

LESSON EIGHTEEN – Christological Controversies to Chalcedon

Christological Controversy

- The Trinitarian controversies of the 4th century led to two ecumenical councils. We see a similar pattern in the 5th century regarding Christological controversies.

As an oversimplification, the relationship of these four councils can be expressed according to the following scheme:

- 1. Nicaea (325) emphasized the oneness of God (Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with the Father).**
- 2. Constantinople (381) emphasized the threeness of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).**
- 3. Ephesus (431) emphasized the oneness of Jesus Christ (Mary is the *theotokos*).**
- 4. Chalcedon (451) emphasized the twoness of Jesus Christ (two natures).¹**

- The Christological controversies were primarily fought in the eastern half of Christendom. The westerners did not get as heavily involved, although Rome did have a crucial role in the official decisions.
- Political rivalries, especially between Alexandria and Antioch became more prominent than before.
- The elevation of the see of Constantinople to second rank behind Rome at the Council of Constantinople in 381 was a humiliation for Alexandria.
- In addition to ecclesiastical jealousy, one must note the different cultural and theological traditions influencing the churches of Antioch and Alexandria.
- The church in Antioch was in closer touch with Palestinian Jewish sources. It had more of a tradition of critical, rational inquiry. Church leaders in Antioch gave more emphasis to the humanity of Jesus Christ.
- The intellectuals in the church at Alexandria, on the other hand, were more under the influence of the philosophical Judaism represented by Philo and transmitted to later Christian thinkers by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The leaders of thought in Alexandria put more emphasis on the divinity of Jesus Christ.
- The differences between the Antiochians and Alexandrians had already surfaced in their different approaches to the refutation of Arianism, differences that set the stage for their Christological conflict.
- The Arians made much of those New Testament passages that suggested subordination of the Son of God to God the Father. Verses they quoted included **John 14:28 “the Father is greater than I,”** and **Matthew 24:36, “No one knows...not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”**
- In their response to the Arians, theologians at Alexandria argued that such passages were properly applied to the Son of God, but only in His incarnate state.
- The theologians at Antioch thought that this argument was in effect surrendering to the Arian claims of subordination. Taking another course, they referred to such passages not to the divine Logos but to the man Jesus, the human person. Both approaches provided a

defense of the Nicene theology, a refutation of Arian arguments and a framework for interpreting the gospels.

- The Alexandrian approach had no difficulty recognizing Jesus as God, but tended to diminish the importance of the human portrait of Jesus.
- The Antiochian response seldom had trouble taking this portrait seriously, but always found it difficult to say how this Jesus could be one with God.
- This difference is why Arianism and the Nicene creed kept coming up in the Christological controversy. Each side thought the other was selling out to Arianism.
- Although by the end of the 4th century Nicene theology had become catholic orthodoxy, its defense rested on different theological approaches.
- By the 5th century these different defenses had shaped two different theological traditions, which as a result undercut the appeal to tradition.
- There was a time, to about the end of the 2nd century, when bishops could appeal to a common tradition. In the Christological controversies however, we see the crumbling of the classical argument from tradition.
- The three phases of the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries concerned three positions that were judged heretical – Apollinarianism, Nestorianism and Eutychianism.

The Preliminary Phase – 362-381 – Apollinarianism

- The problem in understanding the nature of Jesus Christ has been characterized as the conflict between two Christologies. Alexandria followed a Word-flesh Christology, based on **John 1:14, “The Word became flesh.”** Over against it, Antioch followed a Word-man Christology, speaking of the Word joined to a human being.
- An extreme representative of the former approach was Apollinaris of Laodicea, one of the defenders of the Nicene creed.
- He explained that the divine Logos took the place of the human soul or spirit in Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus had a human body in which dwelled a divine spirit.
- The synod of Alexandria in 362 under Athanasius condemned those who rejected the belief that the Savior had a soul or mind, but the object of that condemnation may have been Arians rather than Apollinaris. The Council of Constantinople in 381 condemned the Apollinarians by name.
- Gregory of Nazianzus supplied the decisive argument against Apollinarianism with his saying,

“What was not assumed was not healed.”²

- That means for the entirety of human nature (body, soul and spirit) to be saved, Jesus Christ must have taken on a complete human person.

The Second Phase – 381- 433 – Nestorianism

- Cyril of Alexandria said that Nestorianism had its roots in Diodore. Diodore was a teacher in Antioch and later bishop of Tarsus. His students included John Chrysostom,

later bishop of Constantinople and Theodore of Mopsuestia. He was an opponent of Arianism and Apollinarianism.

- In his Christology, Diodore distinguished the Son of God from the Son of David.

