

Christian Synods in the Ancient World

Introduction

Synods and synodality (which I take to mean, historically, the continuous practice of holding synods) is not only nothing new in the history of Christianity; it is one of its oldest and most turbulent practices. In early Christianity, the Greek word *synodos* (synod) is the equivalent of the Latin *concilium*, or council. Synods/councils of various kinds were habitual and regular in Christianity – both in those ancient churches with well-elaborated hierarchies and legal codes, and in post-Reformation churches whether they have hierarchies and legal traditions or are “free” churches. Typically these councils have been the source, or the collection point, of the laws of the churches and therefore are also legislative bodies. They were called to solve problems at a level beyond the authority of one bishop in one locality.¹ It is undeniable, however, that despite their attempts to restore ecclesiastical harmony, synods in early Christianity often were disputed or ignored; were accelerants of battles over doctrine or practice; and led to lasting divisions still present among those churches founded in antiquity. The rejection of councils created the Coptic Orthodox Church; the Armenian Apostolic Church; the Syriac Orthodox Church; the Assyrian Church; the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; and, finally, the Greek Orthodox Church and the later orthodox churches originally founded by Greek missionaries.

The year 325 is the chronological dividing line in the history of early Christian synods; the Synod of Nicaea was the first ecumenical, or “worldwide” council, so labeled by Eusebius of Caesarea² Previously, there had been local or regional (provincial) councils; the so-called Council of Jerusalem, ca. 50, is generally treated separately because the term synod is not used of it in Acts 15 (and cf. Gal 2?)³ In this period, beginning in the late second century, there are records of numerous synods that are larger than local (municipal) synods, but only if their acts are preserved can their procedures and decisions be known.

These councils took place in Rome, Ephesus, Carthage, Iconium, Antioch, the Province of Arabia, Elvira, Neocaesarea, Ancyra, Arles and Alexandria – in other words, across the churches in Roman-administered areas. Furthermore, these are councils accepted as orthodox councils by later historians; if there were councils among groups judged heretical or schismatic, their records are not known. After 325, there were still local councils; but ecumenical councils took place generally at the behest of the imperial government, consulting with church leaders; and they met in larger cities in or close to Constantinople.

We still lack a comprehensive and accessible overview of early Christian synods in all their complexity, if we understand them as meetings of particular Christian groups, regularly or occasionally, to address particular problems of church life and teaching. A further problem with

¹ Certain aspects of early Christian For a clear and detailed discussion of the development of the law of earliest Christianity, see Wilfried Hartman and Kenneth Pennington eds., *The History of Byzantine and Eastern Canon Law to 1500* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012) and note the essay by Susan Wessel, “The Formation of Ecclesiastical Law.”

² (*Life of Constantine* 3.6; cf. Athanasius *Contra Arianos* 1.7 and later Epiphanius *Haer* 70)

³ Although Acts treats the synod very briefly, it is worth noting that it gathered “apostles and elders,” probably on the model of local Jewish councils, to deal with whether Jewish law at the time applied to those gentiles who joined followers of Christ who followed Jewish dietary rules.

studying councils and their decisions – and particularly their language and procedure -- is the way in which contemporary church historians and historical theologians tend to treat the practices and records of Christianity as if they took place in a solely Christian social world, isolated from the influence – practices, overlapping personnel, social conditions, etc. – of the surrounding social world that, until the fifth century at the earliest, was majority pagan and dominant, particularly among the powerful of Roman society.

