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CHAPTER

35 The Doctrinal Significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon

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Abstract

This chapter examines the doctrinal content and theological significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. It does so by noting the doctrinal development and conciliar affirmation of three essential Christological truths: (1) It is *truly the Son of God* who is man. (2) It is *truly man* that the Son of God is. (3) The Son of God *truly is* man. Within this context, this chapter emphasizes the ontological nature of the creeds and statements of the various Councils and, thus, that they definitively articulate the metaphysical nature of the mystery of the Incarnation. It likewise examines a number of contemporary Christological issues that flow from the doctrinal content of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon.

Keywords: [Nicaea](#), [Ephesus](#), [Chalcedon](#), [Christological truth](#), [Incarnation](#)

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THIS essay examines the doctrinal significance of the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). Since the theological controversies surrounding these councils are treated elsewhere in this volume, only the necessary relevant theological and historical background is first provided. Second, there is a theological and doctrinal exegesis of the pertinent statements and creeds. Third, the enduring philosophical, theological, and doctrinal implications are noted. Lastly, a number of the contemporary Christological issues related to these councils are discussed.

Introduction: Three Incarnational Truths

Three incarnational truths governed the patristic and conciliar doctrinal development. While these truths only gradually became fully perceived and clearly formulated, they were, nonetheless, actively present within the faith-life of the early Church and necessarily continue to govern and authenticate, doctrinally, Christology today. The councils, and the theologians who championed them, in conceiving clearly and articulating properly these truths, defended, professed, and advanced a proper understanding of the Incarnation. These truths will direct this present essay so as to guide the reader to follow the doctrinal progress and to track the theological significance of these councils.

p. 550 The Incarnation demands that the following truths be simultaneously affirmed and preserved:

- It is *truly the Son of God* who is man. This truth focuses on the full divinity of the Son.
- It is *truly man* that the Son of God is. This truth demands that the full and complete humanity be acknowledged.
- The Son of God *truly is* man. This truth affirms that there is an ontological union between the person of the Son and his humanity. Jesus is one being or reality—he is the Son of God *existing* as man.

Also, by way of guidance, these three truths are lodged in what came to be known as the communication of idioms, that is, that divine and human attributes are predicated of one and the same person—the divine Son of God. For example, from apostolic times the Church professed that ‘God was born of Mary’, and that ‘God suffered and died on the cross’. Such emphatic claims only possess cognitive truth within the context of the three incarnational statements. Only if Jesus is *truly God* can one assert that *actually* God himself was born and suffered and died. Moreover, only if he is *truly man* can one affirm that he was truly born and suffered and died. Likewise, only if Jesus is God *truly existing* as man can one authentically confess that God is the subject of human birth and human suffering and death.

All the early Christological heresies (as well as those throughout the centuries) deny one or more of the three incarnational truths as they manifest themselves within the Church’s provocative, yet authentic, profession of the whole truth of the Incarnation as expressed within the communication of idioms. Because of this, the three incarnational truths only become clearly perceived and articulated in the course of defending, endorsing, and cultivating a proper use and understanding of the communication of idioms. Thus, the denial or misuse of the communication of idioms is the hermeneutical key for recognizing Christological error as well as authenticating and adjudicating doctrinal Christological orthodoxy.

The Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, as will be shown, all contribute to explicating and sanctioning the communication of idioms and they do so by properly conceiving, articulating, and validating the three incarnational truths.

The Council of Nicaea

Pre-Nicene Christological Development and Controversy

p. 551 The Council of Nicaea was the culmination of a long theological and doctrinal trajectory, containing insightful advances, unintentional missteps, and gospel-devastating errors. Flowing from the apostolic proclamation as embodied in the New Testament, the Christian tradition professed that the man Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, was divine. The question that surfaced early and grew in intensity was: In what manner is Jesus divine and how is one to conceive this divinity in relationship to the one God attested to in both the Old and New Testaments? Does not the divinity of the Son render the oneness of God philosophically and theologically untenable? Various attempts were offered to resolve this seeming conundrum. (For good accounts of this development in Christian thought, see Kelly 1950, 1968; Pelikan 1971; Grillmeier 1975; Behr 2001, 2004; Ayres 2004.)

Diverse forms of adoptionism were proposed, that is, that the man Jesus was adopted by the Father through the indwelling of his Word and so became God's adopted Son. Such proposals were rejected by the Church in that Jesus would simply be, then, another prophet and God's presence in him would not differ in kind from them.

Some, who wished to uphold both the oneness of God and the full divinity of the Son, proposed what is termed modalism, Sabellius (third century) being its chief proponent. Sabellius argued that the Godhead was one and that it expressed itself in different modes in keeping with the economy of salvation. Thus, at times God expressed himself under the mode of fatherhood, at other times under the form of sonship, and again under the guise of the sanctifying Spirit. While such a theological interpretation may confirm the oneness of God, the distinct subjective identities of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are discarded. These titles possess no ontological depth, but are mere nominal phenomenological expressions of the one undifferentiated Godhead. The early Church realized, in keeping with the scriptural tradition, that each person of the Trinity possesses his own singular ontological integrity and so rejected modalism.

