

Ecumenical Councils



A World in Turmoil

The Byzantine and the Roman Empires ruled the known world in the centuries after the Resurrection. Late in the 200s a man called Constantine the Great became the ruler of both empires. His father and mother had a strong influence on him. Both his parents had come to know about the true God in a time when most of the people were pagans and Christians were persecuted. Constantine's mother, Helena, was a Christian who was behind the search for the true Cross and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, found the Cross of our Lord.

Constantine lived and ruled in a time of much change in the world. His empire had many problems. One of his first Christian acts was to stop the persecution of Christians and to tolerate other forms of religion. During the years of his rule Christianity grew, but not without problems.

One of the biggest problems of the early Church was religious teachers who changed ideas about Jesus Christ to their own ways of thinking. These false teachings were beginning to confuse and weaken the Church. Constantine decided to help the Church settle its disputes. He knew this would strengthen his empire. To do this, he called all the bishops of each great center of Christianity as well as other Christian leaders together to the town of Nicaea to work out their differences. This has become known as the first Ecumenical Council, the Council of Nicaea.

The year was 325 and travel was dif-

ficult, but most of the Christian leaders of that time did come to Nicaea. There they developed what we now call the Nicene Creed. With the Holy Spirit guiding them, they wrote a series of statements about God the Father, God the Son (most of the Creed is about God the Son), God the Holy Spirit, and the Church. Most Christian Churches today still use the Nicene Creed as the basis of their beliefs.

The Armenian Church was under the leadership of St. Gregory the Enlightener at the time of the first Ecumenical Council. Although Gregory could not attend in person, he sent representatives. Leading the Armenian delegation was Gregory's son, Aristakes. He took with him a letter from Gregory giving his thoughts about the problems the Church was trying to solve. When the results of the Council of Nicaea came back to Armenia, Gregory studied them carefully. He found the Creed and other policies the Council had formed within his own ideas of what God wanted the Church to teach. He accepted the decisions of the Council of Nicaea and the Creed became a part of our worship. (It was finalized at Constantinople in 381.)

The Emperor Constantine the Great ruled his empire with the decisions of the Council of Nicaea in mind. He made the Church laws part of the civil laws. This was an enormous step for Christianity. It was now established that Christianity would influence civil law! Many years after the death of Constantine other rulers also acted in

the same way. Now Christianity was not just a religion that taught people how to live their own lives in relationship with God, but it was also helping governments know how to treat people in civil law.

The false teachers whose ideas were labeled as wrong at the Council of Nicaea were thought of as heretics and lost their authority to teach. But their false teaching still caused problems in the Church and another council was called. The second ecumenical council was held in Constantinople in 381.

The Armenian Church was represented at this council also and took its responsibilities seriously. As one of the many centers of Christianity, Armenia had to accept its role in the formation of thought for the entire Church. But the Armenian Church didn't just "go along with the crowd." The decisions of the councils were always studied carefully before they were adopted as part of the teachings and rulings of the Armenian Church.

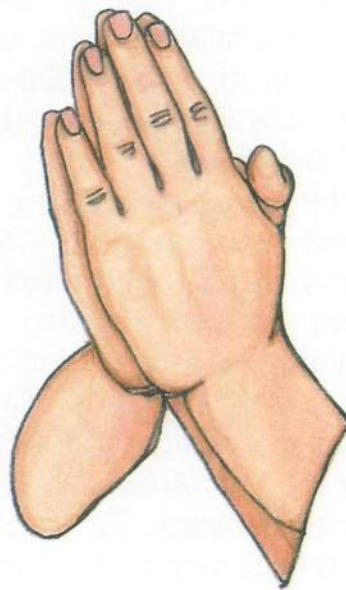
The Council of Ephesus in 431 was another council in which the Armenian Church participated, but not in the next one in Chalcedon in 451. When representatives brought back the rulings of the Council of Chalcedon, the Armenian Church found it could not agree with them and did not adopt them into the thinking of the Armenian Church.

But representatives of the Armenian Church did attend the other councils held in Constantinople and Nicaea. It accepted many of the decisions of these other councils, but maintained its right to disagree. Thus, the Armenian Church established itself as part of the

Christian Church, but independent, and in some ways different.

The Armenian Church has always depended on the Holy Spirit to guide it in making decisions. Through the centuries there have been many problems in our church, but it has survived by the grace of God. The Armenian Church is still an important and necessary branch of Christianity recognized and respected by other churches.

Today there are still meetings of church leaders to help the Church grow and decide things together. The Armenian Church participates in these meetings and works towards the growth of Christianity throughout the world.



The Creed

Look at the Creed and match the sections with the questions the Church was answering.

The Creed

We believe in one God
the Father almighty
maker of heaven and earth
of things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ
the Son of God
begotten of God the Father
only begotten
that is of the substance of the Father.

God of God,
light of light
very true God of very God
begotten and not made
of the self-same nature of the Father
by whom all things came into being in
heaven and on earth
visible and invisible.

Who for us men
and for our salvation
came down from heaven
and was incarnate
was made man
was born perfectly of the holy virgin
Mary
by the Holy Spirit;

By whom he took body, soul and mind
and everything that is in man
truly and not in semblance.

He suffered
and was crucified
and was buried
and rose again on the third day
and ascended into heaven with the
same body
and sat at the right hand of the Father.

The Question

Who is the God of the Old Testament
that Moses, Abraham, and Noah knew
and what is his relationship to us and
the world?

Why did the Son of God live among
us?

Can there be more than one Son of
God?

Is Jesus really related to God the
Father?

What did Jesus do for us?

What was Jesus' life like and where is
he now?

He is to come with the same body
and with the glory of the Father
to judge the quick (living) and the dead
of whose kingdom there is no end.

We believe also in the Holy Spirit
the uncreate and the perfect
who spoke in the law and in the
prophets
and in the Gospels;

Who came down upon the Jordan
preached in the apostles
and dwelt in the saints.

We believe also in only one
catholic and apostolic (holy) Church;

In one baptism with repentance for the
remission and forgiveness of sins;

In the resurrection of the dead
in the everlasting judgment of souls
and bodies
in the kingdom of heaven
and in the life eternal.



HOMEWORK:

It is not easy to form a creed — a list
of what you believe in and will live by.
Think about what you believe in, what
you value in your life. Write ten of your
most important beliefs and values to
form your own creed.

Is Jesus coming again?

Do we believe in the Holy Spirit?

Can there be more than one Church?

Did the Holy Spirit work in the new
Church?

Can a person be baptized more than
once?

Is there life after this life?