

# General Councils

by J.H. Newman

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*General councils can err unless they are gathered in the name of Christ and meet certain conditions, including reception by the universal Church and scriptural proof in matters of salvation.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Timothy 3:16, James 1:5

**Topics:** "Church Authority", "Infallibility"

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## Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the fallibility of general councils, emphasizing that they may err due to the lack of divine guidance and the human nature of their members. However, there is a promise of infallibility when councils are gathered in the Name of Christ, under divine superintendence. The article discusses the conditions necessary for a council to be considered Catholic or Ecumenical, highlighting the importance of proving decrees by Scripture in matters essential for salvation.

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## Transcript

Article xxi. "General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of princes. And when they be gathered together, forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the SPIRIT and Word of GOD, they may err, and sometimes have erred, in things pertaining to GOD."

That great bodies of men, of different countries, may not meet together without the sanction of their rulers, is plain from the principles of civil obedience and from primitive practice. That, when met together, though Christians, they will not be all ruled by the SPIRIT or Word of GOD, is plain from our LORD'S parable of the net, and from melancholy experience. That bodies of men, deficient in this respect, may err, is a self-evident truth,--unless, indeed, they be favoured with some divine superintendence, which has to be proved, before it can be admitted.

General councils then may err, [as such;--may err,] unless in any case it is promised, as a matter of express supernatural privilege, that they shall not err; a case which [as consisting in the fulfilment of additional or subsequent conditions,] lies beyond the scope of this Article, or at any rate beside its determination.

Such a promise, however, does exist, in cases when general councils are not only gathered together according to "the commandment and will of princes," but in the Name of CHRIST, according to our LORD'S promise. The article merely contemplates the human prince, not the King of Saints. While

councils are a thing of earth, their infallibility of course is not guaranteed; when they are thing of heaven, their deliberations are overruled, and their decrees authoritative. In such cases they are Catholic councils; and it would seem, from passages which will be quotes in Section 11, that the Homilies recognize four, or even six, as bearing this character. Thus Catholic or Œcumenical Councils are general councils, and something more. Some general councils are Catholic, and others are not. Nay, as even Romanists grant, the same councils may be partly Catholic, partly not.

If Catholicity be thus a quality, found at times in general councils, rather than the differentia belonging to a certain class of them, it is still less surprising that the Article should be silent about it.

What those conditions are, which fulfil the notion of a gather "in the Name of CHRIST," in the case of a particular council, it is not necessary here to determine. Some have included among these conditions, the subsequent reception of its decrees by the universal Church; others a ratification by the pope.

Another of these conditions, however, the Article goes on to mention, viz. that in points necessary to salvation, a council should prove its decrees by Scripture.

St. Gregory Nazianzen well illustrates the consistency of this Article with a belief in the infallibility of Œcumenical Councils, by his own language on the subject on different occasions.

In the following passage he anticipates the Article:--

"My mind is, if I must write the truth, to keep clear of every conference of bishops, for of conference never saw I good come, or a remedy so much as an increase of evils. For there is strife and ambition, and these have the upper hand of reason."--Ep. 55.

Yet, on the other hand, he speaks elsewhere of "the Holy Council in Nicaea, and that band of chosen men whom he HOLY GHOST brought together."--Orat. 21.

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