immediate disciplinary concerns as well as major difficulties of doctrine. Eastern Orthodoxy typically views the purely doctrinal canons as [dogmatic](#) and applicable to the entire church at all times, while the disciplinary canons apply to a particular time and place and may or may not be applicable in other situations.

List of ecumenical councils

Council of Jerusalem

Main article: [Council of Jerusalem](#)

The [Acts of the Apostles](#) records the [Council of Jerusalem](#), which addressed the tension between maintaining [Jewish practices](#) in the [early Christian](#) community with [Gentile](#) converts. Although its decisions are accepted by all Christians^[1] and later definitions of an ecumenical council appear to conform to this sole [biblical](#) Council, no [Christian church](#) includes it when numbering the ecumenical councils.

The first seven Ecumenical Councils

Main article: [First seven Ecumenical Councils](#)

- **1. [First Council of Nicaea](#)** (325) repudiated [Arianism](#) and adopted the [original Nicene Creed](#), fixed [Easter date](#); recognized primacy of the sees of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch and granted the See of Jerusalem a position of honor.
- **2. [First Council of Constantinople](#)** (381) repudiated [Arianism](#) and [Macedonianism](#), revised the [Nicene Creed](#) in regard to the [Holy Spirit](#)
- **3. [Council of Ephesus](#)** (431) repudiated [Nestorianism](#), proclaimed the Virgin [Mary](#) as the [Theotokos](#) ("Birth-giver to God", "God-bearer", "Mother of God"), repudiated [Pelagianism](#), and reaffirmed the Nicene Creed.
This and all following councils are not recognized by the [Assyrian Church of the East](#).
 - **[Second Council of Ephesus](#)** (449) declared [Eutyches](#) orthodox and attacked his opponents.
Though originally convened as an Ecumenical council, this council is not recognized as Ecumenical and denounced as a Robber Council by the [Chalcedonians](#) (Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants).
- **4. [Council of Chalcedon](#)** (451) repudiated the [Eutychian](#) doctrine of [monophysitism](#), adopted the [Chalcedonian Creed](#), which described the [hypostatic union](#) of the two natures of Christ, human and divine. Reinstated those deposed in 449 and deposed [Dioscorus of Alexandria](#). Elevation of the bishoprics of Constantinople and Jerusalem to the status of patriarchates.
This and all following councils are rejected by the [Oriental Orthodoxy](#).
- **5. [Second Council of Constantinople](#)** (553) repudiated the [Three Chapters](#) as Nestorian, condemned [Origen of Alexandria](#), decreed the Theopaschite Formula.
- **6. [Third Council of Constantinople](#)** (680-681) repudiated [Monothelitism](#) and [Monoenergism](#).
 - **[Quinisext Council](#)**, also called Council in Trullo ^[2] (692) addressed matters of discipline (in amendment to the 5th and 6th councils) and established the [Pentarchy](#).
The Ecumenical status of this council was repudiated by the western churches.
- **7. [Second Council of Nicaea](#)** (787) restored the veneration of [icons](#) (condemned at the [Council of Hieria](#), 754) and repudiated [iconoclasm](#).
This council is rejected by some Protestant denominations, which condemned the veneration of icons.

Ecumenical for some Eastern Orthodox

The next three are regarded as ecumenical by a few modern theologians in the Eastern Orthodox Church but the historical position of the Eastern Orthodox Church is that they were important local councils. In fact, no Orthodox church accepts them as ecumenical, despite acknowledging the orthodoxy of their decisions. The claim that there are more than seven ecumenical councils seems to be a recent innovation of polemical strands of Orthodox theology.

- (EO) **[Fourth Council of Constantinople](#)** (879-880) restored [Photius](#) to the See of Constantinople and condemned the [double-procession doctrine](#) concerning the Holy Spirit.

- [Fifth Council of Constantinople](#) (1341-1351) affirmed [hesychastic theology](#) according to [Gregory Palamas](#) and condemned the [Barlaam of Seminara](#).
- [Synod of Jerusalem](#) (1672) defined Orthodoxy relative to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, defined [Biblical canon](#).

