

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_canadian-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php)

# The Significance of the Ecumenical Councils<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM NICHOLLS

THE SEVEN Ecumenical Councils have such importance for the Orthodox Church that it has been possible for some of her representatives to define her as "the Church of the Seven Councils."<sup>2</sup> No Western Church regards Ecumenical Councils with quite this degree of seriousness, nor does any single out these particular seven in the way that the Orthodox Church does. Councils have, of course, been retained in the Roman Catholic Communion, and a not inconsiderable number of them, including the Second Vatican Council, have been designated as "Ecumenical," both before and after they have taken place. Indeed, since the Middle Ages, any Council called by the Pope, and therefore representing the whole Roman Communion (i.e., in the eyes of its members, the whole of the Catholic Church), has been classed as ecumenical *per se*. But the surprise occasioned by the decision of Pope John XXIII to convoke the Second Vatican Council was a witness to the prevalence, within as well as outside the Roman Communion, of the opinion that the age of the Councils had been brought to an end by the new role assigned to the Pope himself by the developments of the nineteenth century. Even Vatican II was assigned no role of dogmatic definition, whereas when Pius XII considered that the time was ripe for a definition of the dogma of the Assumption of our Lady, he refrained from calling a Council, though it is understood that he consulted the Roman Catholic episcopate, without calling its members together. On the other hand, the willingness of the Roman Communion to continue the definition of dogma, with or without a Council, is an indication not merely of its confidence in its own full catholicity and ecumenicity, but of the failure of the Seven Councils to retain in the West that sacrosanctity they have assumed in Orthodox eyes.

Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church certainly accords to the Seven Councils of the undivided Church full dogmatic authority and indeed infallibility, even if she does not consider that they have said all that needs to be said about the content of revealed truth. The Anglican and Protestant traditions, with which the present paper is concerned, lack such a precise view of the authority of the Councils, nor are they altogether at one in the convictions they do hold. In view of the controversies of the time, most of

1. A paper given at the Consultation between Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Theologians at Montreal, 1963.

2. Cf. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 43. But presumably a full definition of Orthodoxy would include the liturgical witness.

the classical documents of the Reformation period say what little they have to say about the Councils in a somewhat negative form. They are concerned that the authority of the Councils shall not be set up against that of Scripture, and that they themselves should not be committed in advance to submission to the findings of a Council meeting under papal leadership or pressure, and without adequate representation from their own side. Fuller discussion of the ancient Councils is reserved for the literature of the second phase of the Reformation, when its doctrines have to be defended against the attacks of papalists and sectaries. At this stage a somewhat more positive tone is heard, and it emerges that four at least of the Seven are held in very high honour, and their pronouncements acknowledged to be in the fullest accord with Holy Scripture. But it does not appear to me that this more positive tone takes the theologians of the Reformation as far as an explicit definition of the authority of Councils, though at this point it may be said that certain Anglican writers, and certain Anglican official pronouncements, constitute something of an exception to this generalization. Here, however, we are confronted with a phenomenon that has marked Anglicanism right down to the curriculum of theological teaching, a reverence for the first *four* of the Seven Councils, coupled with virtual silence about the rest. This phenomenon, at first sight if hard to explain, at present seems to me to have quite deep roots in the Western attitude in general.

The Reformation view of authority, as we all know, lays very great stress upon Holy Scripture, as the supreme and in some sense sole authority in the Church. At the same time, nothing is more clear from the writings of the Reformers than the respect in which they hold the corporate mind of the Church, as expressed especially in the earlier periods of the Church, when the abuses of which they complain were less conspicuous or non-existent. Whereas, however, in dealing with the authority of Scripture they are on their own ground, speaking positively about a crucial element in their own theology, in their references to Councils they are more guarded: *prima facie*, the Councils belong to the territory of their opponents, and they must show, first, that no such absolute authority attaches to the Councils as they have claimed for Scripture, and, second, that in any case the Councils speak for them rather than the papalists. But once these points have been made polemically, they are free to praise the doctrinal achievement of the Councils and make clear their own firm adherence to the doctrines and definitions there elaborated. Many of the references to Councils in the literature of the Reformation have in mind rather the possibility of a future Council than the authority of past ones. The Reformers inherited from the Conciliar Movement of the late Middle Ages the notion of a great council gathered together by the Empire and committed to the reformation of the Church "in head and members."<sup>3</sup> In the previous century, the movement had had genuine success, limited and temporary though some of its victories were. The Church had not been

