

Council of Ephesus & Canons

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Nestorius

Nestorius was the Patriarch of Constantinople, who was originally from Antioch in Syria, (like St. John Chrysostom.) He was born in 386, and became patriarch in 428 AD, by Emperor Theodosius II, of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Nestorius was originally from the ancient city of Antioch in Syria, where he was born in the year 386 AD. His birthplace shared a rich religious heritage with that of St. John Chrysostom, whose theological prowess had left an indelible mark on the Church. Nestorius, driven by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and a profound love for the scriptures, immersed himself in theological studies at an early age. His intellectual pursuits led him to Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, where he gained prominence as a gifted preacher and theologian. His eloquence and erudition captivated the hearts and minds of the faithful, earning him widespread recognition and respect.

In 428 AD, at the direction of Emperor Theodosius II, Nestorius ascended as Patriarch of Constantinople. As patriarch, he assumed spiritual leadership over one of the most influential Christian sees of the time. Nestorius's reign as patriarch was marked by controversy. He held firmly to the belief that the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ existed separately, a view that sparked intense debate and ultimately led to the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

A Twofold Heresy

In Christianity, there has been numerous dialogues about the two natures of Christ, known as the Human Person and the Divine Person. While the Coptic Church understands that they coexist as one entity, Nestorius proposed a different interpretation. Nestorius asserted that Christ possessed two distinct and separate natures—a divine nature and a human nature. This view, known as Nestorianism, significantly diverged from the established understanding of Christ's nature.

Nestorius argued that the Divine Christ, representing the divine nature, could not suffer or experience mortality. He believed that it was only the Human Christ, associated with the human

nature, who underwent suffering and crucifixion. This separation between the divine and human aspects of Christ challenged the traditional understanding of Christ's unified nature. Nestorius further argued that since Jesus Christ existed as two separate persons: one human and one divine, Mary should only be referred to as the "Mother of Christ," or "Christotokos," rather than the "Mother of God," or "Theotokos." He emphasized that God the Father was without a mother and father, as He was eternally existing.

The Church strongly opposed his ideas, considering them heretical at the Council of Ephesus, convened in 431 AD, where they officially condemned Nestorianism as contrary to the orthodox faith. The council affirmed that Christ possessed a single, unified nature, encompassing both divine and human elements. The rejection of Nestorianism emphasized the importance of recognizing Christ's divinity and humanity as inseparable aspects of his being. The Church's stance on this issue aimed to safeguard the doctrine of the Incarnation, which asserts that God became fully human in the person of Jesus Christ. Nestorianism's influence persisted despite its condemnation, and it left a lasting impact on Christian thought. However, the overwhelming consensus within Christianity remained that Christ had a single, unified nature, embodying both divine and human characteristics.

St. Cyril; the Pillar of the Faith

Nestorius' teachings faced significant opposition from St. Cyril of Alexandria, who emerged as a staunch defender of the Christian faith against Nestorianism. Born around 376 AD, St. Cyril was the nephew of St. Theophilus, who served as the previous Patriarch of Alexandria. From a young age, St. Cyril received an extensive education encompassing philosophy, rhetoric, and theology. At the age of 36, in 412 AD, he succeeded his uncle as Patriarch of Alexandria, a testament to his remarkable capabilities and unwavering dedication to the faith.

Before assuming the patriarchate, St. Cyril had already gained recognition for his contributions to the Church. Initially, he embraced monasticism, spending time at the St. Macarius monastery in the Scetis (Shiheet) desert, where he devoted himself to prayer, contemplation, and the study of Scripture. Following his time in the monastery, he served as a priest in Alexandria, earning the esteemed title "Pillar of Faith."

While Nestorianism sought to undermine the unity and divinity of Christ, asserting that Jesus had two distinct natures, St. Cyril vehemently opposed this teaching, arguing that such a view compromised the integrity of Christ's personhood and contradicted the fundamental belief in the Incarnation. During the council, St. Cyril played a central role in condemning Nestorianism as a heresy

and affirming the orthodox position that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, united in one person.

St. Cyril's legacy extends beyond his opposition to Nestorianism. He is revered for his extensive writings, including commentaries on Scripture, theological treatises, and homilies. His works provide valuable insights into the early Church's understanding of Christology, the Trinity, and other core doctrines. St. Cyril's contributions have significantly influenced Christian thought and spirituality, and he continues to be recognized as a Pillar in the Orthodox Faith.

