The Council of Chalcedon

by Derek Thompson, June 2013

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Introduction

The early church's exploration of its beliefs about the trinity and the nature of Christ proved a test to church unity. The emperors wanted a unified church with a common faith. The Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople[1] had produced a creed that set out the beliefs of the Christian faith in trinitarian format. This gave rise to the Christological controversy of the fifth century over the diverse understandings of how Christ could be both human and divine. To resolve the issue, Emperor Marcian called together the Fourth Ecumenical[2] Council at Chalcedon[3] from 8th October to 1st November 451 C.E. It was attended by some 520 bishops (Norris, 1997, p. 1).

Summary of the Issues

Did Christ have a single nature, or two? Was the will of Christ human or divine?[4] Did the incarnation bring about a permanent change? Another point of contention that had been raised at the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (431 C.E.) was that if Mary was the mother of Jesus, who was both divine and human, it follows that Mary was *Theotokos* (=God bearer), or mother of God.

The two main schools of thought proposed divergent Christological positions. The Alexandrian school lead by Cyril (Bishop 412-444 C.E.) differentiated the situations before and after the incarnation when the Son of God (or divine Word/logos) became flesh and was able to suffer. Nestorius (Bishop of Constantinople 428-431 C.E.), of the Antiochene school, emphasised the humanity of Christ to disassociate divine impassibility from weakness and suffering[5]. Nestorius preferred to call Mary, the recipient of God, or mother of Christ (Norris, 1997, pp. 123-131)[6].

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1 The first Ecumenical Council, held at Nicaea (325 C.E.), formulated the Nicene Creed out of discussions about the divinity of Christ. The second council, held at Constantinople (381 C.E.), confirmed the Nicene Creed as being the touchstone of orthodoxy, added clauses about the Holy Spirit and condemned Arianism The third council, at Ephesus (431 C.E.), proclaimed the Virgin Mary as the Theotokos (mother of God) and condemned Nestorianism (Norris, 1997, p. 1).

2 Werner Loser sees in the ecumenical nature of the early church councils and their emphasis on the trinitarian nature of the Christian faith, a useful tool in ecumenical endeavours (1985, p. 239).

3 Chalcedon is near Constantinople (the modern Istanbul). Today it is called Kadiköy and is in modern Turkey ("Council of Chalcedon," 2013, p. 1).

4 There was a concern that if Christ's will was divine then his temptations were not real. Monothelitism was a 7th century heresy that taught Christ had two natures but only one will.

5 Divine impassibility was a concept carried over from Greek philosophy (Olson, 1999, p. 235).

6 "Nestorius's First Sermon against the Theotokos". Also, for *Christotokos* see (Stang, 2012, p. 534).

Emperor Theodosius II in the East called a council at Ephesus in 449, but it was far from impartial being dominated by Dioscorus of Alexandria. Rome and Antioch condemned it, Pope Leo calling it the "Latrocinium" or "Robber Council"[7]. The problem remained that to speak of Christ as having two natures sounded like Nestorianism (which taught that the human and divine natures formed two persons in Christ) (Nestorianism, 1983, p. 961). There was a concern that the divine nature in Christ would dominate the human nature to such an extent that he could only be thought of as having a single nature, but this would mean that Christ was not fully human and therefore could not represent humanity.

Power struggles in the Early Church

The political background to the dispute was both an obstacle and an impetus to the Council of Chalcedon reaching an amicable solution. In the fifth century the Roman Empire was divided between west and east with capitals at Rome and Constantinople, respectively. The increased use of Latin in the west while Greek remained predominant in the east had given rise to translation difficulties and misunderstandings. The eastern Emperor[8] had a more dominant position over the Eastern Church than was the case in the west, where Pope Leo the Great of Rome (440-461 C.E.) had dominance in the declining empire. Leo insisted that Rome, as the seat of Peter, should have pre-eminence in the church.

Since the seat of political power in the east was at Constantinople (New Rome), the successive Bishops of Constantinople wanted pre-eminence in the east. This was raised at the Council of Chalcedon and included as Canon 28 (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 248). Although Canon 28 did not dispute the supremacy of Rome, it would make Constantinople more powerful than Antioch and Alexandria, both of which had connections with the Apostle Peter. Pope Leo refused to accept Canon 28 (Price, 2009, p. 84).

Antioch and Alexandria were also rivals. The churches in the two areas had developed independently and had different theological schools and views resulting in a history of disagreement.

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7   The Eastern Emperor Theodosius II supported the Latrocinium, but he died in a riding accident in 450 C.E. and was replaced by Marcian and Pulcheria who preferred the Christology of Rome.
8   Marcian was emperor in the East 450—457 C.E.