3. Decree, *Sacrosancta* of the Council of Constance, 1415.

turned into a constitutional monarchy, but some of the worst scandals of schism had been brought to an end. All the Reformers, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican, alike appealed to a free General Council to discuss and settle the issues raised by them and others. But in such an appeal lay the risk that the Council would be captured by the forces of conservatism, and that its decisions would be unilaterally arrived at under papal control. The Reformers had to guard themselves against being committed to signing a blank cheque for a Council in which their case might never be heard properly, as indeed it was not properly heard when Trent met. Undoubtedly some of the discussion of the Councils of the past is carried on with a glance over the shoulder at future possibilities. The authority of Councils is no academic question for the Reformers.

It follows that the most frequently urged position about Councils in the literature we are considering is the negative one: the Councils are not Scripture, and they can neither contradict it nor add to it; likewise, not being Scripture, they may err. In any case, so fresh and dynamic is the Reformation view of Scripture, at its most typical, that it must, for those who feel its excitement, inevitably thrust any other or relative authority into the background. The Reformers are innovators, in relation to the earlier advocates of reform whom they superficially resemble, in holding a dynamic view of Scripture as a living Word of God which speaks directly to faith, and indeed elicits faith, where it is rightly preached and expectantly read. Their predecessors, including such men as Wyclif and Hus, seem to have regarded Scripture rather as a legal document containing the constitution and ground-rules of the Church, and in this sense certainly an instrument for the reform of both doctrine and manners. If, however, Scripture is a legal document, it needs an interpreter, to decide doubtful questions, just as Parliamentary law needs courts and judges. To the extent that Reformation writers do regard Scripture as a legal document—and it must not be forgotten that they sometimes do speak in his way—they see a need for Councils as a court of final appeal.<sup>4</sup> More characteristically, however, they find in Scripture a living, self-authenticating Word of salvation, which needs no authority outside itself, either to support or to interpret it. It is this experienced capacity of Scripture to be God's saving Word which goes far to justify the extreme Reformation assertions of the sufficiency of Scripture, summed up in the phrases *sola Scriptura*, *Scriptura Scripturae interpres*, *perspicuitas Scripturae*. Extract these slogans from the experience of hearing and believing God's living Word of judgment and mercy, and you have no problem in refuting them. Within that experience, it makes perfect sense to say, with the Anglican Article VI, "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation," and to refuse to admit any authority external to it. As the vehicle of the Gospel, Scripture needs no support. The doubts which may arise over the details of doctrinal interpretation, or through the

4. E.g. Luther, *On the Councils and the Churches* (*Works of Martin Luther*, Vol. V, Philadelphia Edition, 1930-43), p. 253; Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, I, x, 14.

findings of historical criticism today, need not obscure the Word in its essential content, the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

However, the Reformers recognize that the voice of Scripture is heard within the community of the Church, and that they are not the first to hear it. The Word has always created for itself a company of believers, and at no time in the history of the Church, even at its blackest, have true believers been lacking to the Church. Indeed, the Reformers accept from the traditional Western church the assumption that the Church has a teaching authority. What they are concerned to deny is that it extends to the creation of doctrines or moral precepts not contained in Scripture. Calvin grants that the Church cannot err "in so far as, having forsaken its own wisdom, it allows itself to be taught by the Holy Spirit through God's Word."<sup>5</sup> But Luther, Calvin and the rest are at one in asserting that a Council cannot invent any new doctrine whatever. This is the theme that runs, for example, through Luther's lengthy discussion in *On the Councils and the Churches*. When he finally comes to summarize his position in ten points, he begins by the general assertion that a Council has no power to establish new articles of faith, because the four chief Councils did not do so, and drives home the point, again by reference to the ancient Councils, in his first two: "A council has no power to establish new articles of faith, despite the fact that the Holy Ghost is with it," and "A council has the power, and is bound, to suppress and condemn new articles of faith, according to Holy Scripture and the ancient faith."<sup>6</sup>

Calvin denies the infallibility of Councils on the best of theological grounds, namely the eschatological one that the Church is not yet the perfect Church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, Councils may err by forsaking Scripture; the *latrocinium* of Ephesus II frequently recurs to the mind of the Reformers. But, this said, Calvin can be surprisingly positive:

I venerate (the Councils) with all my heart, and desire that they be honoured by all.

