

The Seven Pillars of Orthodoxy

Pillars are an integral part of the structure of many buildings. The Eastern Orthodox Church rests upon the ancient pillars of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. This paper will examine the general concept of these councils. The light of Scriptures will appraise a particular decree of the Second Council of Nicea in order to test whether the Orthodox Church's high estimation of the Seven Ecumenical Councils is warranted.

The Seven Pillars

“All profess that there are seven holy and Ecumenical Councils, and these are the seven pillars of the faith of the Divine Word on which He erected His holy mansion, the Catholic and Ecumenical Church.” John II, Metropolitan of Russia (1080-89)¹

This statement clearly illuminates the structure which the Orthodox Church rests upon. The seven historic ecumenical councils² were held in the period spanning between A.D. 325 and A.D. 787.³ These councils issued statements that are considered, by the Eastern Orthodox and others, as authoritative in settling matters of faith and practice:

“Aware that God has spoken through the Ecumenical Councils, the Orthodox Church looks particularly to them for authoritative teaching in regard to the faith and practice of the Church.”⁴

Historically, there have been hundreds of councils.⁵ Why are just seven councils recognized as peculiarly authoritative? That is because they are termed as Ecumenical;⁶ that is, the Orthodox Church considers them to pertain to the whole Church.⁷ A further definition of an ecumenical council is given by Orthodox Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware:

“At a true Ecumenical Council the bishops recognize what the truth is and proclaim it; this proclamation is then verified by the assent of the whole Christian people, an assent which is not, as a rule expressed formally and explicitly, but *lived*.”⁸

¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*: New Edition (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 18. Timothy Ware is also known as Bishop Kallistos Ware

² The Orthodox Church accepts the following seven Ecumenical Councils: 1. The Council of Nicea in 325, which discussed and condemned Arianism. 2. The Council of Constantinople in 381 which principally condemned Apollinarianism. 3. The Council of Ephesus in 431, which condemned Nestorianism. 4. The Council of Chalcedon in 451, which condemned Monophysitism. 5. The Second Council of Constantinople, in 553, which condemned Origen and other heretics. 6. The Third Council of Constantinople in 680-81, which condemned Monothelism. 7. The Second Council of Nicea, in 787, which condemned Iconoclasm.

<http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article7116.asp>

³ The Orthodox Church also assigns ecumenical status to The Council in Trullo in 692, which took place in Constantinople. Eastern bishops took part in it, and they passed disciplinary canons to complete the work of the Fifth and the Sixth Ecumenical Councils and, thus, it is known as the Fifth-Sixth (*Quinisext* or *Penthekti*).

<http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article7116.asp>

⁴ http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/catechism_ext.htm#n6

⁵ “There have been hundreds of such councils - local and regional - over the centuries of the history of the Church...” http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/catechism_ext.htm#n6

⁶ οἰκὸς ἡ γῆ (oikoumene): the inhabited earth (Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 441.)

⁷ “...and seven councils specifically designated *Ecumenical*, that is, considered to apply to the whole Church.”

http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/catechism_ext.htm#n6

⁸ Ware, p. 253.

The historical importance that the Eastern Orthodox Church ascribes to the Seven Ecumenical Councils, can be seen from the following assessment by the historian Deno John Geanakoplos:

“Increasingly, and with the passage of centuries, the decrees of the “seven ecumenical councils” came to be regarded in the Byzantine East as inviolable—something sacred to be preserved absolutely and without the slightest change.”⁹

The Council at Jerusalem

On what basis does the Orthodox Church convene councils? The historian and Orthodox convert, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, in his book on Acts, referring to Acts chapter 15 says:

“This entire chapter has served throughout Christian history as a model for decision-making in the church, and as a charter both for authority *at* church councils and for the authority *of* church councils.”¹⁰

Since this is the only council, convened on behalf of the whole Church, described in the New Testament, then it is reasonable to suggest that it should form the pattern that the Orthodox Church should adhere to. Can Acts 15 be used to affirm the practice of convening later church councils? The participants in the Jerusalem council were: “...*the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.*”¹¹ Many of the men who attended the Ecumenical Councils could be classified as elders; but were any of them apostles? I don’t think any claimed to have been. The Scriptures describe the foundation of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ: “*Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone...*”¹² Can the Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church, since they lacked apostles, be considered as foundational to the Church of Jesus Christ?

