

Unit Seven: Conflicting Pro-Nicene Christologies and the Definition of Chalcedon

Introductory reading:

Chadwick, chapters 51,52,53; Kelly XI, XII

1. Chalcedon and the making of orthodoxy

'Beneath history, memory and oblivion', wrote Paul Ricoeur. From the making of orthodoxy, the decisions of many ecumenical councils are remembered only by a handful of historians and canonists: they have almost passed into oblivion. But the Council of Chalcedon (451) is different. Like Nicaea, its name is great. Its definition is remembered. It retains authority to determine 'orthodoxy', and what the Church of the great tradition believes about the person of Christ.

The Chalcedonian definition has been taken as an acute example of what Harnack called the 'Hellenization' of the Gospel. He offered an influential model of patristic theology as a mistranslation of the primitive Gospel into the abstract language of Greek metaphysics. But, as we have seen, to criticize such definitions as foreign and unnecessarily elaborate philosophical theses may be to miss their character. Doctrinal development has been described as a record of discarded solutions in which a theory is advanced, explored, found wanting and left behind, with a legacy of terminological clarification to make the next round of discussions more difficult. Frequently, there is a reaction against a too tightly worked theory, which omits some fundamental concern. This record continues to Chalcedon and beyond. Definitions are sometimes not very stable compounds of these terminological experiments. The processes of debate give terms new meaning, as with the word *hypostasis*, even if they are originally taken from philosophical discourse.

These innovations and alterations are made as the Fathers seek to speak the Christian language in contexts beyond its starting point, and to ensure that it is still the *Christian* language that they are speaking. They are intended to hold open the possibility of preaching Jesus as a questioning and converting presence in ever more diverse cultures and periods. As Rowan Williams has argued (cited in Highton 2004: 80):

The slow and difficult evolution of a doctrinal language, creeds and definitions...[has] to do at heart with maintaining the possibility of speaking about a God who becomes unreservedly accessible in the person of Jesus Christ and in the life of Christ's community. What is rejected is, pretty consistently, any teaching that leaves God only provisionally or partially involved in the communicating of the new life of grace and communion.

On this basis, the creedal doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation are understood as appropriate implications of, and necessary supports for, the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. As we have already seen, doctrinal creeds, statements, and definitions emerged from a slow and often painful process of reflection on the diverse and unsystematic language with which Christian tradition began, particularly as that language was taken up in the community's worship and devotion, probing and testing until the deepest constraints that hold that language together became visible.

The development of doctrine, therefore, is a way in which the Church points to a reality beyond its control, but which nevertheless provides the context in which it lives and which for that reason constrains what Christians say and do. Christians are answerable for their speech and action, and responsible to a reality they do not master. This affirmation leads to an unforeseen consequence. Unlike orthodoxy with its commitment to bearing witness to a reality beyond itself, it is typically 'heresy' which attempts to *control*, clean up or rearrange Christian language. Any drastic reduction in the capaciousness of Christian language is a likely sign of heresy. Thus there is something *missing* in the theology of Arius, namely, the sense of salvation as 'becoming *theos* in Jesus.' The Christian *gnosis* of Clement and Origen *lacks* Irenaeus' sense of the way Christians can embody the divine love without denying their mortality and vulnerability, in all the contingencies of the human situation. 'Heresy' is any over-culling of orthodoxy's richness and diversity.

1.2 The capaciousness of Chalcedon

The definition of Chalcedon was an attempt to avoid a drastic reduction in the capaciousness of Christian language. Its abstract language holds together two conflicting Christologies.

Henry Chadwick (1991: 3-6) explains why two pro-Nicene Christologies came to diverge. On the one hand, **Christians** intuitively wanted to affirm that only one who really is as human persons are can be their redeemer. We have already noted the teaching by Gregory of Nazianzus that only what is assumed by Christ can be healed. Along those lines, Christians must affirm that the humanity of the redeemer is not merely a temporary tool of the divinity, a nonentity or a marionette.

On the other hand, Christians also wanted to affirm that the order of creation is too flawed by sin to find redemption from within. Christians seek a redeemer who is not as they are, or is at least more than they are. Hence, the need to affirm that the Word of God is not changed into something else when he is made flesh. He who is incarnate and who once for all suffered in the flesh remains immutably 'one of the Trinity' and therefore it is possible, even necessary, to say that his mother is *Theotokos*, the 'mother of God.'