We willingly embrace and reverence as holy the early Councils, such as those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, Chalcedon, and the like, which were concerned with refuting errors—in so far as they relate to the teachings of faith. For they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture, which the holy fathers applied with spiritual prudence to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen. In some of the later councils also we see shining forth the true zeal for piety, and clear tokens of insight, doctrine and prudence. But as affairs usually get worse, it is to be seen from the more recent councils how much the church has degenerated from the purity of that golden age.<sup>8</sup>

But the test of a council's work is Holy Scripture, and this test must, of

5. *Institutes*, IV, 8, 13.

6. *On the Councils and the Churches*, pp. 243f.

7. *Institutes*, IV, 8, 12.

8. *Ibid.*, IV, 9, 1, 8.

course, be applied by others as well as by the fathers of the councils themselves. A council may not interpret Scripture without appeal.<sup>9</sup> Clearly Calvin would have welcomed the notion that a council is not to be regarded as ecumenical in advance, but must obtain recognition from the corporate mind of the Church in the light of Scripture and the common tradition.

If we now turn to the Church of England, to seek its mind on the significance of the councils, we are confronted, as I have suggested, with a special case in relation to the Reformation Churches as a whole. How special, and in what way, is notoriously a disputed question. Those who have been most concerned to claim a Catholic character for the Church of England have often sought to show that she does not in fact hold the distinctive Reformation positions, or that she took the first opportunity to get rid of them. To me, this is no more convincing than the position of those who deny that Anglicanism is a special case at all, and see it without qualification as one of the three main traditions emerging from the Reformation.<sup>10</sup> It seems to me neither possible nor desirable to deny that the Anglican Church is committed to such Reformation positions as the supreme authority of Holy Scripture, and justification by grace alone, through faith alone. The question that Anglicanism raises, both in relation to the continuing Catholic tradition in the West, and to the other churches which underwent the Reformation of the sixteenth century, is whether these doctrines are so incompatible with Catholic Christianity as both sides have been apt to suppose, and it is gratifying for an Anglican to note the way in which the same question is being adumbrated today by such Roman Catholic theologians as Hans Küng.

Anglicanism is at least special in this, that an explicit affirmation of the doctrinal authority of the four first General Councils is contained in an important document of the Elizabethan settlement, the Act of Supremacy of 1559. "Provided always . . . that such person or persons to whom your highness . . . shall . . . give authority to have or execute any jurisdiction, power or authority spiritual . . . shall not in any wise have authority or power to order, determine or adjudge any matter or cause to be heresy, but only such as heretofore have been determined, ordered or adjudged to be heresy, by the authority of the canonical Scriptures, or by the first four General Councils, or any of them, or by any other General Council wherein the same was declared heresy by the express and plain words of the said canonical Scriptures."<sup>11</sup> Likewise the canon which imposed subscription by the clergy to the XXXIX Articles also declares that they are "to be careful that they never teach ought in a sermon, to be religiously held and believed by the people, except what is agreeable to the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments, and what the Catholic fathers and ancient bishops have col-

9. *Ibid.*, IV, 9, 14.

10. It is interesting to read Karl Barth to the contrary in *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 1/2, p. 610.

11. Quoted, for example, by R. H. Bainton, *Age of the Reformation* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1956), p. 147.

lected out of the same doctrine." The theologians of the time, Hooker, Jewel, and Field, echo in their several ways this respect for tradition and in particular for councils.