The Christological Controversy

A Christology was sought that would meet all the requirements of being faithful to Scripture, be seen as reasonable in terms of current Greek philosophy, and be acceptable to both opposing schools of thought, conform to the declarations of the previous Ecumenical Councils, and be consistent with doctrines of the trinity and soteriology.[9] The controversy is outlined here as it engaged with Scripture.[10]

> **Mt 1:23** "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God with us.'"

Tertullian argued against Marcion and the gnostics that God's love for humanity was sufficient reason for God to take on human flesh (Norris, 1980, p. 68).

> **Jn 1:1-2 & 14** "In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. … And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Justin Martyr equated Logos (or the Word) with reason (Stevenson & Frend, 1987, 36). Theodore of Mopsuestia (the Antiochene School) interpreted the indwelling of the Son of God in terms of inspiration so that there are two hypostases or natures in Christ (Norris, 1980, pp. 25 & 120).[11] Cyril of Alexandria agreed to accept a two natures Christology[12] in the Formula of Reunion in 433 C.E. (Price, 2009, p. 70) but continued to call Mary the mother of God (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 226).

> **1 Cor 15:45** "Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

Apollinarius of Laodicea taught that the union of God and humanity in Christ was such that the spirit and intellect was divine and the lower mind and body was human (Norris, 1980,

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9   Charles Stang comments, "The christological controversy of the fifth century is notoriously difficult to understand, and even more to appreciate" (2012, p. 529). Stang says that what was at stake theologically was the subjectivity of Christ (and by extension, ours) in reply to Jesus' question :Who do you say that I am?" (p. 530). What does it mean to be an "I"? The Antiochene position leaned towards a dual "I", a position which Stang says is still in need of investigation rather than being bullied by cries of schizophrenia (p. 547).

10 Norris mentions the Scriptures listed as forming part of the 5th century discussion (Norris, 1980, pp. 3-5). Many others that are also relevant.

11 Also Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 218.

12 Dyophysitism (= two natures). Cyril previously favoured one nature in Christ after the incarnation.

p. 108).[13] The Logos took the place of the *nous,* or thinking principle, in Jesus' human body. Apollinarianism was criticised for making Christ a *tertium quid* (a third thing, neither fully God nor fully human).

2 Cor 5:19a "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself."

Athanasius had argued against Arius that the reason God became human was to save humanity (Norris, 1980, p. 68).

2 Cor 5:21 "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Marcion and the gnostics thought that human nature could not be sinless. This passage meant for them that the divine nature took over the human nature (Norris, 1980, p. 8)[14].

Gal 4:4-5 "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children."

Pope Leo argued that Christ's mediatorial role in our salvation implied that Christ must have both divine and human natures to be both incapable of death and to discharge human debt (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, pp. 338-339).

Phil 2:6-7 Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

Church fathers such as Irenaeus and Melito of Sardis (Stevenson & Frend, 1987, 122)[15] and Athanasius (Norris, 1980, p. 88) had taught that Christ was both fully divine and fully human.

Col 1:15-17 "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible,

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13 Similarly, Paul of Samosata in the third century taught that Jesus was a human indwelt by God (Stevenson & Frend, 1987, 229).

14 Also Stevenson & Frend, 1987, 77.

15 The Son of God taking on human form is also a feature of Melito's Homily on the Passover (Norris, 1980, pp. 33-47).

whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and for him."[16]

Origen taught that there was never a time when the Word or Logos did not exist. He is begotten eternally (Norris, 1980, p. 15)[17].

> **Heb 1:2-3a** "but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."

The Council of Nicaea had agreed to the divinity of the Son (Stevenson & Frend, 1987, 291), but it was not clear how Jesus' divinity related to his humanity as seen in his life, death and resurrection.

Pope Leo's Tome

Pope Leo wrote a letter on June 13, 449 C.E. to Flavian of Constantinople in response to Flavian's report about Eutyches.[18] The Tome (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 241) was read at the Council of Chalcedon and received with approval (at least by the Cyriline Alexandrians)[19] and appended to the minutes of the Council.[20] Leo sought a balanced Christology based on Cyril's view of Christ as being one person with two natures. Leo's reasoning and imprecise terminology did not completely resolve the issues.

1. Leo saw Christ's miracles as evidence of his divinity and Christ's displays of emotions, as evidence of his humanity (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, p. 340) but others in Scripture are reported as working miracles without any suggestion of them being divine, and Scripture records occasions of God showing emotion.

2. Leo argued from representational atonement theology[21] to support Christ having dual

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16 Also see 1 Jn 1:1-3

17 Quoting *De prin*. 1.2.9. This is as opposed to Arius (Stevenson & Frend, 1987, 286).

18 Eutyches, an abbot at Constantinople, was a monophysite.

19 Note that Cyril of Alexandria had died in 444 C.E.

20 Also appended to the minutes (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 246) were the second letter of Cyril to Nestorius (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 219) and Cyril's letter to John of Antioch about the Formula of Reunion (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 226).