Ecumenical?

As we have seen, the Orthodox Church considers the seven councils to be ecumenical. The councils also consider themselves to be authoritative and ecumenical, including the seventh and last council.¹³ However, do others whom the Orthodox Church acknowledges as Christians consider all seven councils authoritative and ecumenical? The surprising answer to this is “No,” as is demonstrated by Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware. He states,

“But to this day there exist Christians belonging to the Church of the East (frequently, although misleadingly, called ‘Nestorians’) who cannot accept the decisions of Ephesus, and who consider it incorrect to call the Virgin Mary *Theotokos*; and to this

⁹ Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 158.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Acts* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible) (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2005), p. 175.

¹¹ Acts 15:6

¹² Ephesians 2:19-20

¹³ “...we diminish nought, we add nought, but we preserve unchanged all things which pertain to the Catholic Church, and following the Six Ecumenical Synods, especially that which met in this illustrious metropolis of Nice [Nicea]...” (Henry R. Percival, Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series* Volume 14, (Albany: AGES Software, 1997), (The Seven Ecumenical Councils, The Decree of the Holy, Great, Ecumenical Synod, The Second of Nice, p. 1031.)

day there also exist Non-Chalcedonians who follow the Monophysite teaching of Dioscorus, and who reject the Chalcedonian Definition and the Tome of Leo.”¹⁴

One example of a church, which to this day rejects the authority of an ecumenical council, is the Armenian Church that recognizes only the first three and rejects the subsequent four Ecumenical Councils.¹⁵ Paradoxically, the Orthodox Church first accepted, but later rejected, a council which could be considered to be the most ecumenical of all: that is, the Council of Florence.¹⁶ This council was endorsed, by the signing of an agreement in A.D. 1439, the signatories included Patriarch Joseph II of Constantinople and all the Eastern bishops but one, Mark of Ephesus.¹⁷ The Council of Florence was later rejected by a synod after the fall of Constantinople in 1472.¹⁸

Consequently, we see that there is no consensus on the number of ecumenical councils. The number ranges from three to eight depending on which church and era is considered. Bishop Ware remarks:

“One might object: What about Chalcedon? It was rejected by Syria and Egypt – can we say, then, that it was ‘accepted by the Church at large’?”¹⁹

This leaves the Orthodox Church in a dilemma so ably expressed by Bishop Ware:

“How then can one be certain that a particular gathering is truly an Ecumenical Council and therefore that its decrees are infallible?”²⁰

The Scriptures provide the answer: the only “Ecumenical” Church council which is infallible and binding upon Christians is the Jerusalem Council as described in Acts 15. The Scriptures are the standard God has given to His Church to guide it in all matters of faith and practice. As the Scripture says: “*The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.*”²¹ Regrettably, the Orthodox Church has erred by not adhering to the biblical teaching with regard to councils.

¹⁴ Ware, p. 28.

¹⁵ The Armenian Church recognizes the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431). ...Some councils, which were recognized by the Latin and Byzantine Orthodox Churches as ecumenical, were denied according to the councils of the Armenian Church. The councils which were not recognized by the Armenian Church as ecumenical are the following: the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Second Council of Constantinople (553), the Third Council of Constantinople (681) and the Second Council of Nicaea (787). <http://www.armenianchurch.org/>

¹⁶ “It is difficult to see from what point of view its oecumenical character could be denied. It was held in the presence of the Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the legates of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. There were many more Easterns present than there had been Latins at any of the early synods that we all agree in calling oecumenical. Even if one were to take up the shamelessly Erastian position that the Emperor’s presence and consent are necessary, Florence had both. Indeed, as a last possibility, if one were to require the presence of such old schismatical bodies as the Monophysites and Nestorians (a position which the Orthodox would of course abhor, and which would involve the denial of all councils except the first two), the heads of the Armenian, Coptic, and Abyssinian Churches were represented, and there were at least some Jacobites and Nestorians present. So that except, perhaps, Nicaea in 325 no council has ever had such a clear right to be considered oecumenical. This is, perhaps, the reason why the Orthodox who now reject its decrees quite specially hate it.” (Adrian Fortescue: *The Orthodox Eastern Church*, p. 216.)