Origen (c.185–c.254), in response to modalism, insightfully argued that since the Father is eternally the Father, the Son must be eternally the Son for to deny his eternity would deny the eternity of the Father. Moreover, Origen grasped that the Father and the Son each possess their own distinct identity or subjectivity and so each is a particular *ὑπόστασις* or person within the oneness of God. While these insights theologically advanced the Church's understanding of the Son's eternal divinity and the relational distinctiveness of the Father and the Son, the manner in which Origen conceived these proved less than satisfactory.

Origen professed in faith the oneness of God but he, as many before him, conceived this oneness as residing in the Father alone. This being the case, Origen elicited the aid of Platonic emanationism and so proposed that the Son emanated out from the Father and in so doing shared in the Father's divinity and oneness with his own distinct identity or *ὑπόστασις*. Such emanationism ultimately forced Origen into a theological cul-de-sac. While the eternal Son may share in the Father's divinity and oneness, yet because he emanates out from the Father, who embodies the whole of the Godhead, he is not as divine as the Father is divine. He is derivatively divine within a hierarchy of divinity—a *δεύτερος θεός*, a secondary God.

p. 552 Origen wished to uphold and articulate the Gospel and its theological tradition but he employed a philosophical concept, Platonic emanationism, that threw subsequent endeavors into theological chaos. Some of Origen's followers stressed that the Son was truly God while others emphasized the derivative nature of that divinity and so the Son's lesser divine status to that of the Father.

Arius: The Son is a Creature

Arius (d. 336) brought the theological divergence and episodic doctrinal development to a head (see Williams 2001). He wanted to answer the simple question: Is the Son of God ontologically God or is he ontologically a creature? While the Church's theological tradition professed the divinity of the Son, it did so, according to Arius, in an unacceptable fashion. For Arius, all previous attempts at reconciling the divinity of the Son and the oneness of God failed and the reason that they failed was that it is ontologically impossible to maintain the oneness of God and the divinity of the Son. He rightly refused to countenance the notion that the Son is a lesser deity. The Son is either ontologically God or he is not. Moreover, if the Son is God then one must concede that there are two gods (which is contrary to reason and faith).

Further, for Arius, a true notion of God must affirm three necessary and unalterable attributes. God is unoriginate, that is, that he is eternally who he is and originates from no other being. He is, likewise, one and transcendent. Because the Son originates from the Father as begotten he cannot be God. Because God is one and the Son is ontologically distinct from the Father, the Son cannot be God. It is impossible for God to mutate in any manner into two, even by emanation, for such would rend asunder his unoriginate eternal oneness. Because God is unchangeably perfect in his transcendence, the Son cannot be God because he became man and as man underwent and experienced change and human frailty. Arius thus concluded, by the force of logical necessity, that the Son must be created by God. He is the first and supreme of all creatures, but a creature nonetheless. Because the Son was created, there was, for Arius, a time (a 'when') when the Son was not and thus the Father was not eternally the Father.

The Nicene Creed

In the midst of condemnation of and support for Arius and his position, the Emperor Constantine convoked the first Ecumenical Council in 325. When the Fathers of the Council gathered at Nicaea most of them were not wondering: What is the true faith? They recognized that the apostolic faith, as found in Scripture and its subsequent tradition, professed the divinity of Jesus. The question at hand was: How could this be affirmed so as to leave no doubt as to its truth? Moreover, they were confronted by Arius' logic: How could the Son be God and God be one simultaneously?

First the Council Fathers deliberated over a creed that was composed entirely of Scripture quotations for this was the precedent set by earlier synods. However, Arius and his cohorts were all too willing to give assent to statements professing that the Son 'was from the Father' and that he is 'like' the Father. Once Arius had raised the issue of the Son's divinity to the ontological level and having decided that the Son is ontologically a creature, they could interpret all Scripture citations within that metaphysical framework. Yes, the Son could be 'from the Father' and 'like' the Father; he could even be 'the only begotten of the Father', but he was so as a creature. Those who wanted to assure that the Son was truly divine and that the Scripture passages that referred to the uniqueness of his divinity were properly interpreted realized that reciting Scripture alone was inadequate to the task. At this juncture Nicaea took an extraordinary and unprecedented action. The Fathers commandeered a non-scriptural word that they believed would testify to the Son's full divinity and ensure an orthodox interpretation of Scripture. That word was *ὁμοούσιον* (*homoousion*—of the same substance or of the same being).

The Council of Nicaea professed:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of all things, visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-Begotten generated from the Father, that is, from the substance/being of the Father (γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς μονογενῆ, τοῦτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς), God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made (γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα), one

in substance/being with the Father (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρί), through whom all things were created, those in heaven and those on earth ...

(Denzinger 2012: # 125)

First, the Council proclaimed that Christians believe in one God who is the Father. Doctrinally the Council asserted, contrary to Arius, that the one God is eternally the Father, and thus, imbedded in this profession, is the profession of the eternal Son, there never was a 'time' when he was not. God would not be eternally the Father if he were not eternally the Father of the Son. To profess in faith the 'Father' is simultaneously to profess in faith the 'Son' (Denzinger 2012: # 126).