Roman Catholic Councils #8 to #21

- **8. (RC) [Fourth Council of Constantinople](#)** (869-870) deposed [Patriarch Photios I of Constantinople](#) as an usurper and reinstated his predecessor [Saint Ignatius](#). Photius had already been declared deposed by the Pope, an act which the Church of Constantinople accepted at this council. After the death of Ignatius, Photius was reinstated as Patriarch with papal approval.
Today, this council is accepted by the [Roman Catholic Church](#) but rejected as a robber council by the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#).
- **9. [First Council of the Lateran](#)** (1123) addressed [investment of bishops](#) and the [Holy Roman Emperor's](#) role therein.
- **10. [Second Council of the Lateran](#)** (1139) reaffirmed [Lateran I](#) and addressed clerical discipline (dress, marriages).
- **11. [Third Council of the Lateran](#)** (1179) restricted papal election to the [cardinals](#), condemned [simony](#), and introduced minimum ages for ordination (thirty for bishops).
- **12. [Fourth Council of the Lateran](#)** (1215) defined [transubstantiation](#), addressed [papal primacy](#) and clerical discipline.
- **13. [First Council of Lyon](#)** (1245) deposed [Emperor Frederick II](#) and instituted a levy to support the Holy Land.
- **14. [Second Council of Lyon](#)** (1274) attempted reunion with the Eastern churches, approved [Franciscan](#) and [Dominican orders](#), a tithe to support crusades, and [conclave](#) procedures.
- **15. [Council of Vienne](#)** (1311-1312) disbanded the [Knights Templar](#).
 - [Council of Pisa](#) (1409) attempted to solve the [Great Western Schism](#)
The council is not numbered because it was not convened by a pope and its outcome was repudiated at Constance.
- **16. [Council of Constance](#)** (1414-1418) resolved the [Great Western Schism](#) and condemned [John Hus](#). Also began [conciliarism](#).
 - [Council of Siena](#) (1423-1424) addressed church reform.
Not numbered as it was swiftly disbanded.
- **17. [Council of Basel, Ferrara and Florence](#)** (1431-1445) addressed church reform and reunion with the Eastern Churches, but split into two parties. The fathers remaining at Basel became the apogee of [conciliarism](#). The fathers at Florence achieved union with [various Eastern Churches](#) and temporarily with the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#).
- **18. [Fifth Council of the Lateran](#)** (1512-1514) addressed church reform.
- **19. [Council of Trent](#)** (1545-1563, with interruptions) addressed church reform and repudiated [Protestantism](#), defined the role and [canon](#) of Scripture and the [seven sacraments](#), and strengthened clerical discipline and education.
Though temporarily attended by Protestant delegates, this and the following councils are rejected by Protestants.

- **20. [First Vatican Council](#)** (1870; officially, 1870-1960) defined [pope's primacy in church governance](#) and [his infallibility](#), repudiated [rationalism](#), [materialism](#) and [atheism](#), addressed [revelation](#), [interpretation of scripture](#) and the relationship of [faith](#) and [reason](#). *This and the following councils are rejected by the emerging [Old Catholic Church](#).*
- **21. [Second Vatican Council](#)** (1962-1965) addressed pastoral and disciplinary issues dealing with the Church and its relation to the modern world, including [liturgy](#) and [ecumenism](#). *This council is rejected by some [traditionalists](#).*

Acceptance of the councils

Assyrian Church: accept #1, and #2

The [Assyrian Church of the East](#) only accepts the First Council of Nicaea and the First Council of Constantinople. It was the formulation of Mary as the Theotokos which caused a schism with the Assyrian church. The Unia in the 16th century of the Catholic Church led to the [Chaldeans](#) being reconciled into [full communion](#) with Rome. Meetings between [Pope John Paul II](#) and the [Assyrian Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV](#) led to common Christological declarations in the 1990s stating that the differences between the [Western](#) and Eastern were primarily linguistic and historical rather than [theological](#) (owing to the difficulty of translating precise theological terms from [Greek](#) and/or [Latin](#) to [Aramaic language](#).) [Aramaic language](#) is believed to have been the native language of Jesus.

Oriental Orthodoxy: accept #1, #2, #3

[Oriental Orthodoxy](#) only accepts Nicaea I, Constantinople I and Ephesus I. The formulation of the [Chalcedonian Creed](#) caused a schism in the Alexandrian and Syriac churches. Reconciliatory efforts between Oriental Orthodox with the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholic Church in the mid- and late-20th century have led to common [Christological](#) declarations. The Oriental and Eastern Churches have also been working toward reconciliation as a consequence of the [ecumenical movement](#).

