Feature Article: **JAF4406**

HOW WAS ORTHODOXY ESTABLISHED IN THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS?

by Bradley Nassif

Among the many challenges to historic Christian faith, a revisionist interpretation of the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy in the early church is particularly influential in our day. A "historical reconstruction" of orthodox Christianity appears repeatedly in popular format through television documentaries, videos on the history of the Bible, and sensational articles in tabloid magazines at the grocery store.

This attempt at reconstruction goes back to at least the scholarly work of Walter Bauer in the nineteenth century. It is carried forward today by a small but influential group of scholars represented by Bart Ehrman (hereafter referred to as the Bauer-Ehrman thesis). These scholars assert that so-called "orthodox Christianity" is a later fabrication of the early church that must be abandoned because it never really existed in the first place. "Orthodoxy" was simply the victory of powerful emperors and bishops over so-called "heretical" groups such as Gnostics and Montanists. The stakes are high in this battle. A "new orthodoxy" — the gospel of diversity — challenges the church's claim that Jesus and the apostles taught a unified message.

A refutation of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis has been offered by New Testament scholars Andreas J. Kostenberger and Michael J. Kruger in their book *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Crossway, 2010). My article here seeks to complement their work by the age of the great Ecumenical Councils (AD 325–787), and how the two spheres of church and emperor worked together in establishing Christian "orthodoxy." Admittedly, this short article permits only a sketch of the issues involved in the definition of orthodoxy during these formative centuries, but hopefully it will provide readers with a reliable compass to guide them through this complex period of Christian history.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SEVEN ECUMENICAL COUNCILS (AD 325–787)

The Ecumenical Councils are the common heritage of all classical Christians, whether they are Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or historic Protestant. The ancient term *ecumenical* was not used in the modern sense of interfaith dialogue or the World Council of Churches. Rather, it comes from a Greek word *oikoumene*, meaning "inhabited world." The Ecumenical Councils were gatherings of all the bishops from the inhabited world of the Roman Empire who were convened at the invitation and expense of the emperor so that church leaders might decide matters of faith for the unity of both church and empire.

The conclusions reached by the seven Ecumenical Councils were as follows:

1. The Council of Nicea (325) condemned the heretic Arius and affirmed the incarnate Son of God as identical in being (*homoousios*) with the Father.

2. The first Council of Constantinople (381) settled the Arian controversy and completed the Nicene Creed, thus affirming the dogma of the Holy Trinity.

3. The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned Nestorianism and declared that there were not two persons existing side by side in Christ (God and a man called Jesus) but that the divinity and humanity were united in one Person, the incarnate Son of God. Consequently, Mary is the "*Theotokos*, Birth-giver of God."

4. The Council of Chalcedon (451) condemned the Monophysites because they refused to distinguish between the concepts of person and nature. If Christ were one person, the Monophysites claimed, He could not have two natures but only one. The council also rejected the Nestorians who separated the divine and human natures of Christ. Instead, the council confessed that the Incarnation consisted of a union of Christ's two natures (fully divine and fully human) in one divine Person.

5. The Second Council of Constantinople (553) was an attempt by emperor Justinian to win back the Monophysites by proving to them that the Council of Chalcedon had not fallen into the heresy of Nestorianism.

6. The Third Council of Constantinople (680–681) condemned Monothelitism, the belief that while Christ has two natures, He has only one divine will. The orthodox confessed that Christ has two wills with the human will subject freely to the divine will.

7. The Second Council of Nicea (787) defined the orthodox doctrine of images (icons) of Christ or the saints. The council made a distinction between the "worship" and "reverencing" of icons. Icons may be reverenced but never worshipped. Icons bear witness to the Incarnation.

Starting with the fourth century, Ecumenical Councils differed from previous local councils in two respects: they were convoked by emperors, and their decisions became imperial law. The legal use of doctrine was the immediate goal of the emperors to ensure the unity of the empire. None of the Ecumenical Councils were attended by each and every bishop in the empire, and their doctrinal conclusions were almost never immediately accepted. However, through a Spirit-led discernment process, which is beyond our space to explain,[1] the councils all were received eventually by the mainstream church. Deliberations among the bishops in council did not seek a majority vote but the adoption by all of Christian truth. Heretical majorities such as the Arians, Monophysites, and iconoclasts at times succeeded in imposing their views on councils, but were later deemed to be false. The mere fact of their being a majority, therefore, cannot be regarded as a criterion of truth. In fact, truth in the church sometimes was held by a distinct minority of heroes such as St. Athanasius, who defended the full divinity of Christ against the opposing Arians, or St. Maximus the Confessor, who defended the divine and human wills of Christ against a powerful heretical emperor.

BYZANTIUM: A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

Politically, all the Ecumenical Councils took place in the Byzantine Empire. The terms *Byzantine* or *Byzantium* come from nineteenth-century German historians to describe the Eastern half of the Roman Empire that continued to exist after the Western half of the empire fell to the Barbarians in AD 476. The Byzantine Empire lasted from c. 330–1453 as the continuation of the old Roman Empire. Church and state formed a single organism, each having its own sphere of influence: the clergy for the church, and the imperial power for the state. Beginning with Emperor Constantine, this new relationship between church and state made it inevitable for Byzantine emperors to play an active role in church affairs. Christian emperors and citizens alike accepted the emperor's role as providentially appointed by God.