Events Leading Up to the Council

In the year 428, Nestorius, the newly appointed Patriarch of Constantinople, delivered a series of sermons that would ignite this heated theological controversy. Nestorius's sermons primarily centered around his opposition to the use of the term "Theotokos" (God-bearer) to refer to the Virgin Mary, arguing that it implied that Mary had given birth to the divine nature of Christ rather than simply his human nature. This stance directly challenged the prevailing understanding and veneration of Mary within the Christian community.

Nestorius's claims were met with swift opposition from several individuals. Eusebius, a prominent layman and future bishop of Dorylaeum, was the first to refute Nestorius's arguments. Eusebius eloquently defended the traditional view of Mary as the Theotokos, arguing that her role in Christ's incarnation was essential and inseparable from his divinity.

Joining Eusebius in their condemnation of Nestorius were two priests from Constantinople, Philip and Proclus. Both Philip and Proclus had previously been candidates for the patriarchal position in Constantinople and were well-respected theologians in their own right. They accused Nestorius of heresy and composed refutations against his teachings. While Philip's refutation was unfortunately lost to history, Proclus's work remains preserved in Christian archives, offering valuable insights into the theological debates of the time.

The controversy surrounding Nestorius's teachings quickly spread throughout Constantinople, and the city's inhabitants, who were initially receptive to their foreign Patriarch, began to harbor doubts and suspicions about his beliefs. It is worth considering the potential impact if Nestorius had preached his ideas in his hometown of Antioch. Given his charisma and influence, there is a possibility that his teachings could have gained wider acceptance and caused a profound rift within Christianity.

As the heresy gained notoriety, Pope Celestine, the patriarch of Rome, added his voice to the growing chorus of opposition. He denounced Nestorius's views and urged Christians to remain

steadfast in their faith. St. Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria, embarked on a mission to combat the spread of Nestorianism. He composed and circulated refutations of Nestorius's teachings, initially without naming him directly. However, recognizing the importance of confronting the issue head-on, St. Cyril later wrote directly to Nestorius, rebuking his theological positions.

Nestorius responded to St. Cyril's letter, accusing him of unfairly attacking his character and questioning his motives. St. Cyril, in turn, clarified that his intent was not to personally attack Nestorius but to fulfill his pastoral duty to protect his flock from doctrinal deviations. He went on to explain why Nestorius's ideas were heretical, emphasizing that Christ was not merely a human being but fully divine and that Mary, as the Theotokos, had a crucial role in his incarnation: "...you have no power to fight against God Who was crucified for us in truth; and died in the body, although He is continually living in the power of His Godhead; it is He who sits at the Right Hand of the Father while the angels, principalities and powers worship Him."

Despite St. Cyril's efforts and the growing criticism from various quarters, Nestorius refused to retract his teachings. He sought the support of Emperor Theodosius II, who attempted to intimidate St. Cyril by threatening him. However, by this time, the Christian world had largely turned against Nestorius and his beliefs. The controversy culminated in the convening of the Council of Ephesus in 431, where Nestorius was officially condemned and deposed as patriarch.

The 1st Alexandrine Council

St. Cyril convened a local council in Alexandria, gathering the bishops of Egypt to address a pressing theological matter. During the council, the assembled fathers reaffirmed their commitment to the Nicene Creed, which served as the foundational statement of Christian faith. Additionally, they approved an Introduction to the Creed, authored by St. Cyril himself. This introduction, recited to this day, serves as a preliminary statement that precedes the testimony of faith ("We exalt You").

Following the council, the bishops wrote letters to other heads of churches, seeking their support and approval of the decisions made in Alexandria. The letters were addressed to the Bishop of Antioch, the Bishop of Jerusalem, the Bishop of Rome, and the Bishop of Aleppo. Each bishop responded in writing, expressing their approval and agreement with the actions taken by the council.

After receiving the positive response from Pope Celestine, the bishop of Rome, St. Cyril felt emboldened to take further steps. He wrote letters directly to the Emperor in Rome, the Empress, and the Emperor's three sisters. In his letters, St. Cyril meticulously explained the subtle deviations from Orthodox teachings present in the Nestorian concept. He appealed to the Emperor to intervene and convince Nestorius of his theological errors.

In his letters to the Empress and the Emperor's sisters, St. Cyril emphasized the importance of their influence in preserving Orthodoxy. He urged them to use their positions to safeguard the unity and integrity of the Christian faith. Additionally, he included a list of verses from both the Old and New Testaments that spoke of Jesus Christ as God incarnate, emphasizing the absence of any separateness or division within His divine nature. To conclude his efforts, St. Cyril then convened again for a second council in Alexandria.