21 *Christus Victor* was the dominant atonement theory for the first thousand years of the church, although some church fathers, such as Athanasius, included substitution in their understanding of the Atonement.

divine and human natures (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, pp. 341-342). This is begging the question. Another atonement theory could be forthcoming that does not depend on the dual nature of Christ.

3. Leo assumed a dualistic model of human nature (immaterial soul/mind/spirit and material body/flesh).[22]

4. Leo did not make clear what he meant by such terms as form, nature, or *hypostasis*[23] (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, p. 339)[24]. Leo says the Word does some things and the flesh does others, yet there is only one person. Are the distinctions in "thought alone", as the Coptic Church has recently agreed to accept, or did Leo mean something else?[25]

Nevertheless, Leo's Tome succeeded in avoiding monophysitism (one nature), Eutychianism (the human nature taken over by the divine), Apollinarianism (a single combined nature), Nestorianism (two separate natures) and fears of two persons.

The Outcomes of Chalcedon

Emperor Marcian published the minutes of the Council to show that the outcomes were the result of considered deliberation and overwhelming agreement (Price, 2009, pp. 92 & 105). The Council produced a statement consisting of a Definition of the Faith, appended documents, and 28 Canons on ecclesiastical matters.[26] It did not produce a creed as such, but

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22 Perhaps this was in rejection of Apollinarianism's tripartite model of human nature drawn from Platonic philosophy (rational intellect, lower "animal" reasoning, and flesh/body). There are other possibilities, for example the modern pentecostal tripartite model (spirit, soul/mind, and flesh/body) would present a different situation. Under this model, since God is spirit, it would only make sense to speak of the spirit in Christ as being divine and human. God's presence in the material parts of Christ could only be like God's presence in the rest of creation.

23 John Lamont applies Leibniz's Law to the hypostatic union to show that the connection is one of identity. He points out that in the fifth century hypostatic union would not have been understood to mean union of identity, but that this is a better understanding of the Chalcedonian Definition without falling into monophysitism. (Lamont, 2006, pp. 1-2 & 24).

24 E.g. in the East, "nature" or *physis* was understood as close in meaning to "essence" or *ousia* . To the eastern orthodox churches, *physis* was close in meaning to *hypostasis* (Brock, 1996, p. 28).

25 In the 1990s the Vatican and the Coptic Orthodox Church affirmed that each other were not heretics (Frame, 1994, p. 51). The Oriental Orthodox churches accepted the Chalcedonian Definition with the understanding that the distinction in natures was in "thought alone".

26 Canons of Chalcedon (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, 247 & 248):-
    1. States that all canons of previous councils shall continue in force;
    2. Disallows payment for ordination by a bishop.
    3. Disallows clergy from engaging in business.
    4. Only bishops may establish new monasteries and the monks are to be subject to the bishop.
    5. Bishops who pass from city to city are subject to canon law.
    6. Forbids clergy from changing dioceses.
    7. Forbids clergy from serving in the military.

an interpretation of the Nicene faith (Olson, 1999, p. 243)[27]. Emperors Marcian and Valentinian III (in the West), enforced the Definition.[28]

The Definition drew on both the Antiochene and Alexandrian traditions to produce a new understanding of how the relationship between the human and divine can be united yet separate (Need, 1995, p. 253) and affirmed that Christ was one person in two natures, that Christ was fully human and fully divine, and that the two natures were not confused. Only the Word (Son of God, second person of the trinity) is the subject of incarnation, not the entire Godhead.

Schism resulted when the Alexandrian Coptic church and the churches in Palestine, Syria[29] and Armenia (later to be collectively called the Oriental Orthodox churches) rejected the definition as being Nestorian[30] because of the use of the terms "person" and "nature" (which could also be used to mean "an individual"). The Chalcedonians accused the non-

8. Clergy of poor-houses, monasteries, martyries are to be under the jurisdiction of the bishop.
9. Limits the ability to accuse a bishop of wrongdoing.
10. Clergy may only belong to one church.
11. The poor are to travel to other churches with a letter of peace only, not a letter of commendation.
12 Prohibits provinces from being divided for the purposes of creating another church.
13. Foreign clergy are not to officiate without a commendatory letter from their bishop.
14. Readers and singers who marry must not marry someone of heterodox opinions.
15. Requires a deaconess to be at least 40.
16. Forbids monks and virgins dedicated to the Lord (nuns) from marrying or be excommunicated.
17. Rural parishes should normally continue under the presiding bishop.
18. Forbids conspiracy against bishops and clergy.
19. Requires bishops to conduct a synod twice a year.
20. Clergy shall not leave the city of their appointment to serve elsewhere.
21. An accuser of a bishop shall first have his own character examined.
22. Forbids seizing the goods of a dead bishop.
23. Clergy from other areas may be expelled from Constantinople if they cause trouble.
24. Monasteries, once consecrated are permanent and not for secular use.
25. Requires a new bishop to be ordained within 3 months of a vacancy.
26. Requires cathedrals to have a steward from among the clergy to monitor church business.
27. Abduction of women under pretence of marriage forbidden for both clergy and laity.
28. Establishes Constantinople's jurisdiction over the east, as for Rome over the west.