Several contemporary arguments are used by followers of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis to support the claim that emperors defined orthodox doctrine. For example, during the Council of Nicea (AD 325), Eusebius of Caesarea, a court bishop, described Emperor Constantine as "a bishop among the bishops." Should this be taken literally as proof that the emperor possessed the sacramental qualities of a bishop, as proponents of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis contend? No; it was simply an honorific, flattering way of speaking about the emperor's benevolent leadership. There is no evidence that Constantine, or any of his successors, ever attempted to celebrate communion at the church's liturgy or serve as a sacramentally ordained clergyman.

Another example of how modern scholars sometimes misinterpret the work of emperors can be seen in how Eusebius described Constantine as an "overseer of those outside" ("*episkopos ton ektos*"). Is this phrase proof of *caesaropapism*? Caesaropapism is a term that describes the power of Roman emperors who allegedly controlled church doctrine, thereby creating "orthodoxy." However, as we will see below, the belief in caesaropapism is a misinterpretation of historical data. Most early church historians

today understand the phrase "overseer of those outside" as a reference to those outside the church. It describes the emperor's missionary duties to assist the church in evangelizing non-Christians within the empire. It is not a description of his control over church doctrine.

Evidence for this interpretation is supported by the burial rites and a specific title given to Emperor Constantine. When Constantine died, he was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople alongside purported relics of apostles, and given the title "equal to the apostles" — all indicating his apostolic function as "overseer of those outside" the church.

When turning to the later emperor Justinian, we learn that he had much too good a grasp of theological principles to take seriously the formal claims of caesaropapism. His attitude is indicated in his famous edict, Novella 6, issued in AD 535 and repeated in many other Byzantine texts. The edict describes an ideal theory of harmonious government by two interdependent authorities, that of emperor and the clergy: "The greatest blessings of mankind are the gifts of God which Have been granted us by the mercy on high: the priesthood and the imperial authority. The priesthood ministers to things divine; the imperial authority is set over, and shows diligence in, things human."[2] The goal to be achieved was an agreement, or "symphony," between these two institutions, not the subjection of one to the other.

THE ROLE OF THE EMPEROR

The Ecumenical Councils were both ecclesiastical and political institutions. They were ecclesiastical because they represented the mind of the church. They were political because their gathering and external management was made possible only through the emperors who would enforce (not decide) the theological conclusions of bishops. Nevertheless, the role of the emperor in the Ecumenical Councils was complex and messy at times. Several examples will illustrate how emperors intervened in church affairs, but also how the bishops had a mind and will of their own.

Take, as our first example, the debates at the Council of Nicea (325) concerning the heretical teachings of Arius, who denied the Son's full divinity. The bishops could not decide which words to use in describing the shared divinitybetween the Father and the Son, so Emperor Constantine proposed the now-famous Greek word *homoousios* meaning "consubstantial, of the same nature." The term may well have been suggested to him by his theological advisor, bishop Hosios of Cordova in Spain, but nearly 300 bishops who assembled at Nicea accepted the emperor's proposal. The term was used to exclude Arius's theology, but it did not become a significant term of debate until St. Athanasius pushed for it around AD 345 in his letters *Against Arius* (book 3) and *History of the Councils*. The term became controversial due to its associations with modalism, a heresy that collapsed the distinctions between the three Persons of the Trinity into one divine being who manifested Himself in three different modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Eventually the term was accepted by the wider church at the Council of Constantinople in 381 as a proper description of the Son's equal divinity with the

Father. The historical push and pulls associated with the acceptance of *homoousios* demonstrate that the final acceptance of the term came not from emperors but from the church exercising its spiritual responsibility to repudiate doctrinal distortion.

A further instance of the church's ultimate rejection of imperial interference into church doctrine occurred in the eighth and ninth centuries when emperors Leo III (717–741) and Constantine V (741–775) opposed the use of icons. Of all the Byzantine emperors, they were the only ones who formally claimed both spiritual and temporal powers. Influenced by Islamic caliphs who saw no distinction between temporal and spiritual powers, Constantine V wished to be both "priest and king." In 754, he convened the Council of Hieria and stacked the deck with over 300 bishops who supported his iconoclastic views. The temporary triumph in opposing icons, however, as eventually rejected by the later seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, followed by a resurgence against icons but then permanently affirmed in 843 in a document known as the Synodikon (an anathema of all the great heresies of the previous centuries). An abbreviated version of the Synodikon is still read in all Eastern Orthodox Churches on the first Sunday of Lent in a service known as "The Feast of Orthodoxy."

THE TRIUMPH OF ORTHODOXY

This brief sketch of the relations between church and state in the age of the Ecumenical Councils illustrates complexities that were involved in the formulation of orthodox theology. It demonstrates that the church and its tradition never ultimately bowed to the imperial will, even though there were false councils and internal strife. Even the true councils were never accepted automatically and rarely won the acceptance of the entire church at once.

Moreover, orthodoxy was never viewed as one of many possible "orthodoxies" to choose from; nor was it the result of caesaropapism by Roman emperors despite occasional attempts to the contrary; nor was it the victory of powerful bishops over oppressed theological minorities. Rather, the triumph of orthodoxy was the triumph of the Spirit of Truth over error. It was the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" (Nicene Creed).

Bradley Nassif, PhD, is professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at North Park University (Chicago) and a specialist on the theological history and spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy in the ancient and modern worlds. *The New Republic* has described him as "the leading academic expert on Eastern Orthodox and Evangelical dialogue."

NOTES

1   For details, see Bradley Nassif, "'Authority' in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition," in *By What Authority?* ed. Robert Millett (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 45–50.
2   *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes*, ed. Deno John Geanakoplos (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 99.