“Never let the Word be thought of as Mary’s son,” he declared.³

- The indwelling of the Logos in the human nature is like a person in a temple or a person in his garments. There are two sons of God – one by nature and one by grace.
- Verbally, Diodore maintained the unity of the Savior, but he insisted on the completeness of Jesus Christ’s human nature, which the Apollinarians denied.
- Theodore of Mopsuestia was born in Antioch around 350 and also studied under Libanius with John Chrysostom. He entered a monastery, where he studied under Diodore. He was ordained as a presbyter in Antioch by bishop Flavian in 383 and then became bishop of Mopsuestia in Syria in 392.
- Theodore was known in the West as an exegete and Biblical critic who practiced a literal interpretation of Scripture based on the historical context.
- In the Syriac-speaking part of the Eastern church, Theodore, rather than Nestorius is remembered as the authoritative theologian.
- Theodore wanted a real humanity of the Lord. In describing the union of the divine and human he favored language of indwelling. The Logos lived in the man Jesus. While there is a complete distinction between the human and divine in Jesus, there is also such a unity of will and operation that the result is one person.
- Theodore thought in terms of the human Jesus who became God. Apollinarian thought in terms of the divine Christ who became man.
- Another important theologian and Biblical scholar in the Antiochian tradition was Theodoret. Born in Antioch, he had John Chrysostom and Theodore as teachers and Nestorius and John of Antioch as fellow students.
- He became bishop of Cyrus in Syria in 423, where he began a purge of heresy, an extensive building program and the writing of historical, polemical and exegetical works.
- The name Nestorius became attached to the Antiochian theological tradition by its opponents because of the condemnation of Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431.
- Nestorius was a presbyter and head of a monastery in Antioch when the emperor Theodosius II chose him to be bishop of Constantinople, a position to which he was consecrated in 428.
- He soon started a harsh campaign against heretics but became himself accused of heresy, charges prompted in part by jealousy and in part by his own aggressive personality.
- The sticking point in the controversy about Nestorius was the word *Theotokos* (God-bearer) as applied to Mary.
- The term became the flash point of conflict between two separate theological traditions that had taken root in Alexandria and Antioch.
- To supporters of the Alexandrian theology, the term seemed entirely appropriate. The divine Christ in the process of taking on flesh was truly in the womb of Mary; to say anything less was to deny the full divinity of Christ and the completeness of His union with the flesh.

- Nestorius and those of his theological tradition were concerned that the title made Mary a goddess. She was the mother of the man who was assumed by God, and nothing should be said that might imply she was the “Mother of God.”
- In November of 428, Anastasius, the chaplain to Nestorius, in a sermon denied that Mary is *Theotokos*, and Nestorius supported him against the protest that ensued because of the increasing honor to Mary in popular piety.
- In 429 the presbyter Proclus, who later became bishop of Constantinople, asserted that Mary is *Theotokos*, and Nestorius, who was present, began a spontaneous answer and the controversy was sparked.
- Nestorius was banished by the emperor after the Council of Ephesus. While in exile, Nestorius wrote a book preserved in Syriac under the title *Proceedings of Heracleides*, setting forth his life and defending his position.
- He claimed that the Word was associated with the human person at the first moment of life, but he offered *Christotokos* in place of *Theotokos* as a more appropriate title for Mary, for she was the mother of the resultant new person.
- The principal opponent of Nestorius was Cyril of Alexandria. In his Paschal letter of 429, Cyril defended the term *Theotokos*. The key text for Cyril’s Christology was **John 1:14**, **“The Word became flesh.”**
- Cyril applied a grammatical model to the understanding of the incarnation. The Word is the subject; the flesh is the attribute that the Word took on. Becoming flesh involved no change in the divine nature. The self-emptying of the incarnation was a change in the circumstances in which the divine exists, but not a change in divinity itself.
- The unity of Jesus Christ’s person is maintained, so much so that Cyril spoke of one nature because there is only one acting subject. The Logos unites flesh to Himself. The one person is not constituted by the union, but the one person of the Logos extends Himself so that humanity is included in Himself.
- The appropriation of the flesh is what Cyril meant by “composition.” His essential analogy was predication, not physical analogies. His comparison of the incarnation to the union of soul and flesh was not an illustration of how the union occurred but of the change of circumstances in which the one subject lives.
- A central theological difference between the Antiochians and the Alexandrians had to do with their approach to the question whether the divine was subject to suffering.
- Nestorius maintained the divine impassibility and so insisted on the difference between the divine and human in Jesus Christ.
- Because the divine impassibility was an axiom of Greek philosophy, the Alexandrians hesitated to assert that the divine suffered in Christ, but Cyril’s emphasis on the union of the divine and human in Christ approached an acknowledgement of this in his paradox that Christ suffered impassibly.
- When bishop Celestine of Rome heard of the dispute, he selected John Cassian to respond to Nestorius, which he did in his work, *On the Incarnation*. Celestine determined to side with Cyril and to try to reclaim Nestorius.
- The alliance of Rome and Alexandria still held: a synod in Rome condemned Nestorius in 430 and Celestine asked Cyril to conduct proceedings against him.

