

## **The Christological Issues Addressed by the Council of Chalcedon And the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Chalcedonian Definition**

The Council of Chalcedon (the “Council”) was the fourth ecumenical council of the Christian Church, held in the year 451<sup>1</sup>.

The main purpose of the Council was to resolve doctrinal disputes which had arisen concerning the nature of Christ, although a number of other doctrinal and disciplinary issues were also debated and resolved.

In the early years of the Christian church, the principal area of theological dispute was the nature of God the Father and his relation to Christ the Son, which mainly manifested itself in the heresies of Gnosticism and Arianism. Later the area of dispute moved to the nature of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity as a whole. However, by early in the fifth century AD the main area of dispute had become the nature of Christ the Son (although it must be conceded that the two issues are somewhat interrelated). In order to properly understand the issues addressed by the Council it is necessary to first consider the historical and theological background, which led to the summoning of the Council.

The initial error concerning the nature of Christ was introduced by Apollinaris of Laodicea, who stressed the importance of the virgin birth of Christ and the epithet “*theotokos*” (Mother of God) and held that in Christ the divine Word replaced the human mind, so that Christ was one person with one separate existence (“*hypostasis*”) and one nature. This theology was rejected by the council of Constantinople in 381 and was also later condemned and challenged by Theodore who built on the earlier ideas of Diodore. This rejection of the council of Constantinople was confirmed by the Council.

Theodore was anxious to protect the reality of Christ’s humanity, which had been seriously prejudiced by Apollinarianism, and held that Christ was one person with two hypostases and two natures. He considered that this view made sense of the human sufferings and temptations of Christ which otherwise would be mere “play acting” by Christ or would alternatively imply that Christ was vastly inferior to God the Father - and lead straight to Arianism. Apollinaris had denounced such ideas on the basis that they implied that there were “two sons of God”, one divine and one human, and demanded that the unity of God and man in Christ be affirmed in terms of one nature and one hypostasis.

Theodore’s theology of the Incarnation was a serious challenge not only to Apollinarianism, but also to the mainstream Alexandrian tradition of the church. This challenge was amplified when Nestorius (whose name has come to be identified with the heresy of the division of the hypostasis of Christ) was chosen as the Patriarch of Constantinople. Nestorius had absorbed Theodore’s views of the dangers of Apollinarianism in general and the use of the term *theotokos* in particular. At the end of the year 428, or perhaps early in the year 429, Nestorius preached the first of his famous sermons against the word *theotokos* and proclaimed the Antiochian doctrine of the Incarnation.

At this time, the see of Alexandria was occupied by Cyril who was violently opposed to Theodore’s theology of the Incarnation, especially his rejection of the term *theotokos*. Cyril

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<sup>1</sup> between 8 October and 1 November at Chalcedon, a city of Bithynia in Asia Minor

attacked Nestorian theology in his paschal letter of 429<sup>2</sup>. A correspondence between Cyril and Nestorius followed, but both sides maintained their different positions.

Cyril was undoubtedly firmly and actively opposed to the theology of Nestorius. He was also an astute manipulator of the politics of the church of the time and campaigned against Nestorius and his theology of the Incarnation both with Pope Celestine and Emperor Theodosius II. Cyril had limited success with the Emperor<sup>3</sup>, but he had much greater success with the Pope who responded extraordinarily forcefully. In August 430 Celestine<sup>4</sup>, summoned a council in Rome and dispatched a letter to Alexandria with enclosures to Constantinople, Philippi, Jerusalem and Antioch giving Cyril authority from Rome to admonish Nestorius unless he should recant within ten days of the receipt of that ultimatum. Cyril sent this letter on to Nestorius accompanied by his own demand that Nestorius should accede to twelve statements (or anathemas) set out in his letter. Unfortunately Cyril's letter was not conciliatory, nor were his twelve anathemas particularly well or clearly drafted and indeed some of them seemed to support Apollinarian theology.

Events were also complicated by the fact that just prior to the receipt of Cyril's letter by Nestorius, imperial letters from Theodosius II arrived in Constantinople summoning a general council to meet at Ephesus on 7 June 431. Nestorius was no doubt confident of the verdict of this council, especially given the wording of Cyril's anathemas, but he badly underestimated Cyril's determination and his own lack of support from the Pope.

