

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Saving the Church

Early church councils sought to save the church from heresy, but accomplished something quite different. Modern heresy-hunters risk doing the same thing.

“For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:23).

The history of Christianity in the first few centuries of its existence is a bewildering story of dissension and division. Church leaders debated a variety of issues, and local churches lined up on opposing sides as these issues were thrashed out. Eventually, as local bishops became more powerful and a Christian emperor (Constantine) came to power in Rome, councils were convened to settle on a common understanding of truth. These councils summarized their conclusions in formal creeds that defined the boundary between orthodoxy and heresy.

In reading the histories of this period, both by modern and ancient writers, it is common to come across references to these councils as having “saved the church” from heresy. There is no doubt that the councils achieved some level of doctrinal unity. But to claim that these ecclesiastical edicts saved the church assumes a premise that is faulty.

The church has only one Savior, Jesus Christ. He does not need men to step in and save it for Him. Any group of men who assume that role are challenging the headship of Christ.

Certainly false teachers exist, and their destructive work must be vigorously opposed (Matt. 7:15-20; Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; Jude 3-4). The issue here is not whether or not false teachers should be exposed, but *how* that opposition should be waged. The organizational arrangement that Jesus created for His people consists of local shepherds who are responsible for the flock among them (Ac. 20:28-31; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). Their involvement in fighting error begins and ends with their local group (see Jesus’ messages to the seven churches of Asia, Rev. 1-2; esp. 2:2). Since the days of the apostles, no man or group of men has been tasked with “concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). By dictating what “truth” is for all the churches, the delegates to the early church councils exceeded their authority.

This history lesson is relevant to us today, because a similar pattern is play-

ing out before us. Modern preachers and elders become alarmed at the threat posed by modern heresies. So they publish papers, hold meetings and lectures, circulate open letters, demand allegiance to creeds (disguised as questionnaires), and mount widespread campaigns to drive the heretics out — and thus “save the church.” The political machinery may be different, but the end result is the same: churches and brethren are forced to line up behind a handful of power brokers who are determined to preserve the purity of the faith.

Early church councils did not save the church. In fact, they *subjugated* the church, bringing large numbers of churches and Christians under the control of a handful of powerful men. Modern brotherhood crusaders, despite their good intentions, are laying the groundwork for that same kind of centralized dominance. Christ is perfectly capable of saving His people, through His arrangement of independent, self-governing local churches following His word. The greatest threat is from men who tamper with that divine plan.

– David King