Second, the creed states that Christians also believe in one Lord Jesus Christ who is the Son of God. As there is one Father so there is one Son. The reason is that this Son is 'the Only-Begotten' who is 'generated' of the Father. The Council immediately defined the meaning of this generation, that is, that to be generated from the Father is to be from the being/substance of the Father. To be from the being/substance of the Father confirms that the Son is the Only-Begotten for he is what the Father is. The Son is not a different kind being (such as a creature) from the Father. Rather, to be from the being/substance of the Father as the Only-Begotten means that he is 'God from God, light from light, true God from God'. As the Father is God, who like a light enkindles another light, so the Son is true God from the true Father, the source of divine light.

Third, all of the above is founded upon the fact that the Son is 'begotten, not made'. Prior to Nicaea, as witnessed in Arius, 'to be begotten' was assumed by many to be synonymous with 'to be made'. Nicaea made, for the first time, a clear distinction. What is made is of a different nature from that of the maker. Ants make anthills; human beings make houses; God creates/makes the world. However, what is begotten is of the same nature as the one who begets. Ants beget ants; human beings beget human beings; God begets the Son and so the Son, as begotten, is of the same nature as the begetter, God the Father. This is precisely why the Council can now employ its non-biblical word—ὁμοούσιον, one in being/substance with the Father.

It is precisely because the Son is begotten and not made that he is the Only-Begotten of the Father, as from his own substance, and thus truly God from God and so of one being/substance with the Father. The Son is God in the same exact sense as the Father is God. What the Father is the Son is. They are both ontologically God. This is why the Council can declare that the Father, who is the creator of all things, creates through his Son. Since they share one and the same being/substance, they are together one and same Creator God.

Defining ὁμοούσιον

At this juncture a historical question of a doctrinal nature arises. While the Council Fathers clearly professed that the Son is truly God possessing the same nature as the Father, did they satisfactorily address the issue of how the Son can be truly God and yet God remain one? Arius, remember, claimed that to hold that the Son is God and that God is one is metaphysically impossible.

At the time ὁμοούσιον could have been understood in two ways. The first conceived ὁμοούσιον specifying that two or more beings share the same common substance in a generic manner. In this sense, as two copper coins are ὁμοούσιον with one another in that they share the same substance of copper, so the Son is ὁμοούσιον with the Father in that he shares the same common divine substance. This understanding would vindicate Arius' logic for then the Father and the Son would be two distinct realities and so there would be two gods. Some of the Council Fathers may have understood ὁμοούσιον in this manner—content to affirm simply that the Son is truly God.

The second understanding designated that for the Son to be ὁμοούσιον with the Father meant that they are one and the same reality, one and the same being. While it is impossible to determine whether most of the Fathers

understood it in this sense, it would appear to be the case since the charge later laid against the Council was not that it professed two gods, but that it had fallen into modalism. Stating that the Son is ὁμοούσιον with the Father could mean not that they were one and the same divine reality, one and the same God, but that they were one and the same ‘person’ expressed under two different modes—as Father and as Son.

This allegation was based upon a false presupposition. Those responsible for this allegation continued to hold, as exemplified within the Origenist tradition, that the Father embodied the whole of the Godhead—he is God in the strict sense. To say, then, that the Son is ὁμοούσιον with him could easily be construed to mean that he and the Father are one and the same ‘person’. The one God is Father/Son. Neither now possesses his own distinct ontological identity.

p. 555 Athanasius, as the authoritative interpreter of Nicaea, grasped the radical nature of Nicaea’s ὁμοούσιον for he appreciated that the Council’s declaration demanded a re-conception of God as a trinity of persons. For Athanasius, in keeping with Nicaea, the Father alone does not constitute the one Godhead and from whom the Son comes forth in the begetting. Rather, the one God is the Father begetting the Son. (Obviously, the Holy Spirit must be included within the oneness of God, but that is another story.) The Godhead is now newly conceived. The Father’s begetting of the Son is constitutive of the very nature of God’s oneness, and contrary to Arius’ deduction, it is metaphysically possible to conceive of the Son as God and God as one simultaneously.

Moreover, since the oneness of God is the Father begetting the Son, modalism is, *ipso facto*, excluded. The very term ὁμοούσιον specifies, for Athanasius, that one distinct subject, the Son, is of the same being/substance as another distinct subject, the Father, since nothing can be ὁμοούσιον with itself.

The Fathers of Nicaea, in dogmatically endorsing the ὁμοούσιον, guaranteed both the oneness of God and the differentiation of the distinct identities of divine persons, for the Father and the Son are what the one God is.

For the above reasons the term ὁμοούσιον and the concept it designates is of the utmost theological and doctrinal significance. It is, historically and doctrinally, the most important word and notion within Trinitarian and Christological dogma. It not only definitively defines the being of the Son as God, but it also definitively defines that this same Son is the one who is man, for the question addressed is whether or not the *man* Jesus is the divine Son equal to the Father. Thus, the Council of Nicaea definitely defined the first incarnational truth: It is *truly the Son of God*, identical in divinity with Father, who is man.

The Council of Ephesus

Prelude to Ephesus

Subsequent to the Council of Nicaea the issue of Christ’s full humanity came to the fore. Already at the time of Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107) the Docetists (from the Greek to ‘seem’ or ‘appear’) held that, because Christ was fully God, he could not actually take on human flesh since this would be unbecoming of a divine being. Ignatius vigorously responded, arguing that if Christ only ‘seemed’ or ‘appeared’ to be man, and thus that his birth, suffering, and death—indeed his whole human life—was a mere charade, then humankind’s salvation is a mere pretense possessing no actuality.

p. 556 Later, Apollinarius (c.310–c.390), in response to adoptionism, wanted to assure that the divine Son was truly ontologically one with his humanity. However, this union entailed that the Son of God united to himself human flesh alone; his divinity assuming the place of the human soul. This guaranteed, Apollinarius argued, the oneness of Christ and the surety of salvation since his divine will governed all that he did.

