

Church History Turning Points: The Council of Chalcedon (451)

“We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God (*theotokos*), according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one Subsistence (*hypostasis*), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers [i.e. Nicene] has handed down to us.”

A Church Divided

Word-Flesh Christology	Word-Man Christology	
Main Center: Alexandria (Egypt)	Main Center: Antioch (Syria)	
Emphases: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Word incarnate in flesh • Unity of Christ • Deity of Christ • Mary is the “God-bearer” 	Emphases: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Word joined to a man • Duality within Christ • Humanity of Christ • Mary is only the “man-bearer” 	
Potential Pitfalls: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the humble carpenter Jesus of Nazareth disappear? • Does Jesus lack a true human soul—and so lack identity with the human race? 	Potential Pitfalls: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the oneness or unity of Jesus lost in this duality? • Is Jesus a mere man adopted or indwelt by divine power? 	
Prominent Advocates: Athanasius: “The Word became flesh.” (John 1:14) Cyril of Alexandria: There is “one incarnate Nature of the Divine Word.”	Prominent Advocates: Diodore of Tarsus: The “Son of God” and the “Son of David” are distinct. Theodore of Mopsuestia: “The Word who assumed” and “the Man who is assumed by him” are distinct.	
Extreme Expression: Apollinaris of Laodicea claimed Christ is not a true human because he had the Word in place of his soul.	Extreme Expression: Nestorius held that Christ’s two natures are separate: “I hold the natures apart, but unite the worship.”	
Extreme Alexandrian Christology after Chalcedon: <i>Monophysites:</i> Christ has only one nature: divine. Eutyches said Christ is one person “out of” two natures. The humanity of Christ is so swallowed up by his deity that it disappears.	Balanced Chalcedonian Orthodoxy: Jesus Christ is one person (<i>hypostasis</i>) existing in two natures (<i>physis</i>). This is known as “hypostatic union.” Mary is the God-bearer. She is the mother of one who is <i>always</i> fully God and fully man. Pope Leo of Rome: “Both natures and substances are kept intact and come together in one person.”	Extreme Antiochene Christology after Chalcedon: <i>Dyophysites</i> (also known as <i>Nestorians</i>): Christ has two separate and distinct natures that are only loosely conjoined. This radical “two natures” view was condemned at a council in AD 553.
Modern Adherents: (usually moderate) Oriental Orthodox churches (Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, and Ethiopian)	Modern Adherents: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches	Modern Adherents: (usually moderate) Church of the East (Assyrian Church of the East)

Key quotes from Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, chp. 3:

“Chalcedon’s answer to these questions... has stood the test of time: Jesus was “one person” consisting of “two natures.”

“The Council of Chalcedon was an important event— and a critical turning point— in the history of Christianity both because it clarified orthodox Christian teaching and also because of the way that it accomplished that clarification.”

“Chalcedon was a threefold triumph:

1. a triumph of sound doctrine over error in the church,
2. a triumph of Christian catholicity over cultural fragmentation, and
3. a triumph of discriminating theological reasoning over the anti-intellectual dismissal of philosophy on the one hand, and over a theological capitulation to philosophy on the other.”

“Leo’s response to Flavian, which is referred to as his Tome, took a forthright position on the Christological question— Jesus was a single “person” with two “natures.” Roots of this wording went back to Tertullian, but Leo here amplified them with careful grounding in Scripture and careful application to the present quarrels. As had Athanasius in the debate over Christ’s divinity, Leo emphasized how much the question of the humanity and divinity of Christ bore directly on the hope of salvation.”

“The intramural theological quarrelling that followed Chalcedon in the eastern part of the Christian world had one particularly unfortunate long-term consequence. That quarrelling, when compounded by acrimony between the churches that accepted Chalcedon and those that did not, constituted one of the factors that weakened Christianity in that region and so prepared the way for the triumph of Islam, sweeping out of Arabia in the mid-seventh century.”

“here it is important to note both the success of East and West in reaching agreement on the person of Christ and the continuing disengagement of style and authority that pointed toward the Great Schism.”

“Getting questions right about the person of Christ was important because Christ and what he did were of immeasurable importance.”

“Chalcedon was a problem of translation...

The words *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *substantia*, and *persona* do not appear in Scripture as technical terms, and the Bible has very little direct connection to the conceptual worlds in which these terms arose and acquired their own intellectual history. Yet Chalcedon showed that the message of God becoming incarnate to effect the salvation of his people was a message that could be heard distinctly, adequately, and powerfully in precisely these extra-scriptural terms and within that non-Judaic intellectual milieu.

For the history of Christian doctrine, Chalcedon was thus vitally important in two ways. It represented a wise, careful, and balanced restatement of scriptural revelation. And it also represented successfully the translation of biblical revelation into another conceptual language.”

iServe Africa 2nd Year Training Wednesdays

Resources:

- [An Introduction to Cyril of Alexandria \(Daniel Hames\)](#)
- [Cyril's Second Letter to Nestorius](#)
- [Leo's Tome \(against Eutyches\)](#)
- C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy*, ch. 5-8
- [Wikipedia on Council of Chalcedon](#)
- [New Advent on Council of Chalcedon](#)