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Florence

¹⁸ Fortescue, pp. 217-218.

¹⁹ Ware, p. 252.

²⁰ Ware pp. 251-252.

²¹ Psalm 33:11

Pillars of the faith?

A pillar may seem sound when viewed afar off, but upon closer examination a crack may become visible. So, let us examine the Second Council of Nicea (Seventh Ecumenical Council A.D. 787) that met at Constantinople and restored the use of icons²² in the Byzantine Orthodox Church after the Iconoclast²³ Council at Constantinople (A.D. 754)²⁴ decreed their removal. The following quote is an official decree of the Second Council of Nicea:

“We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, ...the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honorable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence (ασπασμόν καί τιμητικήν προσκύνησιν [proskuneō]) not indeed that true worship of faith λατρείαν [latreia] which pertains alone to the divine nature; ...For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.”²⁵

It is interesting that the council decree differentiates between two forms of worship: latreia (λατρείαν) which pertains to God alone; and proskuneō (προσκύνησιν)²⁶ which is considered to be suitable towards Mary, Angels, Saints and pious people. Let us shine the light of Scripture²⁷ upon this decree and see what it reveals:

“*And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship [proskuneō] before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship [proskuneō] God.*”²⁸

If worshiping (proskuneō) an angel is acceptable to God, then why does the angel forbid John the apostle from worshiping him? Furthermore, the angel commands John to worship

²² By 787 the Iconodule (pro-image) party became dominant, and Empress Irene (who styled herself basileus and autokrator) called a council which became the Seventh Ecumenical Council. It met in Constantinople to pronounce on the restoration of the icons.” (Geanakoplos, p. 156.)

²³ “Iconoclasts' were deeply suspicious of any pictorial representations of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints, and they therefore unleashed a wave of persecution against the use of religious images, while 'iconophiles' fiercely defended the veneration of icons as an integral element of the life of the church.” (<http://www.theandros.com/iconoclast.html>)

²⁴ “Constantine V. ...called an iconoclastic council in Constantinople in 754, which was to be the seventh oecumenical council, but was afterwards disowned as a pseudo-synod of heretics.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* Volume 4, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006, p. 457.)

²⁵ Percival *et al.*, p. 1032.

²⁶ Προσκυνέω proskuneō : in the NT by kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance, whether in order to express respect or to make supplication (Thayers, p 548); proskuneō (Προσκυνέω, 4352) “to make obeisance, do reverence to” (from *pros*, “towards” and *Kuneō*, “to kiss”), is the most frequent word rendered “to worship.” (Vine, Unger, White, *Vines Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 686.

²⁷ “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

²⁸ Revelation 22:8-9

(proskuneō) God. As can be seen by the angel's assertion; we are not to worship our fellow servants. Is it therefore appropriate for the Second Council of Nicea and the Orthodox Church to encourage the worshipping of icons of angels? A second example from the Scripture is most helpful:

*“And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped [proskuneō] him. But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man.”*²⁹

Peter forbids Cornelius worshipping him, pointing out that he also is a man. As can be seen from the context of the passage, the plain intent of Peter's statement is to show Cornelius that he is not to worship (proskuneō) a man. Thus, it is clearly contrary to the Scriptures for the Seventh Ecumenical Council to approve the proskuneō of images of the “Saints and of all pious people.”³⁰

A third example of the Bible forbidding the worship (proskuneō) of a creature is:

*“Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship [proskuneō] me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship [proskuneō] the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”*³¹

In this text, Satan is addressing the human nature of Jesus Christ. He knows that the divine nature of Jesus will not worship God. God does not worship himself. Yet, we do see the human side of Jesus worshipping the Father. In the Scriptures, we see Jesus kneeling before the Father in worship a number of times. Jesus Christ's reply in the above text is a clear indication that He recognizes His need, as man, though without sin, to worship God and God alone. Our Lord Jesus Christ refused to worship (proskuneō) Satan, and by His example and declaration showed that proskuneō belongs to God.

The New Testament does show two examples of men bowing down in proskuneō worship before other men,³² but in these examples the worshipers are under condemnation. Would the Orthodox Church be willing to use these two examples to justify its worship of images of men?