In order to uphold the full humanity of Christ—soul and body (the second incarnational truth)—Apollinarius was roundly condemned, most authoritatively at the Council of Constantinople (381). Gregory of Nazianzus' (c.330–c.390) soteriological principle expressed the mind of the Church—what was not assumed was not saved.

The issue of Christ's full humanity would surface again at the Council of Chalcedon, but prior to that the nature of the incarnational 'becoming' and ensuing incarnational 'union' became the critical matter at hand. The protagonists, Nestorius (d. 451) and Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), both held that Jesus was truly the divine Son of God and truly man (body and soul). They radically differed as to the nature of the incarnational union.

Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, in response to a request, ruled that it was inappropriate to call Mary *Theotokos*, Mother of God. He reasoned that such a title entailed the erroneous assumption that the Son changed in becoming man and that, as man, he could undergo human experiences, such as birth, suffering, and death. Since God is immutably perfect, he is incapable of changing in 'becoming' man and so incapable of embracing human attributes. Therefore, it was doctrinally incorrect, according to Nestorius, to speak of 'the birth of God' or 'the suffering and death of God'. For Nestorius the whole Christian tradition of the communication of idioms was methodically misguided and theologically misconceived.

In order to protect primarily the divinity of the Son, Nestorius conceived the incarnational union as a 'conjunction' or 'joining' of the two natures so that the Son of God dwells in the humanity by 'good pleasure'. The natures become so closely aligned that they give off one common appearance, what Nestorius termed a 'common πρόσωπον of union', one common personal appearance of both divinity and humanity. This common appearance is to be referred to as 'Christ'. Thus, while Mary cannot be rightfully termed the Mother of God, she can appropriately be designated χριστόκος, Mother of Christ.

For Cyril, Nestorius' denial of Mary as the Mother of God as well as his conception of the incarnational union was anathema. Denying that Mary is the Mother of God was, for Cyril, to deny the reality of the Incarnation. If the Son of God was not born, if he did not suffer and die, then he did not actually come to exist as man. Moreover, since Nestorius thought incarnational union was not an ontological union but a moral union of the two natures, Cyril accused him of espousing two persons/sons. Furthermore, the 'common πρόσωπον of union' (Christ) designated no ontological subject/person, but is merely the term employed to describe the common phenomenological 'appearance' of the two closely conjoined or aligned existing natures.

p. 557 Cyril's theological starting point was the Council of Nicaea, for it proclaimed that the Son, who was ὁμοούσιον with the Father, was the same Son who 'for us men and for our salvation came down and became man, suffered, and rose again on the third day ...'. He who was eternally God truly came to exist as man for our salvation.

In his attempt to assure that the Son of God truly existed as God and as man, and thus rightly bore the attributes of both, he caused confusion by referring to Jesus as the one person/nature of the Word of God incarnate. Moreover, he spoke of this one person/nature being constituted 'out of two' natures. Nestorius was convinced that this implied that Cyril had ontologically united the two natures so as to form one new nature, a new nature that was neither truly God nor fully man, a *tertium quid* being confusedly composed of a mixture of both divinity and humanity.

In the course of the debate, Cyril more clearly conceived and articulated his position. For Cyril, the incarnational 'becoming' terminated in an incarnational 'is' in that, at Jesus' conception, the humanity simultaneously came into existence and was ontologically united to the one person, the one ὑπόστασις, of the Son so that the Son came to be man. To 'become man', for Cyril, did not mean that the Son of God 'adopted a man' or 'changed into a man'. Nor is the incarnational union the ontological compositional union of natures which would result in the

confusion or mixture of natures, causing the mutation of each. For Cyril, ‘to become man’ meant that the Son of God, remaining who he is as God, ‘came to exist as man’ and, thus, the incarnational ‘becoming’ terminated in an incarnational ‘is’—the Son of God truly ‘is’ man. Thus Jesus is one reality/being and the one reality/being that is Jesus is the one Son of God existing as man. This confirmed that both divine and human attributes could rightly be attributed to the one and the same person/subject, the Son of God, for the Son actually existed as God and as man and all that pertained to each were rightfully his. Mary is indeed the Mother of God for the Son of God, who was humanly conceived by the Holy Spirit within her womb, was physically born of her as man. (For a good overview of this controversy, see Weinandy 2003b and McGuckin 2004; the main texts can be found translated in Wickham 1983 and McGuckin 2004.)

The Decree of the Council of Ephesus and the Formula of Union

Both Nestorius and Cyril wrote to Pope Celestine I. A synod in Rome (430) confirmed that Mary is indeed the Mother of God and condemned Nestorius. The Emperor, Theodosius II convoked a council in Ephesus. This became a rather raucous affair in that both factions, those favoring Cyril and those favoring Nestorius, held separate sessions coming, as would be expected, to opposing conclusions. In the end the Council approved, under the authority of the papal legates, Cyril’s Second Letter to Nestorius as a true interpretation of the creed of Council of Nicaea—the Son, who is true God, became man and suffered and died for our salvation. This letter stated in part:

We do not say, in fact, that the nature of the Word underwent a transformation and became flesh or that it changed into a complete man composed of soul and body. Rather, we say that the Word, hypostatically uniting to himself the flesh animated by ↳ a rational soul, became man in an ineffable and incomprehensible manner and was called Son of man, not merely by will or good pleasure or because he only assumed a person [outward appearance]. Furthermore, (we say) that the natures brought together in a real union (are) different and from these two only one Christ and Son results.