The recognition of the first four General Councils seems somehow to have become a distinguishing mark of Anglicanism, and since as a theological decision it is not self-explanatory, it is interesting to enquire how it came about. The question appears to be a somewhat obscure one, and I can only tentatively suggest where an answer might be sought. The origin of the position within Anglicanism may well lie in the Act of Parliament just quoted, as is implied by King James I in his *Premonition*.<sup>12</sup> J. T. McNeill, in a footnote in his edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, on IV, 9, 8, suggests that Calvin's own recognition of the authority of these four influenced Bullinger to set an account of these Councils at the head of his *Decades*, a work that is known to have had a great theological influence in England, and was indeed commended by Convocation in 1586 to the study of unlicensed preachers.<sup>13</sup> Certainly the standard theologians, with few exceptions, seem to concentrate their approval of the Councils in these four, and as recently as 1930 we find the bishops in conversation with the Old Catholics seeking and receiving from them an assurance that they regard the first four Councils as the most important.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Anglican theological students tend to end their study of the doctrinal developments in the early Church with the Council of Chalcedon.

Luther, writing a few years earlier than the composition of the passage in Calvin just referred to, lays the same stress as Calvin on the first four: "To be sure, I have not read all the Councils, and shall not read them all and lose all that time and effort, since I have read the four chief councils thoroughly, better than any of them have done. Also I make bold to say that, after the four chief councils, I will hold all others of small value, even though I would hold some of them to be good." And again, "in all the books there are not more than four of these councils that are famous or well-known, and so the Roman bishops compare them to the four gospels, as they cry in their decretals."<sup>15</sup> According to the editor of the Philadelphia Edition of Luther's Works at this point, C. M. Jacobs, the reference is to *Decret. Grat.* dist. 15, c. 2, where Gregory the Great's celebrated allusion<sup>16</sup> is quoted. Here, conceivably, lies the clue to the nature of the tradition about the four chief councils which so strongly influences Luther, Calvin, and through them the Anglican tradition. Once the West continued the series of Councils reckoned as Ecumenical beyond the number of seven, the fifth, sixth, and seventh did not stand out so clearly from their successors as the first four may be admitted to do. And Gregory's remark about the four

12. P. E. More and F. L. Cross, *Anglicanism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1935), p. 3.

13. G. W. Bromiley, *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, L.C.C. Vol. 24, 1953), p. 284.

14. Lambeth Conference, 1930, meeting with bishops of the Old Catholic Church: *Lambeth Occasional Papers*, 1931-38, p. 31.

15. *On the Councils and the Churches*, pp. 109, 145.

16. Ep. 25, to John of Constantinople and the other patriarchs.

Gospels, made at a time when two of the other Councils had not taken place, and while the fifth remained in certain aspects highly controversial, seems to have greatly influenced the West. Nor, surely, are the Reformation writers wrong in seeing something altogether fundamental in the work of the first four Councils, as having basically refuted all the principal heresies that could logically arise in connection with Christology.<sup>17</sup> If these suggestions are well founded, it remains puzzling why the four Councils in question are regularly described as undisputed. Clearly someone has disputed every council, if only those whose doctrines were anathematized. And granted the disputes which took place in connection with the Fifth and Seventh Councils, they hardly exceed those which arose over Ephesus and Chalcedon, as a result of which the Church was faced with schisms hardly less grievous than that between East and West, or those of the Reformation period. Perhaps "undisputed" should be taken to mean, "not disputed by Luther or Calvin and their followers!" This, if true, might be a somewhat embarrassing conclusion.

One of the writers I have mentioned, Richard Field, takes a more favourable view of the later Councils than his predecessors, and it is noteworthy that his opinion seems to be based on very thorough study. At any rate, his is the first well-known study of the authority of Councils within Anglicanism that goes into real detail; his essay, indeed, amounts to several thousand words; it appears in the fifth book, published in 1610, of his work on the Church.<sup>18</sup> Field, with characteristic commonsense, points out that Councils can scarcely be necessary to the Church, since she got on quite well without them to the time of Nicaea. "Notwithstanding," he goes on, "General Councils are the best means of preserving unity of doctrine, severity of discipline, and preventing of schisms, where they may be had . . . ; and howsoever there may be a kind of exercise of the supreme jurisdiction that is in the Church by the concurrence of particular synods, and the correspondence of several pastors, . . . , yet the highest and most excellent exercise of the supreme ecclesiastical jurisdiction is in General Councils."<sup>19</sup> Field shares the reluctance of the Reformers, and of the Anglican tradition generally, to admit infallibility anywhere outside Scripture. He will not grant to General Councils an authority equal to that of Scripture.