Given the foregoing it is unsurprising that Nestorius refused to accede to Cyril's demands, even though urged to do so by his friend John, Patriarch of Antioch (who had come under severe pressure from Cyril not to support Nestorius), and preached publicly against Cyril and issued twelve propositions of his own with appended anathemas.

Nestorius (accompanied by a few friends) and Cyril (reinforced by 50 of his bishops) duly arrived at Ephesus but John of Antioch and his Syrian bishops were delayed by severe weather. Cyril decided to open the council on 22<sup>nd</sup> June despite the fact that neither John and his party nor the legates from Rome had yet arrived and against the request of 68 bishops for delay. The lack of arrivals from Rome meant that Cyril had no answer to his letter to the Pope asking whether Nestorius' threatened excommunication was in force, although the fact that papal legates had been sent should have strongly implied that the Pope intended Nestorius to be tried by the council. Nestorius refused to accept bishops sent to him by the council and consequently was deposed and condemned for heresy. This was confirmed by the papal legates on their eventual arrival. Cyril's anathemas were approved by the council but have never been formally adopted by the church.

On the arrival of John and his Syrian delegation a rival council was convened which resolved to depose Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus. The Emperor was eventually called to rule on the decisions of these rival councils and confirmed the depositions of all three bishops, although Cyril was eventually reinstated after an undignified escape from prison. Not unsurprisingly, these events led to a complete breach between John and Cyril, which could only be healed by

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<sup>2</sup> and in a contemporary letter addressed to the monks of Egypt. Also early in 429 an Alexandrian lawyer Eusebius (later bishop of Dorylaeum in Phrygia) posted a notice in Constantinople comparing statements in the sermons of Nestorius with utterances of Paul of Samosata (who had been condemned as a heretic in the third century).

<sup>3</sup> who was influenced both by his wife (who favoured Nestorius) and his daughter (who opposed Nestorius).

<sup>4</sup> having already commissioned John Cassian to write an anti-Nestorian treatise on the Incarnation.

a significant compromise by both sides. This was eventually achieved by the Formulary of Peace finally agreed between the two sides in 433. This declared that “Christ was perfect God and perfect man consisting of rational (meaning human) soul and body, of one substance with the Father in his Godhead, of one substance with us in his manhood; so that there is a union of two natures; on which ground we confess Christ to be one and Mary to be mother of God”.

However, this was by no means the end of the matter. By 446 both John and Cyril were dead, John being succeeded by his weak nephew Domnus and Cyril by the extremist Dioscorus (supported by Eutyches) whilst the retiring Flavian had come to power in Constantinople. Dioscorus regretted the concessions made by Alexandria in the Formulary of Peace and plotted to overthrow it. Various disputes and wrangling amongst the above led the Emperor to call a council to meet at Ephesus in 449. Pope Leo was invited to attend but declined, sending three legates and a doctrinal writing – the “Tome” of Leo (which supported the Antiochian views of Flavian rather than the extreme Cyrillian “one nature” views of Eutyches).

When the Council of Ephesus met, however, it was controlled by Dioscorus rather than the papal legates. The council condemned Flavian, restored Eutyches and also deposed Theodoret of Cyrus, Ibas of Edessa and Domnus without even considering Leo’s Tome. Leo was furious, but Theodosius II supported Eutyches, so little could be done immediately. Nevertheless, although Dioscorus appeared to have achieved complete control, the Emperor’s daughter Pulcheria made alliance with Pope Leo to ensure the decisions of this council of Ephesus<sup>5</sup> would eventually be overthrown. Theodosius II died in 450 and now Pulcheria assumed control, exiled Eutyches and called a vast ecumenical council to meet in 451, originally at Nicaea, but later transferred to Chalcedon<sup>6</sup>.

When eventually convened the Council was firmly under the control of Pulcheria and Anatolius of Constantinople. It reversed almost all the decisions made at Ephesus in 449. Dioscorus was deposed<sup>7</sup> and Theodoret and Ibas (both holding Nestorian views) were restored to office, although Nestorius was condemned as a heretic. However, the Council’s most important statements were doctrinal. The Tome of Leo was received with approval and pronounced in line with orthodoxy and the council issued a definition of the nature of the Incarnation (the “Definition”). This formula owed much to the Formulary of Peace of 433, but eliminated the uncertainty of language - which had left open the “one nature” or “two natures” question in the Formulary.