- Cyril had Nestorius condemned in a synod at Alexandria and sent notice of the action to Nestorius with a cover letter and statement of Twelve Anathemas that stated the Alexandrian position in an uncompromising form

The Council of Ephesus – 431 - and its Aftermath

- Theodosius II and Valentinian III called a general council in Ephesus. As the bishops began to gather in 431, the tactical maneuvering resulted in the most confused set of proceedings of any of the ecumenical councils.
- The council opened on June 22nd, 431, with 153 bishops present. Forty more bishops later gave adherence to the decisions.
- Cyril presided over the council. Nestorius was served citations but he renounced them. He was then declared deposed and excommunicated and the city of Ephesus rejoiced.
- On June 26th, John, bishop of Antioch and the Syrian bishops, who had been delayed, arrived. John held a rival council in his lodgings, consisting of 43 bishops and a count representing the emperor.
- They declared Cyril and Memnon deposed. Further sessions of the rival councils extended the number of excommunications.
- Reports of the activities reached Emperor Theodosius II and representatives of both sides pled their case against their opponents.
- Theodosius's first instincts, were to confirm the depositions of Cyril, Memnon and Nestorius. Finally, lavish gifts from Cyril and the intercession of his friends carried the day. Theodosius dissolved the council and sent Nestorius into exile, and a new bishop of Constantinople was consecrated.
- John of Antioch sent a representative to Alexandria with a compromise creed. This asserted the duality of natures, in contrast to Cyril's formulation but accepted the *Theotokos*, in contrast with Nestorius.
- This compromise creed anticipated decisions to be reached later at Chalcedon. The church at Antioch sacrificed Nestorius for the sake of peace. Cyril assented to the creed and a reunion of the churches occurred in 433.

The Third Phase (433-51) Eutychianism

- Nestorius was judged an extreme representative of those who stressed the “twoness” of Jesus Christ, although he later denied that he taught that position he was accused of holding, that Christ represented “two persons.”
- The Cyrillian emphasis on the “oneness” of Christ was continued by Eutyches and Dioscorus, both of whom lacked Cyril's balance and exhibited some of Nestorius's aggressive personality.
- Eutyches was condemned for an extreme advocacy of the one nature of Jesus Christ, also called Monophysitism. As an aged presbyter and monastic leader in Constantinople, he had opposed Nestorius. He adhered to the phrase that came to characterize his party:

“Two natures before union; but after it one.”⁴

- This formula gave lip-service to the humanity of Christ, but only as an abstraction, for from the moment of the conception of Christ the divinity was the acting subject in the person of Christ. Christ was essentially divine.
- At a synod in Constantinople in 448, at which its bishop, Flavian presided, Eutyches was deposed and excommunicated for teaching the one-nature of Christ.
- Cyril was succeeded as bishop of Alexandria by his arch-deacon, Dioscorus. He has been described as a brutal, proud, fierce ecclesiastic. Eager to vindicate Eutyches and seeking to duplicate the success of his predecessor, he planned another general council for Ephesus.
- Meanwhile, the Roman bishop, Leo I had confirmed the actions of the synod of 448 and had written a treatise to Flavian giving an analysis of Christology from the Roman perspective.
- Dioscorus presided over a gathering of 135 bishops at Ephesus in 449. Theodoret was excluded from the gatherings. The position of Eutyches was affirmed, the Twelve Anathemas of Cyril were approved as correct doctrine and representatives of a two-nature Christology, as known as Dyophysitism, were condemned.
- The club-wielding monks who accompanied Dioscorus showed their anger at Flavian by beating him so badly that he later died of his wounds.
- The atmosphere of intimidation was so strong that the papal delegates from Rome feared to read the treatise Leo had sent.
- Leo protested the actions at Ephesus in 439 and called the meeting not an ecumenical council but a synod of robbers.
- The Alexandrian theology lost its imperial patronage when Theodosius II died in 450. He was succeeded by his sister Pulcheria, who chose the general, Marcian, as her consort. Pulcheria favored Leo and the two-nature Christology.