Of these two approaches to the person of Christ, the first is the way associated with the tradition of Antioch, the second with the tradition of Alexandria. In Antioch the perfect humanity of Christ is emphasized, in Alexandria the divinity of Jesus.

In Antiochene Christology what gives the life of Jesus Christ the power to redeem is its moral perfection, inspired by grace and indwelt uniquely by the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes the power of a restored human nature. Christ's humanity is a model for the faith and freedom of all Christians. In terms of Scripture, this Christology is rooted in exegesis of the Synoptic Gospels, Paul and Hebrews. It attends to the human achievement of Christ, without which there is no salvation. But its different emphasis on the humanity of Christ and upon human moral capacity sounded reductionist to Alexandrians. It lacks their emphasis upon the life of Christ as a divine intervention. It risks making the redeemer so human that this intervention ceases to be apparent.

By contrast, Alexandrian Christology begins with the axiom that Christ is not from below but from above, in line with John 8:23 where Jesus says to the Jews, 'You are from below; I am from above.' Alexandrian theologians took for granted that one who is himself part of the world, even if free from sin, is nevertheless not powerful enough to bring redemption. Alexandrian Christology affirms the complete, concrete and real presence of God in the incarnate Lord. The incarnation is an intervention that comes from the divine side of the gulf between the immutable creator and the unstable, transient creature. It is the fullness of the divine presence that gives this life the power to redeem. But this Christology betrays its weakness when it slides towards losing the reality, fullness and freedom of the human life of Jesus Christ.

As Chadwick observes, the long history of Christian thought shows how easy it is for a lasting and deep polarity to develop between two patterns of affirmation, each of which has behind it the force of a powerful sense of religious commitment and a fear of its rival.

Antiochene and Alexandrian theologians both sought to control Christian language and exclude their rivals from the Church. Such exclusion would have been an 'over-culling', which undermined either side's ability to communicate the full significance of Easter. As Pope Leo of Rome wrote in his [Letter 28.5](#), a doctrinal statement (known also as his *Tome*) that was accepted as defining orthodoxy by the Council of Chalcedon, 'it was equally perilous to have believed the Lord Jesus Christ to be either only God without man, or only man without God.'

The definition of Chalcedon was capacious enough avoid both dangers, which the exclusion of either of these rival Christologies would have risked. To see how, we must first trace the history of divergent pro-Nicene Christologies, and of the conflicts between their different proponents that the Chalcedonian definition of Christological faith sought to end.

2. Divergent Christologies, 380-450

2.1 Apollinaris of Laodicea

The dispute that arose in response to the theology of Apollinaris (c. 315-392) was in many ways the opening salvo in a Christological battle that was to rage for many centuries, the initial skirmish of which might be said to end at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Traditionally Apollinaris' theology has been described through reference to his supposed insistence that Christ did not have a human soul. Instead the Logos 'ensouled' the human person of Christ. Apollinaris may in fact have believed that the Logos only replaced a higher level or division of soul, the 'rational soul.' For Apollinaris this was the only way of preserving the true presence of the Logos in the incarnate Christ; the idea that the human Christ possessed both a rational soul and the presence of the Logos implied to him that the full depth of union between man and Logos was being avoided. While Apollinaris does sometimes speak of or imply two different aspects to Christ, his two natures, divine and human, his main focus is on ensuring that we understand Christ to be a unity, constituted by the saving presence of the Logos.

2.2 Diodore of Tarsus

One of the targets and opponents of Apollinaris was the Christology associated with Diodore, bishop of Tarsus from 378, by which time he had already had a long career in the pro-Nicene cause. His work has tended to be seen as one of the early examples of what is frequently called the 'Antiochene' school, exhibiting a Christology and a style of reading texts that stands as one of two key theological traditions of the early fifth century. While it does seem fair to talk of an Antiochene tradition in the fifth century, it is not the case that 'Antioch' and 'Alexandria' represent two traditions equally long-standing and all encompassing in Christian thought. The Antiochene tradition in terms of Christology is limited in scope, largely from Diodore to Nestorius. The Alexandrian tradition of Cyril, is in many ways a particular version of a style of Christology found in many places in the fifth-century Christian world. Treating them as equal traditions can easily give a distorted sense of their relative size.