(Denzinger 2012: # 250)

Ephesus sanctioned the title ‘Mother of God’ and the traditional use of the communication of idioms.

Having achieved his theological and doctrinal goal at the Council of Ephesus, Cyril was willing to seek reconciliation with the more moderate ‘Nestorians’. In 433 Cyril enthusiastically accepted the *Formula of Union* composed by Theodoret of Cyrus, the leading Antiochene theologian. Cyril agreed to set aside his ‘one nature’ formula and clearly acknowledged that there are two natures after the incarnational union. The Antiochenes, for their part, agreed that ‘Mother of God’ is an apt title for Mary and that the communication of idioms was a legitimate expression of the Church’s faith in the Incarnation (Denzinger 2012: # 271–3).

With the Council of Ephesus, all three of the incarnational truths have now been sanctioned. Nicaea has authoritatively declared, against Arius, that the Son of God is God as the Father is God and so it is *truly the Son of God* who is man. Apollinarius’ denial of the full humanity was found to be contrary to the Gospel. Thus, it is *truly man* that the Son of God is. With the condemnation of Nestorius and the endorsement of Cyril’s understanding of the incarnational ‘becoming’ and ensuing ‘hypostatic union’ the Council of Ephesus confirmed that the Son of God *truly is* man. In so doing the traditional use of the communication of idioms, which was the catalyst for most of the controversies, was theologically refined and was doctrinally confirmed to be what it was intended to be from apostolic times—a crisp and emphatic declaration of the Church’s faith in the total reality of the Incarnation.

These incarnational truths, nonetheless, were affirmed at different times and under diverse theological circumstances. Only at the Council of Chalcedon will all three incarnational truths, together, find their authoritative doctrinal conception and definitive dogmatic expression.

The Council of Chalcedon

Prelude to Chalcedon

With the death of Cyril in 444, Dioscorus became Patriarch of Alexandria and Eutyches became the chief theologian. Both repudiated the *Formula of Union*. Moreover, Eutyches (378–454) stated that before the Incarnation there were two natures, but after the union there was only one nature. Within this monophysitism (one-naturism) the divinity swallowed up the humanity and thus Christ's humanity became 'heavenly'.

p. 559 Eutyches did what Nestorius accused Cyril of doing—he conceived the incarnational union as the ontological compositional union of the divine and the human natures, resulting in a third kind of being that is neither fully God nor fully man. Eutyches' Christology was perceived to be a new expression of Docetism and Apollinarianism, and was condemned at the Synod of Constantinople in 448. Appeal was made to Pope Leo the Great, who responded in 449 with his *Letter/Tome to Flavian* (Patriarch of Constantinople) condemning Eutyches. Leo insisted that Christ is one person existing in two natures. In response, the Emperor Theodocius II called a synod in Ephesus in 449 under the leadership of Dioscorus. The papal legates were prohibited from reading Pope Leo's *Tome*. Eutyches was vindicated. This synod came to be known as 'The Robber Synod' for the true faith had been stolen. Pope Leo demanded a new council. When Theodocius unexpectedly died after falling from his horse, the new Emperor, Marcian, being in sympathy with Leo, convoked a council at Chalcedon in 451.

At first the Fathers of the Council did not wish to promulgate a new creed, but simply wanted to re-affirm the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, Cyril's *Second Letter to Nestorius*, and Pope Leo's *Letter to Flavian*. However, the Council came to realize that a new creed was required; one that all could agree upon (see Young 1988).

The Creed of the Council of Chalcedon

The Chalcedonian Creed reads as follows:

In agreement, therefore, with the holy Fathers [those of the Council of Nicaea], we unanimously teach that we should confess one and the same (ἓνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν) Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same (τὸν αὐτὸν) perfect in divinity and the same (τὸν αὐτὸν) perfect in humanity, the same (τὸν αὐτὸν) truly God and truly man composed of rational soul and body, one in being/substance with the Father (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ) as to the divinity and the same one (τὸν αὐτὸν) in being/substance (ὁμοούσιον) with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin (Heb. 4:15). Begotten of the Father before the ages as to the divinity and in the latter days, the same (τὸν αὐτὸν), for us and for our salvation was born as to his humanity from Mary the Virgin Mother of God (τῆς θεοτόκου).

[We confess] one and the same (ἓνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν) Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, made known in two natures (ἐν δύο φύσεσιν), without confusion (ἀσυγχύτως), without change (ἀτρέπτως), without division (ἀδιαίρετως) and without separation (ἀχωρίστως), the difference of the natures never abolished because of the union but the property of each nature being preserved in and in harmony with one Person and one hypostasis (εἰς ἓν πρόσωπον καὶ μίαν ὑπόστασιν συντρεχούσης)—not parted or divided into two Persons (δύο πρόσωπα), but one and the same (ἓνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν) Son, only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets of old and Jesus Christ himself have taught us about him and the creed of our Fathers has handed down.