Common Terms for Councils: Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian

It may be useful to clarify the most important terms applied to early Christian gatherings. Christianity (*christianismos*), meaning an act, state or condition – as distinct from the institution it later became – because it arose within Second Temple Judaism, did not originate with a set means of government beyond that of Judaism; rather, that government developed over time – first, because following Christ arises from the decision of a person to engage in a change of heart or to respond to an act of power such as an exorcism, and so the evangelists conceived of numerous recorded encounters with Jesus in the Gospels (with the exception of Jesus' teaching-sessions); but second, as Christians congregate, beginning with the apostles and disciples, they and their leaders began to employ the habits and customs of the larger social world in which they lived, both in their encounter with Roman regional and urban life and as already established as a precedent in II Temple Judaism. It's worth noting also the resemblance of Jesus' followers to a school (whether an interpretive or philosophical school) with its own habitual rules of continuity (e.g. recorded teachings, classroom procedure, community life)⁴, and Jesus' claim of authority over the rabbis sitting in council (advanced in Luke 2:22-38) and in his discourse to/lament over Jerusalem Mt 23:37-39 (and note, this disaster is understood to have happened because its ruling council had not honored its founding constitution, the covenant between God and Israel). Christianity is, however, beginning with Christ, profoundly 'constitutional' and therefore obligated to councils, we will explore below. This was crucial as a model for Christian writers in subsequent generations.⁵

By the late third century, Christian assemblies⁶ (*ekklēsiai*) were spread across the Mediterranean world and into Persia and southern India. As early as the missions of Paul and other emissaries (*apostoloi*) they were beginning to organize on a regional level in order to

⁴ cf Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*.

⁵ It could be argued that the first councils invented solely by Christians for a uniquely Christian form of life are late, originating in the monastic movement – in the Pachomian communities with their rules, the “synodia” of the northern-Egyptian communities, the rules of Basil (all 4 c.) Augustine (5 c.), and in Italy in the sixth-century *Rule of the Master* and *Rule of Benedict* with their constitution, officers, and elected abbots and mandatory obedience for members. But these organizations surely had benefited and drawn from the conciliar habits of wider, non-ascetic Christianity. And the term *ekklēsia*, which in a linguistic sense permits the development of the council, is already understood in a highly complex way, from its beginnings (at least in Christianity) in Mt. 16.18.

⁶ I translate *ekklēsia* as “assembly,” in this lecture and generally, instead of as “church” because the latter term, derived from a Latin expression meaning “the Lord's house,” signifies either a building or a congregation, where the former clearly refers to a congregation as a *meeting* whether local, regional or ecumenical.

consult with each other to face challenges and threats both internal and external, and to exchange oral teachings and written documents; and although the authorial voices of early Christianity were more likely to be teachers (*didaskaloi*; occasionally prophets/visionaries) or catechists (e.g. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria/Caesarea, Julius Africanus) at the same time, the supervisors (*episkopoi*) of the major cities of the Roman Empire were also gaining strength because they presided at the community's work of worship (*leitourgiai*) led local, then regional, associations of congregations as the Christian population grew and social services – and wealth – through the multiplication of the Christian population and the accruing of wealth. By the late third/ beginning of the fourth centuries, bishops had become expert teachers as well – trained in philosophy and rhetoric, often with assistant teachers to whom they delegated tasks, and equipped with agents (*diakonoï*). Many if not all of these communities assembled their own libraries – either in episcopal residences or in the houses of non-officer families.

This vocabulary for the normal structure of Christian assemblies and their officers reflects the political organization of the Empire, likely because Christian texts use a common political language. They do this because they conceive of Christianity as a city or community (*polis*; *politeuma*) here on earth as a colony of the city around the court of God (here the relevant terms are given in Greek, though there are equivalents in the languages of Christian communities to east and west – Syriac, Coptic, Armenian and Georgian, and eventually Ethiopic; and Latin with associated local languages). This level of complexity and political density led naturally to the arrangement of synods, in the first three centuries of Christian communities. They were a well-established practice by the early fourth century, but they had always been local or regional (usually in the major city of a region, e.g. Carthage).