Though the inspirations and resolutions of Bishops in General Councils proceed from the same Spirit from which the Scriptures were inspired, yet not in the same sort, nor with the like assurance of being free from mixture of error. For the Fathers assembled in General Councils do not rely upon immediate revelation in all their particular resolutions and determinations, as the writers of the books of Holy Scripture did, but on their own meditation, search and study, the general assistance of Divine grace concurring with them. . . .<sup>20</sup>

However, though Field thus attaches the authority of Councils to the

17. Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, V, iv, 10.

18. Quoted at length in More and Cross, *Anglicanism*, pp. 142-155.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 151.



general authority of the Bishops and other ministers taking part in them, and to the ordinary grace by which these are guided at all times, he is not reluctant to accord to Councils a very high degree of authority:

Yet when there is a lawful General Council . . . we are so strongly to presume that it is true and right that with unanimous consent is agreed on in such a Council, that we must not so much as profess publicly that we think otherwise, unless we do most certainly know the contrary.

Concerning the General Councils of this sort that hitherto have been holden, we confess that in respect of the matter about which they were called, so nearly and essentially concerning the life and soul of the Christian faith, and in respect of the manner and form of their proceeding, and the evidence of proof brought in them, they are and ever were expressly to be believed by all such as perfectly understand the meaning of their determination.<sup>21</sup>

Field reckons six Councils<sup>22</sup> as being worthy of this sort of assent; the seventh he regards as dealing with manners, not faith, and as suspect through what he conceives to be its later consequences in the West. Field's study as a whole is especially impressive, and should be mastered by anyone attempting to reach a conclusion on the matters he deals with.

The great spokesmen of the Reformed tradition today, Barth and Brunner, have little expressly to say on the Ecumenical Councils, since the question is for them absorbed in the larger one of the authority of the confession of faith. Looking at the Scriptures today in the light of the ancient Councils and of the Reformation Confessions, which reiterate the authority of the creeds of the early Church, the Protestant theologian can acknowledge that the Word was rightly heard and borne witness to by the men of the past. The Councils are to be commended, precisely because of their fidelity to Scripture. Brunner argues that the Reformed Churches possess no dogma, in the sense of *credendum*, but only confessions of faith, in the sense of *creditum*, and argues that the form of the earliest Protestant Confessions bears him out.<sup>23</sup> However, it is not so clear that the Confessions differ in this respect from the Ecumenical Councils themselves. Barth, on the other hand, admits the term dogma, but rather characteristically grounds its authority on the commandment: "Honour thy Father and thy Mother."<sup>24</sup> His massive discussion of authority under the Word in *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 20, 2, shows an awareness of the humble responsibility incurred by those who dare to recognize that they are in a *status confessionis*, that reminds us of his own experiences in Germany in the 1930's, and of his part in the Barmen Declaration. His insistence upon the necessity for seriousness of the *damnamus*, the *anathema*, may contain a valuable lesson for the Ecumenical Movement as it approaches the point of crystallizing the results of years of debate. For Barth, the authority of Confessions

21. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

22. Cf. Cosin, More and Cross, *Anglicanism*, p. 55.

23. *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), p. 156; but cf. *Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), Vol. I, pp. 52ff.

24. *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 585; *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1949), p. 13.

does not bind, as Scripture does, but none the less must be respected and taken seriously, and not lightly controverted. A biblicism which ignores the findings of the Church receives no respect from Barth. I have not been able to find in these writers any separate doctrine of the Councils; they fall into place in the general doctrine of the authority of church tradition, which is the authority, for them, of the past hearing of the Word.