Despite the state of Diodore's remaining corpus, the basic lines of his position are clear: he insisted that in Christ there is a clear separation between the Logos, 'the Son of God', and 'the one born of Mary' or 'the son of David'. Diodore insisted on distinguishing the two subjects of talk about Christ for a sound pro-Nicene reason: the divine, impassible and omniscient Logos could not in any way be subject to change or suffering. At every stage his animus against Apollinaris stemmed from his worry that Apollinaris envisaged Christ as a mixture and thus compromised the truly divine status of the Logos. Pro-Nicene theology informed this dispute in its early stages in two ways: first, one side insisted that our descriptions of Christ must constantly bear in mind the immutability and impassibility of the divine Logos; secondly, both sides insisted that salvation comes through the presence of the Logos in Christ. But for Apollinaris, as

earlier for Athanasius and later for Cyril of Alexandria, this conception implies that the Logos must somehow have become truly one with Christ's humanity transforming it into the unitary locus of salvation.

2.3 Theodore of Mopsuestia

Diodore died around 390, but his theology and teaching lived on, especially in the teachings of Theodore who became bishop of Mopsuestia in 392. Theodore's main Christological concern, like Diodore's, was with preserving the Logos as immutable and hence not confusing the two different subjects of talk about the incarnate Christ. Theodore clearly argues that Christ had a human soul: 'the man assumed' must be a fully human being. Theodore had a sophisticated account of the union that is the incarnate Christ. God is present in all things and everywhere, but by a specific act of love or grace he chooses to be especially present, or present for particular purposes. In the Son, the Logos is present 'as in a Son' so that there is one person (*prosopon*) to which all the actions of the Saviour can be referred. This union enabled the participation of Christ's human nature in the divine life and was eternal. The union that occurs in the incarnate Christ is then the model for the adoption of all Christians as sons of God.

2.4 Nestorius

Although it is difficult to narrate the course of events with certainty, it seems that the work of Diodore and Theodore was well known, and had created a context in which differing pro-Nicene Christologies were in an increasingly tense relationship. This is the background of the next stage of the controversy. In 428 Nestorius, a disciple of Theodore, became bishop of Constantinople. The theology of Nestorius offered another version of the 'Antiochene' tradition as we have seen it in Diodore and Theodore, but his maladroit personality seems also to have contributed to the events that followed. Within a year of his consecration he became involved in controversy with the patriarch of the see that rivalled Constantinople for the title of second see in honour after Rome, Cyril of Alexandria. Both the protagonists in this controversy were well known and established figures. Two events were key to its emergence. First, Nestorius preached in Constantinople arguing that Mary should not be addressed by the title *Theotokos* ('one who gave birth to God'). Secondly, Cyril wrote to Nestorius in 429 claiming that the Nicene Creed implies the necessity of the title *Theotokos*. Nestorius' reply to Cyril avoided the issues, and Cyril wrote again: his *Second Letter to Nestorius* became a document that was eventually identified by the Council of Chalcedon as a standard of orthodoxy.

The theology of Nestorius in many ways followed clearly on from Theodore's. Nestorius insisted that Christ may be spoken of as both one and two realities, but at different levels. The incarnate Christ is indivisible as Christ, as the person of Christ – and *prosopon* for Nestorius seems to have specifically indicated the person as a concrete manifestation. However, Christ is also two in the sense that the two natures of divinity

and humanity are distinct. Christ is made up of two sorts of realities, which cannot lose or change their essential features. Although Nestorius tries hard insist that one *prosopon* of the incarnate Christ means that we can attribute sayings and actions of Christ, not simply to his human or divine nature, but to the incarnate *prosopon* as a unity, at other times his language is looser, and he even speaks of two *prosopa* in Christ.

For Nestorius Cyril's language was dangerous because it seemed to envisage a change in the nature of the Logos, the two natures for him being always the unchangeable grounds from which Christ is constituted. After he had lost his battle with Cyril, Nestorius composed a long text called *The Book of Heraclides of Damascus* (known at times as the *Bazaar of Heraclides*), in which he seems to have moved much more closely towards admitting that in the union of the incarnation the two natures interpenetrate in some sense. Since the days of Bethune-Baker (1908) and Loofs (1914), many scholars have argued that Nestorius was not a 'Nestorian' who taught that the divinity and humanity of Christ were not united in a single self-conscious personality, that he is not fairly represented by opponents and by the caricature condemned under his name.