Because synods were already a well-established practice, the ancient *ecumenical* councils cannot be understood to have arisen in the fourth century as a series of gatherings to solve problems in a newly legitimized church, one on its way to becoming the sole legitimate cultus of the Roman empire. They do not simply begin with the Council of Nicaea, even though that council became a potent symbol of both inspiration (in its neologism, the *homoousion*) and frustration (its contested legacy, and the obscurity of its procedures because of the loss or destruction of [?] its acta)

The origins of synods or councils in Christianity are thus much older than the early fourth century, and they arise not only as a solution for problems in the life of the community, but because of how early Christians understood themselves to be the new Israel, and the true Israel refounded by Christ in his twelve apostles, parallel to Israel's twelve tribes. Christianity, from the earliest period, is thoroughly political. The evangelists clearly indicated in their accounts of the entry into Jerusalem that Jesus was a king, and therefore political – so the gospels portray him even if they use the word sparingly because of its dangerous “leakage” from theories of ancient kingship with a divine monarch, as contrasted with the variously just or unjust kings of earlier Jewish literature, particularly in the Old Testament, understood as human, and the eschatological expectations of certain II Temple discourses regarding the Anointed.

Consequently, most authors of the early church also understood the church as inescapably or naturally political, because it is, from the first, understood not only as a gathered community, but as a city. This can be seen in Mt 5.14, where in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus as second Moses instructs his disciples as to their behavior and their constitution.

However interpreted, this discourse establishes the serious followers (i.e. disciples he gathers) of Jesus as a second and superior, covenanted community, bound by rules of behavior oriented toward the restoration of the people and the arrival of the kingdom of God. But writing his letters before the composition of the written gospels, Paul writes in Phil 3.20, “our *politeuma* is in the heavens,” indicating that the *ekklesia* here is a colony of the heavenly political organization – again, following the terminology for Greek cities established as colonies of an older city. Further words drawn from the Greek political vocabulary show up in the earliest generation of Christian authors after the New Testament authors; just to cite a few, So Ignatius of Antioch in Eph 9.2 uses the term *synoidiporos* for fellow traveler or fellow martyr; cf Martyrdom of Perpetua 15 (Gk version) such that *synodia* is journey in company, Christian fellowship or local congregation. The word appears again for the community in Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* 3.4.3, or in the Liturgy of St. James a eucharistic gathering and even a community of the zealous and celibate in Basil *Asketikon* 1.32 In the *Letter of Diognetus*, as well, *politeuma* is in heaven while Christians are a “third race.” Later, in the writings of Origen (who is an important witness to the functioning of councils, church officials govern the church as a *city* (Contra Celsum 3.30.15). We might understand, as well, the Book of Revelation as an institution of a *politeuma* entirely arising in the court of God, setting the precedent that the sacrifices of martyrs are the sacrifices of this city, though an invisible city, which however to non-Christians look like executions on the part of a well-ordered city (note bivalent interpretation) But this is a city whose government is both prior to, and existentially different from, human cities. Jesus and his disciples and literary followers like Ignatius, have used the language of city and citizenship disanalogously to the city and citizenship of, e.g., Smyrna or Corinth.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that Jesus did this, according to the New Testament sources, as a Jew, at a time when the authority of the political structures of Judaism came into conflict with those of the Roman authorities, and not just in his life – for instance, the rabbis recorded in Josephus’ *Jewish War* who were martyred with their students because they removed Roman eagles that the governor had placed eagles on the walls of Jerusalem; or Philo who attests that Jews throughout the empire would lie down and offer their necks rather than have Jerusalem defiled by those who did not admit the supremacy of Adonai. The latter were not resident in Jerusalem but have loyalty to it as their polis.

Thus the Jewish attachment to their holy city, made famous in the Books of the Maccabees and other, extra-canonical literature, gives later Christian readers one source for understanding the *ekklesia* as a *politeuma*, and one worth dying for if necessary. This attachment to the city is so well-known as to need no further elaboration here; in the II Temple period it was articulated by sages, prophets, visionaries and teachers; in apocalyptic and legal discourse where the Temple standing in Jerusalem is also understood as a mirror of the Temple in heaven and so just as holy; and continuously, where the holiness of of synagogues and their governing councils is understood as standing in continuity with the Temple, hopes for the rebuilding of which lasted into the late fourth century.⁷The term *synodos* is, of course, older