In the final portion of the paper, I turn to the consideration of the influence of the Ecumenical Movement upon the Western non-Roman traditions in their view of the Councils, and to sketch out the kind of view which I think might now emerge. Those who have followed the proceedings of the Christ and the Church Commission of Faith and Order, which were recently reported to the Fourth World Conference, will note the way in which its discussions have implicitly accepted as authoritative not only Scripture but at least the four first Councils. In particular, there has been much play with a Christological analogy, which can be valid only if the Chalcedonian formula is certainly true. One of the most striking developments in the last period in ecumenical theology has been the growing appreciation of theologians for the work of the fathers and the Councils, and particularly for Chalcedon. A generation ago, so great a man as William Temple could say of Chalcedon that it "represents the bankruptcy of Greek patristic theology." Few would echo that sentiment today. Apart from a general renewal of scholarly interest in the patristic period, the major credit for this development is probably to be assigned to Karl Barth. Not only does Barth take Chalcedon as the basis for further reasoning, he is prepared to make use of post-Chalcedonian refinements such as those associated with the name of Leontius of Byzantium. In short, there has been a general upgrading, as it were, of the status accorded to the Councils by Western non-Roman theologians. As we leave the stage of biblical theology, which has held sway since the end of the war, and enter the realm of true dogmatics, we become more ready to appreciate not only the faith but the professionalism of the conciliar fathers.

Secondly, the ecumenical movement itself has given us an insight not only into the procedures of councils, but also into the positive significance for theology of the method of solving problems by conciliar discussion. Basic to the ecumenical movement is the practice of meeting in conference, face to face.<sup>25</sup> We have learned that we cannot expect to understand the point of view of a theologian of another tradition merely from reading his books. Only when we meet him, and engage in dialogue with him, so that our interpretations of his position are subject to his instant correction, can we seriously expect to know what he means, or correspondingly to be able to explain ourselves to him. Many of the disputes of the patristic period turned in part at least on differences in terminology; while some of the greatest men were able to see this, there were exceptions. It seems to be a step forward when the Fifth Ecumenical Council is able to incorporate such

25. Cf. the Constitution of the Faith and Order Commission.

different emphases within its own thought, while warning against the one-sided conclusions that might be involved in each way of speaking if it ignores the witness of the other.<sup>26</sup> More positively, many have toyed with the idea that the World Council of Churches may be the seed from which will grow a renewal of the practice of the authorized teachers in the churches conferring with each other right across Christendom, and coming to agreement about the faith which they teach. Some, like Professor T. F. Torrance of Edinburgh, look forward to a definition of the Church which might join the series of Christological definitions undertaken by the ancient Councils.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the Second Vatican Council has brought the idea of a council, and particularly one with an ecumenical aim, vividly before the consciousness of Western Christendom.

Before turning in conclusion to the question of whether the West might come to a more positive appreciation of the Seven Councils venerated by the Orthodox, it might be helpful to consider some of the problems which would arise for the West if the suggestion of a future ecumenical council ever reached the stage of seriousness. Outside the Roman Communion, there could certainly be no question of a Council being regarded as Ecumenical in advance. One could conceive of a highly representative body being gathered together in connection with the World Council of Churches, especially if it were to come about that the Roman Catholic Church joined in the Council, as so many of the Orthodox Churches have now done. Such a body might be called a Council, and it might be regarded as ecumenical in the modern acceptance of the term, as in the phrase, "ecumenical movement." But its authority, great as it would obviously be for us all, could hardly be accepted unconditionally in advance. It would be a very different Council, from the Anglican and Protestant viewpoint, from Trent, inasmuch as it would include the Orthodox and ourselves, on equal terms. Clearly we should look to it with very high hopes. But to enrol it in the select list, whether the list now be four or seven long, would be a matter for the subsequent judgment of Christendom. However, I take it that if we adopted this attitude we should only be returning to what has always been the Orthodox practice.

Secondly, even if the non-episcopal churches did not take part, and my assumption is that they would, we should not want the Council to be confined strictly to bishops, if the utterances of some of our most influential past theologians are to guide us today. Not all our bishops are very highly educated theologically, and, if they are not, they are not always willing to submit to the guidance of their theologians. While the bishops for us too retain the right of final decision as to what is of the essence of the Christian faith, they have no sort of infallibility, and their decisions can have no validity if they ignore Holy Scripture. Many theologians are in plain fact far more competent to read the mind of Scripture on the points now at

26. Anathemas 7, 8, 9.

27. *Conflict and Agreement* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959-60), Vol. I, p. 233.

issue than the vast majority of bishops. So priests and laymen should be present at such a council, and their voices clearly heard. By the same token, the representatives of the non-episcopal churches would have to take part if the Council were to have any usefulness in resolving the kind of problems that divide us in the West. But untraditional in certain ways as such a Council might be, I do not see what is to prevent the Church at large from subsequently recognizing that it had indeed succeeded, if such were the case, in determining and resolving the matters hitherto under dispute, and in bringing about a union between the separated churches. If so, I cannot see why it should not come to be regarded by all parties as an "Ecumenical Council" in the sense of those of the past. As we have seen, the West is not altogether at one in the significance which it attaches to these past Councils.