Eastern Orthodoxy: accept #1-#7; some also accept #8(EO), #9(EO) as ecumenical

As far as some Eastern Orthodox are concerned, since the Seventh Ecumenical Council there has been no synod or council of the same scope as any of the Ecumenical councils. Local meetings of hierarchs have been called "pan-Orthodox", but these have invariably been simply meetings of local hierarchs of whatever Eastern Orthodox jurisdictions are party to a specific local matter. From this point of view, there has been no fully "pan-Orthodox" (**Ecumenical**) council since 787. Unfortunately, the use of the term "pan-Orthodox" is confusing to those not within Eastern Orthodoxy, and it leads to mistaken impressions that these are [ersatz](#) ecumenical councils rather than purely local councils to which nearby Orthodox hierarchs, regardless of jurisdiction, are invited.

Others, including 20th century theologians Metropolitan [Hierotheos \(Vlachos\)](#) of [Naupactus](#), Fr. [John S. Romanides](#), and Fr. [George Metallinos](#) (all of whom refer repeatedly to the "Eighth and Ninth Ecumenical Councils"), Fr. [George Dragas](#), and the 1848 [Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs](#) (which refers explicitly to the "Eighth Ecumenical Council" and was signed by the [patriarchs](#) of [Constantinople](#), [Jerusalem](#), [Antioch](#), and [Alexandria](#) as well as the [Holy Synods](#) of the first three), regard other synods beyond the [Seventh Ecumenical Council](#) as being ecumenical. Those who regard these councils as ecumenical often characterize the limitation of Ecumenical Councils to only seven to be the result of [Jesuit](#) influence in [Russia](#), part of the so-called "Western captivity of Orthodoxy."

Before the 20th century, the council of 879 AD was recognized as the 8th ecumenical council by people like the famous expert on Canon Law, Theodore Valsamon (11th century), St. Neilos of Rodes, St. Mark Evgenicus (15th century), St. Symeon of Thessaloniki (15th century), and the Patriarch of Jerusalem Dositheus, in his Tome of Joy (17th century).^{[citation needed](#)}

Roman Catholicism: accept #1-#7, #8(RC), #9(RC), #10-#21

Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches recognize seven councils in the early years of the church, but Roman Catholics also recognize fourteen councils called in later years by the Pope. The status of these councils in the face of a Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation would depend upon whether one accepts Roman Catholic ecclesiology (papal primacy) or Orthodox ecclesiology (collegiality of [autocephalous churches](#)). In the former case, the additional councils would be granted Ecumenical status. In the latter case, they would be considered to be local synods with no authority among the other autocephalous churches.

The first seven councils were called by the [Emperor](#). Most historians agree that the emperors called the councils to force the Christian bishops to resolve divisive issues and reach consensus. One motivation for convening councils was the hope that maintaining unity in the Church would help maintain unity in the Empire. The relationship of the [Papacy](#) to the validity of these councils is the ground of much controversy between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Churches and to historians.

The Roman Catholic Church holds that the dogmatic decrees of these ecumenical councils approved subsequently by the pope are infallible.

Anglicanism: accept #1-#7, but not unconditionally

While the Councils are part of the "historic formularies" of Anglican tradition, it is difficult to locate an explicit reference in Anglicanism to the unconditional acceptance of all Seven Ecumenical Councils. There is little evidence of dogmatic or canonical acceptance beyond the statements of individual Anglican theologians and bishops. The full acceptance of the doctrine of all seven Councils, particularly Nicea II, was a centuries-long process in the Western Church, and within Anglicanism in particular.

The Reverend Canon Chandler Holder Jones, [SSC](#), explains:

“ We indeed and absolutely believe all Seven Councils are truly ecumenical and catholic - on the basis of the received Tradition of the ancient Undivided Church of East and West. The Anglican formularies address only particular critical theological and disciplinary concerns of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that certainly by design. Behind them, however, stands the universal authority of the Holy and Apostolic Tradition, which did not have to be rehashed or redebated by Anglican Catholics. ”

Dr Bill Tighe supports this position:

“ ...despite the fact that advocates of all sides to the 16th-century religious conflict, Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed alike, were given to claiming that their particular doctrinal stances and, in some cases, distinctive practices, were in accord with those of the Early Church Fathers, or at least with those of high standing (such as St. Augustine), none [but Anglicanism] were willing to require, or even permit, their confessional stances to be judged by, or subordinated to, a hypothetical ‘patristic consensus’ of the first four or five centuries of Christianity.’ But Anglicanism most certainly did, and does so to this day. ”

[Article XXI](#) teaches: "General Councils ... when they be gathered together, forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and word of God, they may err and sometime have erred, even in things pertaining to God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture."^[4]

The 19th Canon of 1571 asserted the authority of the Councils in this manner: "let preachers take care that they never teach anything...except what is agreeable to the doctrine of the Old and New Testament, and what the Catholic Fathers and ancient Bishops have collected from the same doctrine."^[5] This remains the [Church of England](#)'s teaching on the subject. A modern version of this appeal to catholic consensus is found in the Canon Law of the Church of England and also in the liturgy published in [Common Worship](#):

“ The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.