2.5 Cyril

Cyril was a formidable enemy, a power renowned and feared for his imperious and vehement character. As Patriarch of Alexandria he could identify himself with the orthodoxy of its former bishop, Athanasius. The significance of his theology in the formulation of the Chalcedonian definition and in the whole story of 'the making of orthodoxy' is not to be underestimated. For Lionel Wickham (1983: xi),

The patristic understanding of the Incarnation owes more to Cyril than to any other individual theologian. The classic picture of Christ the God-man, as it is delineated in the formulae of the Church from the Council of Chalcedon onwards, and as it has been presented to the heart in liturgies and hymns, is the picture Cyril persuaded Christians was the true, the only credible, Christ.

Cyril's theology found its early bearings in reinterpreting Athanasius' anti-'Arian' themes. In his early works on the Trinity and in his commentary on John Cyril strongly defends the status of the Logos as divine, and he emphasizes the Word's *kenosis*, self-emptying, in the incarnation. Unsurprisingly, Cyril does not imagine that the Word voluntarily ceases to possess the qualities intrinsic to being divine; rather, in a mysterious and ineffable way the Logos chose to unite himself to a human nature and to take the flesh and soul as his own. One helpful way to understand the core of Cyril's thought is, Richard Norris suggests, to think about the narrative Cyril wishes to tell. Cyril's fundamental Christological narrative takes its form from Phil. 2. The Logos remains in the form of God and yet descends, not assuming a person who might have potentially have existed independently, but becoming one subject with a human nature so that a

human life and death (and resurrection) would be his eternally. The concern of this narrative is not to offer a metaphysical analysis of the constitution of the person of Christ, but to describe how the Logos, as the one subject of the story, assumes flesh for our salvation.

Theodore of Mopsuestia had been anxious to safeguard the reality of Christ's humanity, which he rightly saw as threatened by Apollinarianism. He emphasized the permanent duality of the two uniting 'natures' of Christ, divine and human. Antiochene theologians distrusted Alexandrian Christology. They saw it as tainted by Apollinarianism, and their misgivings were justified when Cyril mistakenly attributed writings by Apollinaris to Athanasius. In particular Apollinaris' expression 'the one enfleshed nature of the Logos' seems to have helped Cyril develop his increasing insistence on there being one nature in Christ.

2.6 The making of a saint and the making of a heretic

Cyril and Nestorius began a war by correspondence in 429. Cyril's tactics were masterly: at the same time as his correspondence campaign he also won over Celestine, pope of Rome. Cyril was able to persuade Celestine to hold a synod in August, 430. At that synod, Nestorius was to be condemned if he did not recant. However these views were forestalled by imperial summons for a council to meet in the following year. But this Council of Ephesus (Third Ecumenical; 431) was also problematic. Cyril dominated the proceedings: Nestorius was condemned and Mary proclaimed *Theotokos*. John of Antioch and the bishops of the dioceses of the East, from whom Nestorius might have expected support, arrived in Ephesus late and by then Cyril had already concluded the council with those already present.

There were those, John of Antioch and Theodoret of Cyrrhus among them, who found the council's simple proclamation that Cyril was right unacceptable. Something of a rapprochement came in 433 when a document known as the Formula of Reunion and composed in Antioch was signed by both Cyril and John of Antioch. Nestorius remained deposed, Cyril conceded that in matters of exegesis one might attribute sayings to either of the two natures or to the one person of Christ, and the Antiochenes confessed that Mary is *Theotokos*. The text also speaks of an 'unconfused union' of two natures, the divine '*homoousios* with the Father' (as Nicaea had affirmed), and the human, which includes a rational soul, '*homoousios* with us', in 'One Christ, one Son, one Lord'. For Grillmeier Cyril's final position can be summed up as, 'God the Word did not come into a man, but he truly became man, while remaining God.' This agreement seems to have angered some of Cyril's supporters, but he held to it until he died in 444. Theodoret sent an unsparing message ([Letter 180](#)), perhaps to Domnus of Antioch, in which he rejoiced in Cyril's death:

Great care must then be taken, and it is especially your holiness's business to undertake this duty, to tell the guild of undertakers to lay a very big and heavy stone upon his grave, for fear he should come back again, and show his changeable mind once

more. Let him take his new doctrines to the shades below, and preach to them all day and all night.