27 Philip Jenkins says a writer several decades after the Council said that one's salvation depended on holding to the precise Definition of the faith, but this was not the Council's intention (2010, p. 23).

28 Chalcedon Definition: "we all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same consisting of a reasonable soul and body, of one substance with the Father as touching the Godhead, the same of one substance with us as touching the manhood, like us in all things apart from sin; begotten of the Father before the ages as touching the Godhead, the same in the last days, for us and for our salvation, born from the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*, as touching the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and concurring into one Person and one subsistence (*hypostasis*), not as if Christ were parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ;" (Stevenson & Frend, 1989, pp352-353).

29 Andrew Louth suggests that the reason the Syrian church rejected Chalcedon was because they thought it betrayed the faith of Cyril, which they say is the faith of the Church (Louth, 2009, p.

Chalcedonians of holding to a Eutychian monophysitism, which sees Christ as having a single nature that is a mixture of human and divine. The Oriental Orthodox prefers to call its Christology "Miaphysitism" wherein Christ is understood as having one nature with both divine and human characteristics.

The Chalcedonian Definition did not end the controversy. Bishops in the East questioned whether Christ had two wills or one[31] (Olson, 1999, p. 235). "If, as was everywhere agreed, a nature must have its [own] hypostasis [personal existence], how can one confess 'two natures in one hypostasis?'" (p. 245). There was dissatisfaction with the ambiguity in the Definition. After Chalcedon, there were three parties, the strict dyophysites (two natures radically distinct from one another but not two persons after the incarnation), the moderate monophysites, and the neo-Chalcedonians. Leontius of Byzantium was of this third group[32]. Leontius proposed "the *enhypostasia* of the human nature of Christ in the divine Word" (Olson, 1999, p. 245). Leontius said that Christ's divine nature did not mean that he did not have a fully human personality. Christ's human nature was not impersonal (*anhypostatic*). Two natures do not necessarily imply two persons existing alongside each other (Nestorianism) or a blended third thing (Apollinarianism, Eutychianism and radical monophysitism). "Two things may be so united that their distinct natures subsist in a single hypostasis" (Olson, 1999, pp. 245-246). Leontius said this is like a human being's body and soul being two distinct natures in one person while they are alive.[33]

In 518 C.E., Emperor Justin I insisted that the church accept Chalcedon and he removed non-Chalcedon bishops from office. In 553, Emperor Justinian I[34] called the fifth ecumenical Council in Constantinople[35] to make clear that Chalcedon was to be interpreted in accordance with Leontius's insights, which demonstrated how the Definition could be understood in terms

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115). This can be seen in Pope Shenouda's paper on the nature of Christ (Shenouda, 1999, p. 4)

30 Nestorius, himself, approved of the Definition (Norris, 1997, p. 1). However, it has been suggested that the Antiochenes were rejecting a straw man version of Nestorianism rather than give up the two natures in Christ needed to guard the impassibility of the Creator, as opposed to the creature (Stang, 2012, p. 539).

31 The Monothelitism taught that Christ had two natures but only one will. It was proclaimed a heresy at the Third Council of Constantinople, 680-681 C.E.

32 An English translation of the critical passage of *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos* by Leontius is given by Shults (1996, p. 439).

33 The understanding that Jesus' human nature is *ahypostatic* (not subsisting in itself, but in the *hypostasis* of the divine Word) has been seen as problematic by modern theologians (Burkett, 2011, p. 186).

34 Also called Justinian the Great (reigned 527-565 C.E.). Justin I, reigned 518-527 C.E. Note that Rome and the Western Empire had fallen by 476 C.E.

35 Also called the Second Council of Constantinople. This Council was not successful at healing the schism with the Oriental Orthodox churches.

of the Aristotelian philosophy of the sixth century (Krausmuller, 2011, p. 513).

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and later the Protestant churches accepted the Chalcedon Definition as the criterion for Christological orthodoxy. It helped guard these churches against the heresies that it was formulated to avoid. The wording could have been clearer. Although the issues might appear to be esoteric to modern Christians who are used to believing in Jesus as God in human form, any deviation into heresy in the fifth century by the ecumenical church would have had great repercussions for the preaching of the gospel throughout the world.[36]

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36 Nestlehutt said that the Chalcedonian formula is still an important tool in the quest for visible church unity (Nestlehutt, 1998, p. 175).

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