The 2nd Alexandrine Council

The Second Council of Alexandria convened with the intent of once again attempting to persuade Nestorius to recognize and rectify his theological errors. To accomplish this, the council resolved to compose another letter to him. This letter would comprise two distinct parts. The first part was to be an exposition of the Nicene Creed, which served as a foundational document for Christian doctrine. By presenting a detailed explanation of the creed, the council sought to provide Nestorius with a clear understanding of the orthodox beliefs regarding the nature of Christ. This exposition aimed to demonstrate how Nestorius's views deviated from the established teachings of the Church.

"Conforming to the faith of the fathers, we declare that the unique Logos of God has taken the flesh of the Virgin. Has made this flesh His own, submitting Himself to human birth, passed out of the Virgin's womb as a child without ceasing to be what He is and remaining in the body as He is, namely Very God by nature. The flesh was not changed into the nature of the divine, just as the divine Logos was not changed into the nature of the flesh for It was not submitted to any change. Being yet a child, and even while in the tomb of His Mother, the Logos filled the entire world, He governed it conjointly with His Father and the Holy Spirit, for divinity knows no limit. The Logos is united to the flesh hypostatically. We therefore believe in one single Son and Lord, Jesus Christ; we separate not the man from the God; we do not believe that He is simply united under the semblance of dignity and power; these are new words alien to the faith. If we, too, say, as did St. Paul in Colossians 2:9 that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, we see that God dwells not in Him as He dwells in His saints. But that the divine and the human were united in our Lord Jesus Christ in the fashion that the soul is united to the body in a human being. There is, therefore, one Christ, one Son, one Lord." If he were really 'Orthodox' as he had claimed, Nestorius was asked to prove it by signing both the letter and the anathema. Thus he would vindicate himself and clarify his attitude before all believers."

The second part of the letter was intended to serve as an affirmation of the true faith, as defined by the council. This section would expound upon the correct understanding of the person and work of Christ, emphasizing the unity of His divine and human natures. The council intended to articulate the orthodox position in such a way that it would leave no room for misinterpretation or ambiguity.

In addition to the exposition and affirmation, the letter would also include twelve anathemas. These anathemas were designed to condemn specific heretical teachings attributed to Nestorius. Each anathema would target a particular aspect of Nestorius's theology that the council deemed to be in contradiction with the true faith. By issuing these anathemas, the council sought to definitively reject and repudiate Nestorius's views, making it clear that his teachings were incompatible with Christian orthodoxy.

The Twelve Anathema

- 1 If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy virgin is the mother of God ... let him be **anathema**.
- 2 If anyone does not confess that the Word from God the Father has been united by hypostasis ... is therefore God and man together, let him be **anathema**.
- 3 If anyone divides in the one Christ the hypostases after the union ... let him be **anathema**.
- 4 If anyone distinguishes between the two persons or hypostases the expressions used either in the gospels or in the apostolic writings ... let him be **anathema**.
- 5 If anyone dares to say that Christ was a God-bearing man and not rather God in truth, ... let him be **anathema**.
- 6 If anyone says that the Word from God the Father was the God or master of Christ, and does not rather confess the same both God and man, the Word having become flesh, according to the scriptures, let him be **anathema**.
- 7 If anyone says that as man Jesus was activated by the Word of God and was clothed with the glory of the Only-begotten, as a being separate from him, let him be **anathema**.
- 8 If anyone dares to say that Christ's human nature should be worshiped separately from His divine nature ... , let him be **anathema**.
- 9 If anyone says that the one Lord Jesus Christ was empowered by an external Spirit, rather than by His own Spirit, to perform miracles and overcome evil, ... let him be **anathema**.
- 10 If anyone claims that it was not the very Word of God who became our high priest and apostle as a man, but someone separate from Him, or says that He offered sacrifice for Himself and not solely for us ... , let him be **anathema**.
- 11 If anyone does not confess that the flesh of the Lord is life-giving and belongs to the Word from God the Father, but maintains that it belongs to another besides him, united with him in dignity or as enjoying a mere divine indwelling, ... , let him be **anathema**.
- 12 If anyone does not confess that the Word of God suffered in the flesh and was crucified in the flesh and tasted death in the flesh and became the first born of the dead, although as God he is life and life-giving, let him be **anathema**.