A pertinent response at this point may be: only proskuneō worship of a creature in conjunction with falling down before it seems to be forbidden. The following comment made by Gregory Koukl³³ addresses this matter:

*“By the way, it isn't just falling down and worshipping that's condemned. There are twelve references where demons, idols or the beast of Revelation are merely proskuneo, worshipped (no reference to "falling down") and it's condemned. But the addition of the notion of falling down in other places merely makes the meaning impossible to miss in the context.”*³⁴

²⁹ Acts 10:25-26

³⁰ Percival et al., p. 1032.

³¹ Matthew 4:8-10

³² Matthew 18:26; Revelation 3:9

³³ “He is an adjunct professor in Christian apologetics at Biola University.”

<http://www.str.org/site/PageServer?pagename=GregsInfoPage>

³⁴ <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5379>

Falling down (prostration) and proskuneō worship of icons is a feature of the present day Eastern Orthodox Church, as Bishop Ware shows:

“An Orthodox prostrates himself before these icons, he kisses them and burns candles in front of them...”³⁵

Orthodox writer Timothy Copple came to the conclusion that proskuneō worship is due unto God alone:

“...the Greek seems to use the word "proskuneo" to only refer to worship which can only be given to God.”³⁶

The assembled three hundred and fifty bishops fully endorsed the worship (proskuneō) of icons and relics as the official record of the council shows:

“The holy Synod cried out: So we all believe, we all are minded, we all give our consent and have signed. This is the faith of the Apostles, this is the faith of the orthodox, this is the faith which hath made firm the whole world. Believing in one God, to be celebrated in Trinity, we salute the honorable images!”³⁷

The Eastern Orthodox Church rests upon the decrees of the Seven Ecumenical Councils which are considered to be infallible.³⁸ If the Eastern Orthodox Church has accepted a council proclamation,³⁹ which subsequently is shown to have contradicted the Bible, then the Eastern Orthodox Church has to seriously rethink some of its beliefs and practices. Bishop Ware is informative on this point:

“But they see in the period of the councils the great age of theology; and, next to the Bible, it is the seven councils which the Orthodox church takes as its standard and guide in seeking solutions to the new problems which arise in every generation.”⁴⁰

From this statement, it is obvious that Bishop Ware understands that the Bible has priority over the councils. This would be especially apparent when there is a disagreement between the two. As the Scripture says: “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...*”⁴¹

An inevitable question is: how can such a large council of men be wrong? The Orthodox Church, itself, has rejected the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 754) and the Council of Florence (A.D. 1431-1445). The Scriptures provide the answer to this question. In the words of Paul the Apostle, “*that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another.*”⁴²

³⁵ Ware, p. 31.

³⁶ http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/icon_bowing.aspx

³⁷ Percival et al., p. 1033.

³⁸ “How then can one be certain that a particular gathering is truly an Ecumenical Council and therefore that its decrees are infallible?” (Ware pp. 251-252.)

³⁹ “The Iconodule position was upheld by the seventh and last Ecumenical Council (787), which met, as the first had done, at Nicaea. Icons, the council proclaimed, are to be kept in churches and honoured with the same relative veneration as is shown to other material symbols, such as the ‘precious and life-giving Cross’ and the Book of the Gospels.” (Ware, p. 31.)

⁴⁰ Ware, p. 35.

⁴¹ II Timothy 3:16

⁴² I Corinthians 4:6

The second commandment of the Law that God gave to Moses says:

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me...”⁴³

The Scriptures give a fearful warning to those that worship images: *“And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship [proskuneō] devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk...”⁴⁴*

The Seven “Ecumenical” Councils are valuable to the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ where they defend and elucidate the Scriptures. However, in the areas where they contradict the plain teaching of Scripture, they must be ignored. The Lord Himself emphasized that if we keep His word we demonstrate that we love Him. *“Jesus answered and said unto him, if a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me.”⁴⁵* Again, *“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”⁴⁶*

The Bible clearly shows the result of building upon a scriptural foundation and also the consequences of not doing so:

“Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.”⁴⁷

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⁴³ Exodus 20:4-5

⁴⁴ Revelation 9:20

⁴⁵ John 14:23, 24

⁴⁶ Matthew 24:35

⁴⁷ Luke 6:47-49