The Council of Chalcedon - 451

- Pulcheria and Marcian called a general council for Nicaea in 451, but turbulent conduct forced them to move the meeting place to Chalcedon, nearer to Constantinople.
- Between 500 and 600 bishops assembled. The largest of the ancient councils. They were all Eastern bishops except for the Roman delegates and two bishops from North Africa.
- The first three sessions were concerned with the trial of Dioscorus and related matters. When the minutes of the robber synod were read, Theodoret was shown into the assembly at the mention of his name. The minutes at the synod of Constantinople in 448 were read and Flavian was declared orthodox.
- It was now clear where majority sentiment lay. As a result, Juvenal of Jerusalem and bishops of Palestine and Illyricum abandoned Dioscorus and went over to the Dyophysite side.
- Leo's treatise was read and greeted with the acclamation, "Peter speaks through Leo," although to some it sounded Nestorian. Dioscorus's deposition was pronounced and signed by the bishops.
- The 4th-6th sessions dealt with the question of drawing up a new definition of faith, which many were reluctant to do. It was agreed that the faith was to be based on the creed of

Nicaea as confirmed by Constantinople, expounded by Cyril at Ephesus and set forth in Leo's treatise.

- Several efforts to find acceptable wording failed but a committee finally produced the **Chalcedon Definition of Faith**. The crucial affirmation was that Jesus Christ consisted of two natures (divine and human) but was only one person.
- The official promulgation occurred in the 6th session before the emperor, with Pulcheria given the honor of presiding. The bishops gave the following acclamation:

“Many years to our emperor and empress, the pious, the Christian...To the priest, the emperor. You have straightened out the churches, victor of your enemies, teacher of the faith. Many years to the pious empress, the lover of Christ...to her that is orthodox. You have put down the heretics, you have kept the faith.”⁵

- The remaining sessions settled questions involving various bishops and adopted canons regulating affairs and relationships among the churches.

There are four aspects of the Council of Chalcedon and its importance to the history of the church.

1. Dogmatic

- The Definition of Faith in regard to the mystery of the incarnation is the chief element for which the Council of Chalcedon is remembered. The Logos was made man, so He had two natures: two *physes* or *ousiai* in Greek, two natures or *substantiae* in Latin.
- Cyril of Alexandria had a different vocabulary. Instead of using *physis* for each layer of Jesus Christ's being, he used *physis* or *hypostasis* for the unity of the personality. Hence, he became the great saint of those called by their opponents Monophysites. For the duality of Christ, he used such expressions as “quality of existence.” “natural quality,” or “property.”
- At Chalcedon the word *persona* or *hypostasis* was adopted for the unity of Jesus Christ's being and the *physis* or *natura* for the duality. Christ was affirmed to be not only *homoousios* with the Father but also *homoousios* with humanity, yet without sin.
- The Chalcedonian formula rejected the *tertium quid* of Apollinarianism, the two persons alleged against Nestorius and the one nature affirmed by Eutyches.
- The formula does not really explain how the two natures become one person; rather it adopts a terminology for the “oneness” and the “twoness” and marks out the boundaries of acceptable speculation. It preserved the mystery rather than explaining it.

2. Conciliar

- The Council of Chalcedon was important for defining the authority of councils. It identified the three preceding ecumenical councils: Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus.
- Up to this time, no one could have spoken of two or three ecumenical councils, for only Nicaea had general recognition as such.
- The council also defined which council's canons would be authoritative for the churches. This was an important step toward codifying a common canon law for the church.

3. Monastic

- The canons of Chalcedon defined the place of monks in the church. It was decreed that monks may not invade other parishes.
- No more intimidating bishops at councils like what happened with the Egyptian monks who beat Flavian. It also decreed monks must be subject to the bishop in whose diocese their monastery was located.
- No new monasteries were to be set up without the bishop's permission.

4. Constitutional

- The Council of Chalcedon confirmed the place of the church in Constantinople as next to Rome. The 28th canon grounded the authority of the Roman bishop in his place of residence and not on his connection to the apostles.
- Thus, was laid the basis for a long-standing dispute between Rome and the East on the constitutional basis of the church.
- The East followed a principle of accommodation, so that ranking of churches could be accommodated to political realities. Since Constantinople was now the capital of the empire, the new Rome, its bishop should be given a rank reflecting that reality. A primacy of honor was accorded to the bishop of Rome because of the historic association of Rome as the old capital of the empire.
- The bishop of Rome, on the other hand, steadfastly insisted on a principle of apostolicity: Rome had its position because of its connection with Peter and Paul. Leo accepted only the dogmatic part of the Council of Chalcedon as an ecumenical council.
- The ranking of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem as the principal sees of Christendom established a proto-patriarchal system of church government.
- The Council of Chalcedon formally closed the Christological controversy in the West, but in the East, it inaugurated a new period of debate.

The Chalcedon Definition of Faith

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures, being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.⁶

¹ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett page 255

² Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett page 258

³ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett page 258

⁴ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett page 263

⁵ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett page 265

⁶ <https://www.monergism.com/definition-council-chalcedon-451-ad>