I, AB, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and ”

administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.^[6]

Protestantism: accept #1-#7 with reservations

Many [Protestants](#) (especially those belonging to the [magisterial traditions](#), such as [Lutherans](#), or those such as [Methodists](#), that broke away from the Anglican Communion) accept the teachings of the first seven councils but do not ascribe to the councils themselves the same authority as Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox do. The [Lutheran World Federation](#), in [ecumenical dialogues](#) with the [Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople](#) has affirmed all of the first seven councils as ecumenical and authoritative.

Some, including some [fundamentalist Christianity](#), condemn the ecumenical councils for other reasons. Independency or [congregationalist polity](#) among Protestants may involve the rejection of any governmental structure or binding authority above local congregations; conformity to the decisions of these councils is therefore considered purely voluntary and the councils are to be considered binding only insofar as those doctrines are derived from the Scriptures. Many of these churches reject the idea that anyone other than the authors of Scripture can directly lead other Christians by original divine authority; after the [New Testament](#), they assert, the doors of revelation were closed and councils can only give advice or guidance, but have no authority. They consider new doctrines not derived from the sealed [canon](#) of Scripture to be both impossible and unnecessary, whether proposed by church councils or by more recent [prophets](#).

Nontrinitarian churches: accept none

The first and subsequent councils are not recognized by nontrinitarian churches: [Unitarians](#), [Latter-day Saints](#) and other [Mormons](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), etc. The leadership of some groups—such as the [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) and the [Mormon](#) denominations—lays claim to a divine authority to lead the church today and sees the ecumenical councils as misguided human attempts to establish doctrine, as though true beliefs were to be decided by debate rather than by [revelation](#).

References

1. [^] [Karl Josef von Hefele's commentary on canon II of Gangra](#) notes: "We further see that, at the time of the Synod of Gangra, the rule of the Apostolic Synod with regard to blood and things strangled was still in force. With the [Greeks](#), indeed, it continued always in force as their Euchologies still show. [Balsamon](#) also, the well-known commentator on the canons of the Middle Ages, in his commentary on the sixty-third [Apostolic Canon](#), expressly blames the Latins because they had ceased to observe this command. What the Latin Church, however, thought on this subject about the year 400, is shown by [St. Augustine](#) in his work *Contra Faustum*, where he states that the Apostles had given this command in order to unite the heathens and Jews in the one ark of Noah; but that then, when the barrier between Jewish and heathen converts had fallen, this command concerning things strangled and blood had lost its meaning, and was only observed by few. But still, as late as the eighth century, Pope Gregory the Third 731 forbade the eating of blood or things strangled under threat of a penance of forty days. No one will pretend that the

disciplinary enactments of any council, even though it be one of the undisputed Ecumenical Synods, can be of greater and more unchanging force than the decree of that first council, held by the Apostles at Jerusalem, and the fact that its decree has been obsolete for centuries in the West is proof that even Ecumenical canons may be of only temporary utility and may be repealed by disuser, like other laws."

2. [^](#) The appellation "troullus" (Latin *trullus*, dome) comes from a dome-roofed palace in Constantinople, where the council was hosted.
3. [^](#) For additional references to this section and for more on the Anglican position, see Dr CB Moss [*The Church of England and the Seventh Council*](#)
4. [^](#) *An Exposition Of The Thirty-Nine Articles V2: Historical And Doctrinal* by Edward Harold Browne.
5. [^](#) *The Sufficiency of Holy Scripture as the Rule of Faith* By [Daniel Wilson](#), [Bishop of Calcutta](#).
6. [^](#) See *Common Worship* ISBN:071512000X

Further reading

- Tanner, Norman P. *The Councils of the Church*, [ISBN 0824519043](#).
- Tanner, Norman P. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, [ISBN 0878404902](#).
- Michalopoulos, Dimitris, " The First Council of Nicaea: The end of a conflict or beginning of a struggle?", *Uluslarasi Iznik Semposyumu*, Iznik (Turkey), 2005, pp.47-56. ISBN: 975-7988-30-8.