⁷ Under the reign of Julian, “the apostate” emperor, who was said to have intended to rebuild the Temple as a rebuke to the Christian community. It’s worth noting here that the Sanhedrin/synedrin is in its very name a marker of the adaptation of Greek judicial apparatus in Jewish governance; later it generates rabbis and courtrooms, the *beit-din* of which the nearest contemporary example is at

than Christianity and also predates Judaism, although the Septuagint uses the word *synodos* three times as a term to translate the Hebrew equivalent, and *synodeuein* (“to meet in a synod”) three times.⁸ But the Septuagint translators, working in Alexandria in the third century BCE, knew well the meaning of a *synodos*, and they adapted the word to the Hebrew that they had in their text (*knš* is the root). But inevitably, and possibly deliberately, the use of the word raised associations with the use of *synodos* in Greek, first applied to city-government, and then under the Roman empire, to regional government. In Greek, a *synodos* is always a political assembly. But importantly, there is no political assembly in the classical or Hellenistic or Roman Greek world that is not also cultic – and this would also conform to the Second Temple Jewish usage. There really is no division between what, post-Enlightenment, western European thinkers consider the separable realms of “politics” and “religion.” From the records of Athenian society, *synodos* means meetings under the divine aegis: in court, in political clubs or conspiracies, in private meetings for discussions – *dialektai* – of in a “national” gathering in the Hellenistic period⁹. And like municipal or regional synods, Christian synods depend upon a pre-existing Greek *paideia*, or a Latin version of the same thing; and efforts of Christian teachers to consult with their peers about all kinds of problems they encounter in one locality, or all together (such as what to do with those who lapsed in persecution, as in the Councils of Carthage under Cyprian) And then the practice of assembling councils spreads further, beyond Greek and Latin speaking cultures: into Syria and Mesopotamia, where in the latter they assembled under the rule of the Persian Shah and responded to his views. Councils, bishops and the resultant canons became the way to resolve difficulties in Christian life – whether in response to controversies or with regard to practical difficulties.

If Christian church synods, similarly to their II Temple Jewish sources and analogues, took as their model the form, order and record-keeping of Greco-Roman state councils, usually at the urban level. City-councils always reported to imperial officials, and set the pattern for local governance aiming for harmony with imperial command. It is not wrong to see the relationship of local church councils to bishops, and then to patriarchs as an adaptation of this practice

At the same time, church councils gave a place of honor to copies of the written authority for their gathering – the scriptures regarded as *theopneustos*, or “divinely inspired.” Thus they also continued to see as their precedent an earlier form of the synod described above – the “Great Assembly” of Second Temple Judaism, and the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35) in

665 Beacon St. That body has its Catholic parallel in the local Roman Catholic Office of the Tribunal, the local example of which is in nearby Braintree.

⁸3 Kingdoms 15.23 13 καὶ τὴν Ἄνὰ τὴν μητέρα ἑαυτοῦ μετέστησε τοῦ μὴ εἶναι ἡγουμένην, καθὼς ἐποίησε σύνοδον ἐν τῷ ἄλσει αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐξέκοπεν Ἄσα τὰς καταδύσεις αὐτῆς καὶ ἐνέπρησε πυρὶ ἐν τῷ χειμάρρῳ Κέδρων.

Jeremiah 9.2 Jeremiah wants to leave “my people” who are “an assembly of the treacherous”
And Tobit 5.16,

Wisdom 6.23 /25 οὔτε μὴν φθόνῳ τετηκότι συνοδεύσω ὅτι οὔτος οὐ κοινωνήσει σοφία; and see Zachariah 8.21.

⁹ See Plato *Theaetetus* 3.104, *Symposium* 197D, and Aristotle, *Eudaimonian Ethics*, for whom “the ancient sacrifices and synods” means a “society for festal purposes.”

the year 50 AD, before Christianity had definitively separated from Judaism. The Council of Jerusalem, in turn, had as precedent the gathering of apostles and disciples at Pentecost, a Jewish feast to mark the passage of 7 weeks after the Passover.