2.7 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Eutyches, and the 'robber council' of Ephesus

In the late 440s the controversy broke out again, and two issues were central, the case of Eutyches in Constantinople and the theology of Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Theodoret emerged as the chief defender of Nestorius and his theology is clearly dependent on themes found in Diodore and in Theodore. After much reluctance Theodoret eventually accepted the Formula of Reunion but he refused to condemn Nestorius. Eutyches, an aged and respected archimandrite in Constantinople, was condemned by Flavian, patriarch of Constantinople, for his insistence that in the incarnation one must speak of only one nature, and indeed a nature not 'consubstantial with us'.

In 449 a synod was held in Ephesus under the control of Dioscorus, Cyril's successor. Eutyches was declared orthodox and Flavian was deposed, as was Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Dioscorus used imperial troops to harass those who opposed him. Among those whose views were not heard was Leo, the bishop of Rome. Leo was deeply offended and termed the meeting the 'robber council'.

3. Chalcedon

In 451, the Council of Chalcedon (Fourth Ecumenical) met. The main task of the drafting commission was to produce an agreed statement of consensus in which everyone present, except the obstinate Dioscorus, could find their faith. Three aspects of its work need to be particularly noted. First, and at imperial insistence, Dioscorus and some of his key supporters were deposed. Secondly, the council defined a series of works that embodied Christological orthodoxy. The creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople were reaffirmed, but the council also accepted as standards of orthodoxy Leo's *Tome*, Cyril's *Second Letter to Nestorius*, and Cyril's letter to John of Antioch which contained the Formula of Reunion. Thirdly, the council drew up a famous definition of Christological faith. This definition affirms that 'the mystery of the dispensation' should not be split 'into a duality of sons'; at the same time it rejects any 'mixture or confusion' of the two natures, and rejects any language of one nature after the union. The central part of the definition is closely related to the Formula of Reunion. It insists that, 'one and the same Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ' is 'known in two natures' (a modification of the theology avowed by Cyril and Dioscorus insisted on by the papal legates), adding the adverbs unconfusedly, unalterably, undividedly and inseparably. Finally the text insists that the natures come together 'in one person or *hypostasis*.'

The definition executes the intention stated in its preamble, which declares its object to bring peace and to end dissension in the Church, that being the reason why the emperor had called the bishops together in synod. As we have seen, Leo's *tome* insists on the completeness of both divinity and humanity in Christ; He is to be

acknowledged 'in two natures.' But those who drafted the definition tried to show that Leo's *Tome* could be interpreted in a way that conformed to the orthodoxy of Cyril, whom many of the bishops present regarded as an inspired teacher. The drafting commission exercised great skill in re-expressing Leo's 'two natures' (*dyophysite*) doctrine wherever possible using a series of quotations from the writings of Cyril. At the same time the supremely sensitive clause, 'known in two natures' leaves legitimate room in the Church for Theodoret and protects the Christological tradition of Antioch from an 'over-culling' of the comprehensiveness of orthodoxy.

Perhaps the best indication that, by this stage, defenders of orthodoxy preferred reticence to definition is the group of terms in the definition from Chalcedon called the 'Chalcedonian adverbs.' These four words resist easy translation into English, so that they often appear as prepositional phrases: the union of the divine nature and the human nature in Christ is *without confusion, without change, without division and without separation*. These adverbs make important stipulations that preclude misinterpretation, without attempting a positive explanation of how the union exists. The Chalcedonian Definition maintains that, in Christ, there are two natures which are simultaneously different and united.

This module comes to a close with the Council of Chalcedon, though of course the evolution of theological debates did not. Indeed, the council proved hugely divisive such that the Churches of Constantinople and Rome were separated from the Church of Alexandria and the churches in Ethiopia and Armenia. It is only in very recent times that theological engagement across the Chalcedonian divide has resulted in mutual understanding and an affirmation that the difference over Chalcedon is more linguistic and cultural than theological. It is appropriate to end this module with the acknowledgment that the formulas and the debates that we have studied are not in themselves conclusive: they point beyond themselves and guide Christians to God.

The Texts

The texts for this unit are key texts of the Council of Chalcedon; Cyril of Alexandria's *Second Letter to Nestorius*, the *Tome* of Leo, and the Chalcedonian definition itself.

Further Reading

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Questions for consideration

1. Why did the Christologies of Antioch and Alexandria, which were both pro-Nicene, diverge?
2. What did each tradition fear in the teaching of the other?
3. Why did Nestorius object to the use of the title *Theotokos* for Mary?
4. What does the *Tome* of Leo teach about Christ?
5. How did the Council of Chalcedon attempt to reconcile the two traditions?