I have just implied, and I should want to stand by this implication, that the role of such a Council would for us be limited to declaring the mind of Scripture and the past witness of the Church, especially in its undivided state, upon the matters under dispute. Likewise, no infallibility could be claimed for it. Infallibility is even less acceptable to us now, since the rise of historical criticism, than it was at the time of the Reformation, and I am confident that the vast majority of the Western theologians associated with the Ecumenical Movement would echo Calvin's eschatological objection to the idea. Moreover, we hardly accord infallibility in all matters even to Holy Scripture. Whatever our formularies may say, it had better be faced that most of us feel not only free but obliged to read Scripture in the light of the most rigorous and scientific historical criticism that we can bring to bear upon it. All this raises large questions about the nature of revelation, which in my judgment are far from having been solved even by the rather extensive literature on the subject produced in the last thirty years. However, we should all agree in believing that the gates of Hell shall not prevail against the Church, and that divine Providence will always prevent the whole Church from falling into grievous error in a matter affecting our salvation. There may well be a kind of infallibility which is not the same as the verbal inerrancy of a theological formulation.

More positively, the authority of such a future Council would derive for us very largely from its representative character. One reason that we have for rejecting the ecumenicity of the Western councils which have taken place since the schism with the East is precisely that they are purely Western, and we do not reckon the West to be the whole Church. This does not exclude the possibility that the whole Church might later come to accept some of them as ecumenical, on the ground that they correctly declared the common faith. Similarly, Anglicans at least have not dared to claim for their own synods any such ecumenicity, and we have avoided the making of confessions of faith, since we do not regard ourselves as a body competent to make them. Perhaps we should listen more carefully to Karl Barth here, and admit that even quite a small group of Christians may find themselves

forced into the *status confessionis*. Even so, and in spite of the loyalty which we ought to accord to such a confession if we found ourselves shut up by God in the necessity of making it, we should have to await the judgment of all the churches before we could ask them to regard it as binding also upon themselves. But with all these qualifications, I seriously believe that we should all regard a truly representative Council as competent to decide and pronounce upon the most important at least of the matters which divide Christendom today.

If this is our view of a possible future Council, what of the past? I have shown that the first four Councils are already held in very high honour, under Scripture and short of infallibility. I do not believe that we are likely at any time to accord them more authority than we now do. We may come to use their formulations much more frequently in our teaching than at present. What of the other three? This seems to be a question on which the West might well be invited to re-examine its mind. Here I should not be justified in speaking other than personally, beyond the reminder that there is, at least in Anglicanism, a minority tradition of regard for the authority of at least the Fifth and Sixth Councils. I believe that we shall in fact come to have an increasing regard for the theological work done at Constantinople in the sixth and seventh centuries, as we in general get more deeply once more into the problems of Christology than we have in recent years. I am bound to say, however, that the condemnation of the Three Chapters is likely to present in our time something of the problem it created in the West at the time of its enactment, if the matter is now pressed. As for the Seventh Council, it might be embarrassing if I were to quote some of the utterances of Protestant theologians and formularies in its regard. None the less, for myself I look forward to its increasing acceptance, for it seems to me that it was on sure ground when it invoked the Christological analogy in favour of the icons, and that the Eastern church, in its stricter interpretation of that Council, has gone along a surer way than the West. Had the Reformers known of the Eastern attitude to icons with the same intimacy which they had with the Western use of images, it is possible that they might all have followed Luther in his more tolerant attitude in these matters. But I doubt if such a development is to be looked for outside the Lutheran and Anglican traditions for a long time to come, and if it does come, I think it will be the fruit of a liturgical movement, rather than of dogmatic theology.

The question which the "other three" Councils pose for the non-Roman West is, I believe, this: Can we ignore the representative voice of the Church, speaking through Councils which have been accepted as ecumenical in both East and West? If we are *sure* that they are against Scripture, we ought to do it. But are we so sure?