(Denzinger 2012: # 301–2, modified)

p. 560 While elements from the various documents mentioned above can be found within the Chalcedonian Creed, yet the Creed itself stands as its own profession of faith. Moreover, it must be read through the eyes of Cyril. His teaching is the hermeneutical principle that governs the proper interpretation of Chalcedon. With this in mind, the Christological relationship among the various elements can be grasped and the Creed as a whole can be understood.

First, the Creed conspicuously and markedly repeats the phrases ‘one and the same’ (three times) and ‘the same’ (five times). To ascertain who is the ‘one and the same’ and ‘the same’ is to discover, doctrinally, the incarnational metaphysics of the Creed. Echoing the voice of Cyril, the Fathers resoundingly professed that he who is ‘one and the same’ and ‘the same’ is none other than the one eternal Son/Word. Against Nestorius, there are not two ontological persons/subjects (two ‘who’s), but only one ontological person/subject (one ‘who’) the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, the one and the same person/subject—one and the same ‘who’—is ontologically God and ontologically man. The same Son/Word is perfect as to being God and is perfect as to being man. The same Son/Word is one in being/substance (ὁμοούσιον) with the Father (against Arius) and one in being/substance (ὁμοούσιον) with humanity, possessing body and soul (against Apollinarius and Eutyches). The Son/Word is one with the Father since they are one and the same God and he is one with humankind because he is a human being in the same manner as all human beings. Because Jesus is one and the same Son/Word existing as God and man, Mary can truly be designated ‘Mother of God’ for the one who was born of her as man, this man’s identity, was none other than the divine Son of the Father. Thus the Son/Word was not composed ‘out of’ two natures, which would result in the demise of each, thus resolving Cyril’s ambiguity, but he was made known ‘in two’ natures for he came to exist as man and so revealed himself to be such—the one Son of God incarnate.

Third, Chalcedon, in the above, has clearly defined and so distinguished who it is, the person or subject—the Son/Word of God, and the manner of the Son’s/Word’s ontological existence, the essence or nature of the Son’s existence—as God and as man.

Fourth, the Creed notably defined the mystery of the singular ontological character of the incarnational ‘becoming’. To ‘become man’ means that the Son of God, ontologically, ‘comes to be/comes to exist’ as man. In ‘becoming’ man the Son did not change as God or cease to be God, for such would demand that it is not God who is man. Rather, ‘to become man’ specifies that the Son, remaining who he is as God, assumed a new manner of existence, that is, an existence as man. Thus, the incarnational ‘becoming’ terminates in an incarnational ‘is’, a ‘becoming’ that not only constitutes the ontological unity of both natures, both manners of existing, in the one person of the Son, but also confirms the unaltered existence of the Son’s divinity and the ontological bringing into existence of the Son’s humanity in the fullness of its integrity.

Fifth, Chalcedon specifies why this is the case. The natures, the particular manners of existence, are not confused or changed, nor are they divided or separated. Such is the essence of the incarnational mystery. While not comprehended, the mystery can be conceived and articulated. The distinct manners of existence are not
p. 561 confused or changed ↪ because the incarnational ‘becoming’, and thus the incarnational unity, is not the ontological compositional union of natures whereby they would be metaphysically mixed and mingled so as to constitute a being that is neither ontologically God nor ontologically man, but ontologically a third kind of being. Thus, as Chalcedon affirms, the difference of the two natures, the distinct manners of existence, is in no way removed because of the union precisely because the union is not an ontological compositional union of morphing natures.

Yet, the natures, the distinct manners of existing, are not divided or separated, precisely because they are united and so exist in the one person/subject, the one ‘who’, of the Son/Word. Each manner of existence, as the Creed insists, is ‘preserved and in harmony with the one πρόσωπον and one ὑπόστασιν’. The incarnational act, the ‘becoming’, while not the compositional union of natures, is the personal uniting, the *hypostically* uniting, of

the humanity to the person of the Son such that he personally assumes human existence and so, ontologically, comes to live as man. Thus, divine and human existences are united in the one person of the Son. Christ, for Chalcedon, is one reality/being and this one reality/being is the one divine Son existing as a unique historically identifiable man—Jesus.

Sixth, Chalcedon, having properly conceived and fittingly articulated the ontological nature of the incarnational ‘becoming’ and so metaphysically defined the mystery that is the Incarnation, simultaneously confirmed the ontological propriety of the communication of idioms. Because the divine Son of God exists as man, the divine Son of God, as man, genuinely was born, thirsted and hungered, suffered, died and rose as man. What had consistently been the catalyst for fostering doctrinal Christological development, often through its very denial, has, through that same doctrinal development, not simply been vindicated but has been, at Chalcedon, elevated to its rightful place as the supreme theological expression of the authentic reality of the Incarnation and so becomes its ultimate doctrinal guarantee. For Chalcedon, Mary truly is the Mother of God.

Seventh, here at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, in its one creed, all three incarnational truths are unambiguously present. The Council Fathers did not simply endorse, but actually doctrinally articulated and definitely defined them. For Chalcedon, it is *truly the Son of God* who is man; it is *truly man* that the Son of God is; and it is the Son of God who *truly is* man.