Since the levels of government of the Roman Empire (ruling over areas speaking Latin, Greek and other regional languages) participated in the sacrality of the emperor, it was a matter of practice and record to stress the unanimity of councils' decisions. Those who attended councils, often trained in rhetoric and sometimes in philosophy, were highly educated males and were prominent in their cities or regions. Christian councils copied, and later amplified, this practice. Guided by the Spirit, responsible to the rule of bishops, they usually kept narratives or minutes of their deliberations and decisions. Thus they created legal precedents upon which all later councils could build, and which continued even among those churches that after the third century separated from the imperially-sponsored ecclesiastical body.

The Development of Law Before, and Because of, Synods

So we have seen that the church is inescapably political in its terminology and its organization, and that it's political in the first instance because many of its writers and, presumably, its broader membership, believed that it is a reflection of the city of God. It is in itself in its original and broadest sense a *synodos* of those who take the same path as Jesus, which we could say is the path that leads away from possessions and glory to the gentleness (mt. 11) Jesus insists upon for those who join him – they must imitate his own qualities and actions because he is their *proestos*, or presider, first in his epidemia, or visitation as teacher and leader; and after his departure, as their ruler in heaven.

Such a viewpoint, and the account above, may serve to temper the common perception of the high degree to which Constantine's "conversion," to Christianity, and his legitimation of the religion, turned Christianity into a state-like institution, ready to exhibit the "caesaro-papism" that supposedly characterized the Eastern Roman Empire in his Christian phase, especially in the fifth and sixth century. Politics requires laws, and Christians had been making law for themselves long before they allied with imperial officials. Already drafted into service in the reign of Constantine, lawyers (rhetores) increasingly practiced as Christians, and by approximately, 450 no non-Christian (i.e. no pagan or Jewish) advocates, and after Justinian no pagans could teach law. This decision overturned former opinions and conciliar decisions that Christians should not practice law. Meanwhile, the church had developed a kind of legal system, and again because of the need to regulate Christian practice. Thus James Brundage, historian of medieval canon law, can write:

The process [of making law] began early in the church's history, as its leaders discovered that goodwill and brotherly love were not in themselves sufficient to create a viable community. Rules and regulations for the orderly conduct of worship, the administration of property, and the management of relationships among its members proved essential to the peaceful operation of the Christian community.¹⁰

And Brundage lists as the first laws of Christianity the canonical status of the imperative statement in the second-century documents the *Didache*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the later

¹⁰ Brundage p. 40

third-century *Apostolic Tradition* (revised in the 4th?), and the *Didascalia apostolorum* that built upon the earlier texts¹¹. Synodal documents are collected, particularly in Rome, and become the basis for ecclesiastical law. Later laws thus were generated by regional councils – for instance, in Carthage over the years 220-30, to rule on heretical baptism, and then in the 250s Cyprian's councils use Roman senatorial procedure. Cyprian organizes seven councils after the Decian persecution 250-251: on the lapsed in persecution, and then confirming rebaptism of heretical baptism – to which Rome objected. Then, Donatist movement actually produced by a council 305, Cirta in Numidia, after which a council in 348, Carthage, arranges a reunion that proves temporary; 383 a Donatist council excommunicated Tyconius, influential upon Augustine, at which point Catholics in a minority; but there was another Donatist schism in 393, again at a Carthaginian council; until finally, the support of the emperor in 416 and 418 promotes Catholics; they reject Pelagianism, with other councils under Vandal rule until ultimately the church disappears in N Africa, but documents from this series of councils survive in medieval canon law collections.¹²

Ironically, then, the rise of imperial prosecution/persecution during these first three centuries, culminating in Diocletian's reign and ending in 313, with tolerance growing into sponsorship and domination of Christianity. By 381 Theodosius' *cunctos populos* had made Christianity the official religion of empire, and the Roman imperium can impose legal penalties for practicing other religions (though the problem of enforcement)