Through this carefully crafted letter, the Second Council of Alexandria aimed to provide Nestorius with a comprehensive presentation of the true faith, as well as a clear condemnation of his erroneous beliefs. The council hoped that by engaging with Nestorius in this manner, they might persuade him to abandon his misguided ideas and embrace the orthodox teachings of the Church.

Alongside the second letter addressed to Nestorius, the Council of Ephesus dispatched two additional letters simultaneously. The first letter was directed to the priests, deacons, and people of Constantinople, while the second was intended for the monks residing in the city. In both letters, the Council implored Nestorius to sign a document acknowledging his agreement with the Council's position. However, Nestorius adamantly refused to comply, prompting him to seek assistance from the Emperor of the East. Subsequently, the Emperor threatened Saint Cyril in an attempt to influence the Council's proceedings and protect Nestorius. This act of interference by the Emperor further escalated the tensions between the Council of Ephesus and Nestorius, leading to a prolonged conflict.

The Ecumenical Council

As opposition to the heresy of Nestorianism intensified, the people of Constantinople urged Emperor Theodosius II to call a council to address the matter. The Emperor, realizing the urgency, had no choice but to send out invitations to all the bishops of the Christian world, asking them to convene in Ephesus during the summer of 431 AD. The date of the council, the day after Pentecost, has been traditionally used for the Holy Synod to convene to this day. Upon receiving the letter, St. Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria, organized a group of clergy to sail with him to Ephesus. Among them was the fiery St. Shenouda the Archimandrite of Akhmim, known for his unwavering commitment to the Nicene Creed.

Approximately 200 bishops descended upon Ephesus, each representing their respective dioceses and eager to stand up for the Nicene Creed, which had been challenged by Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. Nestorius, accompanied by 40 of his followers, also arrived in Ephesus. He was joined by a large group of armed men under the command of a nobleman named Candidian, who had been designated as the Emperor's representative at the council. Candidian, however, instead of remaining neutral, decided to support Nestorius fully. Unfortunately, the representative from Antioch was delayed in his arrival. Although he was a friend of Nestorius, he sent two of his bishops ahead to inform the council not to wait for him.

On June 22, the council convened in the church of "The Mother of God" in Ephesus. A meeting was established, and St. Cyril was voted to preside over the council proceedings. The council members

sent three different summons to Nestorius, requesting his presence. Despite being in the city, Nestorius refused to attend. Consequently, the council proceeded with its deliberations without him. The Council of Ephesus consisted of seven sessions, each dedicated to addressing various aspects of the Nestorian heresy and reaffirming the Nicene Creed.

The Seven Sessions of Ephesus

The Council of Ephesus, convened in 431 AD, comprised a series of significant sessions that addressed various matters pertaining to the church and its doctrines.

1st Session:

The first session of the council commenced with the recitation of the Creed, followed by discussions on Nestorius's heresy. St. Cyril's letters and Anathemas were presented, along with Nestorius's reply. After careful deliberation, the council came to a unanimous decision that Nestorius should be excommunicated, degraded, and deposed from his position. Subsequently, a letter was dispatched to the clergy and church members, informing them of the council's resolution.

2nd Session:

The second session witnessed the arrival of John of Antioch, but he was intercepted by the emperor's army and compelled to hold a separate council. In this rival council, St. Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus were deposed in retaliation. Nestorius, in collaboration with the emperor, attempted to overthrow the Bishop of Ephesus and install a new leader. Additionally, they prohibited the council from conducting liturgies, prompting an uprising among the people of Ephesus. However, the timely arrival of the Bishop of Rome and his representatives bolstered the council's decision to excommunicate Nestorius.

3rd Session:

During the third session, the council reviewed the decision with the delegates from Rome who arrived later. A consensus was reached, with both the Eastern and Western churches officially excommunicating Nestorius and his followers. A letter conveying this decision was sent to the emperor and the people of Constantinople, urging the emperor to reconsider his earlier stance.

4th Session:

The fourth session convened in the church to address the emperor's decision to depose St. Cyril and Memnon, the Bishop of Ephesus. The council sought the attendance of John of Antioch, but

he declined. Notably, St. Cyril and Memnon intentionally absented themselves to ensure unbiased deliberations. As a result, the council resolved, as a church, not to depose or excommunicate the two bishops.

5th Session:

The fifth session revisited the matter of St. Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus, once again requesting John of Antioch's attendance. His continued refusal prompted the council to make a solemn decision, declaring John of Antioch excommunicated and no longer in communion with the Christian church at large. This resolution required the emperor's endorsement, and a letter was dispatched to him seeking his approval.