Doctrinal Principles and Contemporary Issues

The creeds and doctrinal statements of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon are now permanently imbedded within the living Christological tradition of the Church. These persist as guiding doctrinal principles for subsequent Trinitarian and Christological development (see Weinandy 2006, 2011). By way of concluding this essay, a number of contemporary issues will be briefly discussed in the light of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon.

Christological Doctrine and Scripture

The New Testament revelation speaks of the one God being the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Council of Nicaea’s Creed confirmed an essential aspect of this scriptural revelation.

For Arius, the proper name for God was ‘ingenerate’—having no origin—thus effacing ‘Father’ as naming who God essentially is. For Nicaea, conversely, the proper divine names, those that define the very being and essence of God, are those that have been revealed: ‘Father’, ‘Son’, and ‘Holy Spirit’. These names are not, then, mere descriptive metaphors, but properly designate the ontological identity of the subject to whom they apply. All other divine names—such as Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, etc.—flow from, and so are consequent upon, God being the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This doctrinal judgment is of contemporary significance, since there is presently a theological debate concerning which ‘names’ are appropriate for rightfully designating God and the persons of the Trinity.

Moreover, over the past hundred years, within some scholarly circles, there has surfaced a tension and even opposition between doctrinal statements and creeds and the sacred Scriptures. The doctrinal definitions, with their philosophical precision and technical terminology, do not, it is claimed, bear the same life-giving appeal of the simple Gospel and may even hinder it.

Such criticism is misguided for it does not recognize and appreciate the invaluable service that doctrine renders the scriptural proclamation. All of the above councils realized that they were providing, in their statements and creeds, an authentic window into the truths of Scripture for what they defined actually arise out of and confirmed, by way of defending and expounding, the authentic Gospel message.

To read the whole of the Bible, especially the New Testament, through the eyes of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, is to read and interpret its message properly—as the various authors and the Holy Spirit intended it to be read and interpreted. Thus, Trinitarian and Christological doctrine does not hinder the life-giving message of the Bible, but actually promotes and fosters its rightful integrity and singular inspiration. These doctrines provide the Church the intellectual freedom and the scholarly assurance to delve more deeply into the unfathomable truths of the Gospel. They also allow individuals of faith to ponder the Scriptures, without fear of error, assured that they are being guided, in communion with the councils, by the Spirit of wisdom and truth. Far from being an oppressive burden heaped upon Scripture's easy yoke the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, which embody the living faith of the Church, reveal the singular pearls of great price hidden within the treasure-field of Scripture.

p. 563 **Christological Ontology**

Today some theologians speak of models of the Trinity and models of the Incarnation. By this they imply that, since both are ultimately unknowable mysteries, one must conceive various ways to express the Trinity and the Incarnation, all of which models may, more or less, approximate the mysteries themselves, but do not intellectually grasp their ultimate metaphysical reality. Thus, Trinitarian and Christological language, and the concepts that inhere within such language, is solely metaphorical or symbolic in nature. Moreover, these models of approximation are conceived within differing historical cultures and so inherently bear within them a provisional conditionality. The final conclusion drawn is that, while all doctrinal and creedal statements may be instructive theological models, they too are formulated within a particular historical culture and philosophical milieu and, as such, they, alongside other models, are not definitive in nature. They are simply part of the revered, but non-binding, Christian tradition.

The conciliar creeds and decrees do not simply propose theological models. Granted that the mysteries of the Christian faith, including the Trinity and the Incarnation, can never be fully comprehended and sufficiently articulated, yet Christians, in faith, do know what the mysteries of faith are for they have been divinely revealed through perceptible deeds and intelligible words. The faithful, even in heaven, may never fully comprehend the mystery of the Trinity, but they do know, even while on earth, the metaphysical reality of that mystery. Similarly, how one and the same Son of God is able to exist simultaneously as God and as man will never be fully grasped, but that Jesus is indeed, nonetheless, the Son of God ontologically existing as man is rationally intelligible and is objectively believed to be metaphysically true.

This essay has emphasized the metaphysical nature of Nicaea's, Ephesus', and Chalcedon's conciliar statements and creeds and so the ontological nature of the mysteries of which they speak. Nicaea's doctrinal definition that the Son is one in being/substance with the Father is ontological in nature. This is ontologically what the one God is: The eternal Father eternally begetting his eternal Son. Nicaea is not simply offering a 'model', however adequate, that can be applied to the Trinity alongside other future models. Nicaea, without making the mystery of the Trinity comprehensible, did clarify more accurately the exact ontological constitution of that mystery.

The Council of Ephesus defined that the ontological identity/subject, the 'who', of the historical man Jesus is the person of the Son of God. Who it is that is ontologically God and man is the one divine Son. This was but a further elaboration and refinement of the incarnational ontology of the Nicene Creed. It professed that the Son, who is consubstantial with the Father, is the same Son 'who for us men and for our salvation came down and became flesh, and made man ...'.

The metaphysics of the Incarnation finds its classic definition within the Chalcedonian Creed for here all three incarnational truths, truths that are ontological in nature, are professed with metaphysical care and precision.

p. 564 The mystery of the Incarnation, which will always remain a mystery of faith, is the divine Son of the Father ↵

ontologically existing as man. Chalcedon's Creed did not offer one of many possible incarnational models. This Creed emphatically defined the mystery of who the historical and everlasting Jesus *is*.