Thus during the fourth century, after the reign of Constantine, bishops gained judicial functions, and civil courts were required to recognize judgments of episcopal courts. An imperial constitution of 376, preserved in Theodosian Code, compelled ecclesiastical courts to observe the same procedures as those of civil courts. This had the further effect of eroding the boundaries between church and imperial courts, because this almost certainly meant that advocates were appearing in bishops' courts as well as in civil courts. The boundaries of the two, in short, overlapped. Imperial laws came to govern church property and revenues, marriage and family law (areas where there was a high degree of state interest – such as marriage between members of different classes, dissolution of marriages, and divorce; sex, theater/entertainment; military service, slavery, commercial and financial law, and contract law¹³. (Jones LRE)

By the late fourth and early fifth centuries, then, church law was growing, and councils are one of the main reasons that the law accumulated and (under Theodosius II and Justinian) became codified. Mostly bishops with high-level clerics, convening diocesan or provincial synods, and ecumenical councils allegedly summoned by patriarchs, including the patriarch of

¹¹ These rules had to do with Rules: the supporting of widows and orphans, duties of various officials of the community, relations between Christians and Jews, fasting and penance.

¹² J.A. Fischer and A. Lumpe, *Die Synoden von den Anfängen bis zum Vorabend des Nicaenums* 1997, H. Hess, *The Early Development of Canon Law and the Council of Serdica*, 2002 and Jane Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine* 1997. Note that these laws were all about regulating the community within, not unlike the vast corpus of rabbinic law that developed as Judaism in the Roman empire came to be isolated/inward under Christian influence *** to judge from sermons though, many frequented both church and synagogue as they did pagan shrines and church, or all three.

¹³ See Jones, *History of the Later Roman Empire*.

Rome: and this creates even more canon law. Conciliar canons, and the legislation of Christian emperors (note, Constantine calls himself in famous letter to Shah, the “bishop of those outside” Decretal letters (first one by Pope Siricius 385) , i.e. papal decisions in cases appealed to Roman church) are beginning to have the same authority as conciliar canons, and are included in collections of canon law from the fifth and sixth century. Also passages from Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine, the latter two of whom were bishops and trained rhetors, were incorporated along with papal letters.

Thus councils contribute to canon law, and canon law becomes a source for decision makers, giving rise to canon lawyers. Letter 24 of Augustine, Brundage notes, has to ask a lawyer friend about how to deal with a girl being sold into slavery by her parents. Brundage writes that “Augustine was following a practice, common among bishops who lacked [complete] legal expertise, of relying upon assessors, often drawn from the ranks of advocates or jurists, to advise them on the law.”

Advocates, in turn, were sometimes clerics – called *scholastici*, attached to bishops’ courts; and sometimes *defensores*, who were lay advocates and could act on the bishop’s behalf to defend church property, by this time grown to a large size. By the fifth century, the growth of the legal profession was greatly assisted by a relatively new opportunity for Roman professionals to exercise their craft – namely, the church.

The Effect of Nicaea

Once Nicaea convened, even though no procedural records were kept, its reputation as a sacral council increases the status of councils generally. Participation in Nicaea, largely from the East, may have assisted the spread the idea for councils into other parts of the Roman world and even into Christian groups on the border or beyond it. And after Nicaea, Nicaea itself becomes the ideal council in the minds of many even though the *horos*, or definition (?) was disputed and the council rejected or ignored, but at the same time the ecumenical council itself became authoritative. For the first twenty years after the council, there were a plethora of councils, with the construction and proposal of new creeds. Bishops divided into two camps, those supporting Athanasius and those supporting those bishops in agreement with Eusebius of Caesarea. The symbolon of Nicaea was unsatisfactory. How to gain the sense of orthodoxy and *homonoia* upon which the peace of the church and even more than that, divine favor, seemed to rest, and the clarity of a definition upon which to found theology.