6th Session:

Five days later, the council convened for the sixth session, presided over by St. Cyril. After scrutinizing doctrinal teachings, the council reaffirmed its adherence to the Creed of Nicea and Constantinople. They denounced any alteration, either by addition or omission, of words from the Creed, issuing an anathema against those who deviated from its original form.

7th Session:

The final session, the seventh, was held the following day and focused on resolving an administrative issue related to the church of Cyprus. The council granted independence to the church of Cyprus, ensuring its autonomy. Additionally, six canons were established, addressing matters of discipline within the church.

The Canons

The resulting canons outlined the proper responses to doctrinal deviations and the authority of bishops and clergy, establishing clear guidelines for handling heresies and maintaining ecclesiastical order. The canons reflect the council's efforts to defend the integrity of Christological doctrine and enforce ecclesiastical discipline, aiming to preserve church unity and orthodoxy amidst widespread controversy.

Canon	Summary
1	Any Metropolitan who joined or joins apostates, or accepts heretical doctrines (e.g., Celestius), loses all ecclesiastical authority and is subject to local orthodox bishops.
2	Provincial bishops absent from the Synod who joined apostates, or supported Nestorius after rejecting him, are to be deposed from the priesthood.

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- 3 Clergy banned by Nestorius for their orthodoxy are to be restored. Orthodox clergy must not submit to apostate bishops.
 - 4 Clergy who support the doctrines of Nestorius or Celestius are to be deposed.
 - 5 Anyone restored to their rank by Nestorius, after being condemned, remains deposed; Nestorius' actions to restore them are invalid.
 - 6 Those attempting to oppose Synod decisions shall lose their office if clergy, and be excommunicated if laypersons.
 - 7 No new or altered faith statements are allowed. Those who create or teach heretical doctrines (like Nestorius' doctrines) will be deposed if clergy, and anathematized if laypersons.
 - 8 The Synod reaffirms the independence of Cyprus and other provinces to ordain their own bishops without external interference, following ancient custom. Violations against this rule are invalid.

One Nature of Christ

The one nature of Christ is a fundamental tenet of Orthodoxy, and it is not open to dispute. The Gospel of John explicitly states that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), emphasizing that Jesus Christ possessed both human and divine aspects. This profound mystery of godliness is further affirmed in the First Epistle of Timothy, which declares, "great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16).

Despite the challenges posed by various heresies, such as those propagated by Nestorius, the Church has remained steadfast in its faith in the one nature of Christ. The words of the archangel Gabriel to St. Mary, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, provide a powerful affirmation of this truth: "for you have found favor with God...therefore also the Holy One which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:30-35).

This passage underscores the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ and His unique identity as both the Son of God and the Son of Man. The union of His human and divine natures in one person is essential to understanding the significance of His life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Through His humanity, Jesus was able to fully experience the human condition, including suffering and temptation. Yet, He remained sinless and consistently demonstrated His divine power and authority.⁴

The one nature of Christ is crucial for our salvation. His sacrificial death on the cross, as the perfect and sinless Lamb of God, provided the necessary atonement for the sins of humanity. By His resurrection, He conquered death and secured eternal life for all who believe in Him.

Throughout history, the Church has consistently upheld the doctrine of the one nature of Christ against various heretical teachings. This unwavering commitment to the truth has been instrumental in preserving the integrity of the Christian faith and ensuring that future generations of believers can continue to experience the transformative power of knowing and following Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.



Review Questions

1. Nestorius created two heresies.
 - a. **True**
 - b. False
2. One such heresy claimed Christ had one nature and his humanity was not real.
 - a. True
 - b. **False**
3. Who refuted Nestorius' heresy?
 - a. **Cyril of Alexandria**
 - b. Athanasius of Alexandria
 - c. John Chrysostom
 - d. Gregory of Nazianzus
4. How many sessions did the Council of Ephesus convene for?
 - a. 1
 - b. 3
 - c. **7**
 - d. 8
5. Cite a verse regarding Christ's singular nature. (A: John 1:14)
6. How many canons were instated during the Council of Ephesus?
 - a. 6
 - b. **8**
 - c. 7
 - d. 9



Books & References

1.  council of ephesus of 431.pdf . Accessed March 25, 2023.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1swMFYSn7NwRD8SJX7RrHR-UQdy1azU92/view>