While these truths may be expressed in multiple ways, the ontological content of these conciliar truths cannot be changed or altered. Future generations and subsequent councils may expand and develop these truths, as did Constantinople I (381) (Denzinger 2012: # 150), Constantinople II (553) (# 421–38), Constantinople III (680–1) (# 550–9), and Nicaea II (787) (# 600–9), but these dogmatic definitions concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation are sacrosanct.

Christology from Above and Below

Some contemporary theologians also speak of two approaches to Christology. The first is a Christology 'from above'. Such a Christology is described as emphasizing the notion that the transcendent Son of God came down to earth and so became man. Christology 'from below' focuses on Jesus' earthly humanity and his historical and cultural conditioning and from within this setting discerns his divinity. In the light of the conciliar Christological tradition, this dichotomy of Christological approaches is ambiguous and is often misconceived and misunderstood.

While it is true that Jesus' disciples came to know who he is through his humanity—his human words and actions—and thus in this sense 'from below', it would be erroneous to claim, as some theologians do, that Jesus himself 'became' God 'from below'. He did not become divine by some form of human openness to the transcendent so that through his prayer and faithfulness to the Father, he became his 'Son'. This would be a contemporary form of 'adoptionism'. While human beings always, by necessity, come to know who Jesus is through his humanity, that is, 'from below', yet, the conciliar tradition demands that the Son of God, ontologically, comes to be man, and so in this sense 'from above'. Having become man, Jesus, epistemologically, reveals who he is as the Son through his humanity and thus human beings come to know him to be the Son through his humanity.

Jesus' Human Self-consciousness and Knowledge

Without entering deeply into the current debate concerning Jesus' earthly self-consciousness and self-knowledge, given the conciliar statements and creeds treated here, the three indispensable incarnational truths are essential for a proper understanding.

Who is conscious and knows himself to be the Son of God is *the divine Son himself*. The manner in which he is conscious of himself and so knows himself to be the Son of God is *in a human manner*, in accordance with his human consciousness and intellect. Again, this is necessitated by the fact that the Son of God *is* man, and thus, as incarnate, ^{p. 565} he must perceive himself to be the divine Son of the Father within a human mode for that is the manner in which he exists.

For example, as incarnate, the Son would, through his human prayer and reading of scripture, humanly come to know God as his Father. The Son, in humanly perceiving his filial relationship to the Father, would humanly become conscious of himself as the Son and so would humanly know himself to be the Son.

Is Jesus a Human Person?

The councils clearly declared that Jesus is one person, one subject, one 'who'—that of the eternal Son of God. It is sometimes argued today that if such is the case, then Jesus is not a 'human person' and, therefore, he is not fully human. This would be, they hold, contrary to the Council of Chalcedon which demanded that Jesus be *ὁμοούσιον* with humankind. This position is founded upon a false understanding of the Incarnation.

It is necessary that Jesus be authentically and fully human, as Chalcedon demanded, in order to ensure that it is precisely man that the Son of God is. To insist upon Jesus' humanity while failing to acknowledge that it is the Son who is man is to deprive the humanity of its singular significance—that the identity of this man Jesus is that of the Son of God. To profess that Jesus is a divine person is not, then, to deny anything concerning his humanity. It is merely specifying that, in this unique and unrepeatable instance, the identity of this particular historical man—who this man is—is the Son of God. The Son of God is not only eternally identifiable as God, but he is also, now, temporally identifiable as man.

The Soteriology of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon: Jesus as the Definitive and Universal Savior

Despite what might be initially thought, all of the conciliar statements and creeds are of absolute salvific importance. The Council Fathers were not simply engaged in ensuring the truth of Christological doctrine for the sake of doctrinal purity, but to confirm the truth of humankind's salvation. Once again, the three doctrinal truths are central. Only if Jesus is *truly the Son of God* is salvation assured. Only if the Son's salvific words and deeds, particularly his suffering and death, are done *as man* are we guaranteed that they were said and done on humankind's behalf and so are humanly salvific. For the Son of God to speak the good word of the Gospel and enact the human efficacious deeds salvation, he must *be* man.

This is why Nicaea's, Ephesus', and Chalcedon's Christological doctrine necessarily encompasses the truth that Jesus is the definitive and universal Savior. Among all other founders of religion, only Jesus is the Son of God incarnate and as incarnate only did he offer up his holy and innocent human life as a loving sacrifice to the Father out of love for the whole of humankind. He did not provide humankind with religious norms and customs—sacred words and sacred actions—that are to be said and done by human beings after the manner of, for example, Mohammed and Buddha.

Rather, being the Son of God incarnate, Jesus made possible a radically new way of life founded upon a new and singular relationship with his Father. He accomplished this through his life, Passion, death, and resurrection which initiated the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Through faith human beings do not merely adhere to a set of religious or moral norms, but are personally united, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to the risen Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Living in communion with him as members of his body, the Church, human beings are conformed into Jesus' likeness, and so are adopted children of the Father. The Council Fathers of 325, 431, and 451 have bequeathed to the Church, for all ages, the Gospel truth that in Jesus' name alone is there salvation (Acts 4:12).

Suggested Reading

Ayres (2004); Behr (2001, 2004); McGuckin (2004); Weinandy (2003b, 2006).

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