The fateful answer is that it took bishops: Basil of Ancyra appealed to the idea of a succession of councils. But eventually the powerful bishop of Alexandria, in this case Athanasius, was successful through his writing: *De Decretis* to discuss the orthodoxy of the Nicene formula, and *De Synodis*, about how Nicaea was sufficient and authoritative of the church’s faith that never changed. Athanasius invoked the mind of the fathers” that expressed, he insisted, the intent or scope – the *skopos* – of the scripture. Athanasius also insisted that the number of the bishops present at Nicaea was 318, to fulfill the number of Abraham’s servants i Gen 14.14 – though because no records, the exact number of participants was disputed in different sources – again, because the minutes of Nicaea were not kept. Then in the 370s new players arose, Basil of Caesarea, succeeded by Gregory Nazianzenus and Gregory of Nyssa: beginning to add the Holy Spirit as an important factor and insisting that the scriptures proved

the Nicene formula. The meaning of Nicaea is disputed in the successive ecumenical councils, but what the early fourth century had done was to instantiate the council as the place for doctrinal clashes, echoing through the next centuries.

The growth and evolution of synods is far more complex and interesting than this essay has been able to show. The foregoing has been merely a sketch in aid of considering the growth of councils in the context of early Christianity. Although it has indicated the role of scripture, particularly as scripture presents the intentions of Jesus and of Paul the Apostle; and although it has tried to indicate how the growth of councils involved the non-Christian political context of the Eastern Roman empire and assisted in the production of laws governing the increasingly large community, it has not been able to consider the details of particular councils. Further readings are listed below.

Finally, this essay has not been able to indicate much precedent for direct lay participation – apart from the influence of wealthy benefactors and members of noble families involved in the church – in conciliar deliberations. There seems to be little precedent in early Christianity for extensive participation, at the level of the council, in ecclesiastical decision-making. Yet donors very likely exercised their influence, just as they did in the building and decoration of churches and monasteries across the empire, from Spain to the Caucasus.

Yet there is one programmatic exception to this silence, and it is the following:

Epilogue

I have written this essay as if early Christian synods were matters for bishops or chorbishops alone, along with their scribes, with the occasional presence of a government official. For the most part, councils included lay people only as scribes or “influencers” outside the general proceedings, although in some cases lay people are known to have participated. But in one of the ancient churches of early Christianity, laypeople have participated in church governance through councils from the fourth century. Much like other regions in late antiquity, Armenia began to hold regional councils to deal with internal matters. In the Synod of Ashtishat in 354, Bishop Nerses the Great, adopted apostolic canons, established poorhouses. There was a series of synods, attended by those in the Armenian region. The Synod of Shapapivan in 444, for instance, dealt with the succession to the Catholicosate; in 449-50, the synod of Artashat rejects demands of the Persian Shah Yazdegerd II for Armenia to adopt Zoroastrianism. And in each of these synods, note that **lay people participated and from that time to the present, lay people – now including women – are electors in Armenian councils.** Otherwise, the Armenian church followed the pattern of the earlier, “undivided” church in the ancient period. Further councils dealt with matters of Armenian church law and conduct: Valarshapat in 491 adopts Henotikon of Zeno but when Constantinople rejected it in 518, a schism arose. The Emperor Maurice’s sponsorship of Chalcedonian Armenians led to another schism, at Dvin 607, reunifying the Armenian church. Finally, the Council of Dvin in 719 dealt with liturgical practice, rejected the Paulician sect, and established canon law in the *Kanonagirk’*; the Synod of Manazert 726 rejects Aphthartodocetism, reconnected with Syriac Orthodox Church, and

sealed the Armenian church as Miaphysite, i.e. not in communion with either Latins or Greeks. And other regional churches held their own, “national” councils – for instance, in the Persian empire, with a series of councils in the “Nestorian” church from 410 to 775.

It is not the only irony in the history of Christianity that synods led not only to ecclesiastical law and further organization, and even cooperation – from the making of laws to their interpretation – but also to bitter arguments, long-lived divisions, and, finally, to ecclesiastical disunity that led to betrayal and persecution. Sadly, it has never been repaired completely. Synods seem to have been integral to Christianity from its origins; their history was not, however, without dispute and long-lasting tumult.

Select Titles For Further Reading

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