Considerations of space preclude a full reproduction of the Definition here, but in summary the “one person, one hypostasis, one nature” contention of Apollinaris and his later imitators (such as Eutyches) was rejected along with the “one person, two hypostases, two natures” contention of the Nestorians in favour of the (now defined) orthodoxy of “one person, one hypostasis, two natures”.

However, the Council also pronounced on a number of other issues, including one that was completely unacceptable to Pope Leo – the establishment of the primacy of Constantinople in the East. This canon was rejected by Leo, who vetoed it. However, concern over this non-doctrinal item led to a delay in the ratification by Leo of the whole of the proceedings of the

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<sup>5</sup> commonly known as “the Robber Council” following comments by Pope Leo that it was a council of robbers.

<sup>6</sup> where it opened on 8 October 451.

<sup>7</sup> Although, interestingly, not on doctrinal grounds.

Council (including the Definition) until 453. This delay may not have been fatal to universal acceptance of the Definition (which might well have been rejected on account of its language by many of the Eastern churches in any event), but was at the very least unhelpful in establishing its authority. That lack of authority absolutely ensured its rejection in the East, which led to a split between the Eastern and Western branches of the church and the establishment of a strong Monophysite church, based on a neo-Eutychian doctrine. The East largely remains in heresy to the present day, whilst the extreme Monophysite church also continues to the present day in a number of forms, especially in the East, of which the Jacobites are perhaps the best known along with the Coptic Monophysites and the Armenians.

Thus the strength of the Definition – that it provides a certain definition of orthodoxy, leaving little room for argument about the person, hypostasis or nature of Christ – is also its weakness – in that its language was too dogmatic to secure universal acceptance. This resistance to acceptance was violent on occasion<sup>8</sup>.

There followed one hundred years of a search for reconciliation between East and West, but positions were too entrenched and pronouncements of Emperors lacking theological sophistication achieved little.

The Eastern churches were particularly resistant to the use of certain language within the Definition, particularly the word *physis* (nature). It must be conceded that the concepts involved are subtle and difficult, and require a consistent and precise use of language. If we are to use consistently the three principal theological terms employed in relation to the Trinity and the Incarnation – “person”, “hypostasis” and “physis” – then we see that the Trinity is one Physis having three Hypostases of Persons. Clearly “physis” is an abstraction and cannot exist apart from the concrete – apart from a hypostasis. However, in the Trinity the denotation and connotation is somewhat diverse. Here each hypostasis is a physis (the one physis), but the physis is not one *by* the three hypostases. In the Incarnation we have the converse – two natures are one hypostasis. This is where the Eastern churches parted company from the West following the Council. They held that Christ is one person and one hypostasis - so therefore He must be one physis.

Although the difference appears minor, almost inconsequential, I believe it to be of great significance. If the divine and human natures of Christ are united into one nature then *either* the whole divine nature (the whole of the Trinity) became man and suffered and died *or* the Trinity does not have one physis at all, but each of the three persons of the Trinity has a divine nature of his own. In fact, the Monophysite church split on this very question.

Nevertheless, each of the above possibilities leads to great difficulties that contravene essential elements of Christian doctrine. The latter leads directly to polytheism, whilst the former implies the death of God the Father, which seems somewhat absurd, and it also undermines the doctrine of the atonement. Thus, I believe that the tradition of the Western church, in line with the Definition, is the theologically soundest doctrine of Christ and the Incarnation. However, it seems to me a great pity that the church has been split in this way over a fine doctrinal issue which is contrary both to Christ’s prayer that we should be one in order that all might believe in him<sup>9</sup> and the spirit of his message of universal acceptance.

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<sup>8</sup> Proterius, bishop in Alexandria, could only sustain his position with military assistance after his acceptance of the Definition and was torn to pieces by a mob after the death of the Emperor Marcian in 457.

<sup>9</sup> John 17:21