

Council of Chalcedon

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Christianity in the 5th Century

As Christianity grew through the first few centuries, five apostolic Sees led the way: Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople. These Sees were important centers of Christianity and played a significant role in the development of Christian thought and practice.

Likewise, the Roman Empire had two capitals: the western capital of Rome and the eastern capital of Constantinople. Rome was the traditional capital of the Roman Empire, while Constantinople was founded by Emperor Constantine I in 330 AD as a new capital for the eastern part of the empire.

All had one faith was confirmed by the three councils against many heresies. These ecumenical councils were gatherings of bishops and other church leaders who met to discuss and resolve theological disputes. The three councils were:

- Nicea 325 AD: This council condemned the heresy of Arius, who taught that the Son of God was not equal to the Father. The council affirmed the Nicene Creed, which declared that the Son is "begotten, not made" and is "of one substance with the Father."
- Constantinople 381 AD: This council condemned the heresies of Macedonius, who denied that the Holy Spirit is God, and Apollinarius, who taught that Christ was more Divine than human. The council affirmed the Nicene Creed and declared that the Holy Spirit is "co-eternal and co-equal with the Father and the Son."
- Ephesus 431 AD: This council condemned the heresy of Nestorius, who taught that the two natures of Christ, divine and human, are separate. The council affirmed that Christ is one person with two natures and declared that St. Mary is the Mother of God, not just the Mother of Christ.

These three councils were instrumental in shaping the Orthodox Christian faith and in condemning various heretical teachings that threatened the unity of the church.

Events Leading Up to Chalcedon

The Church of Alexandria played a pivotal role in the early Ecumenical Councils, leaving an enduring mark on Christian history. St. Athanasius of Alexandria staunchly defended the doctrine of the Trinity at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. His unwavering stance against Arianism, which threatened to divide the Church, earned him the title "Father of Orthodoxy."

Another influential Alexandrian bishop was Pope Timothy I presided over the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 AD. This council condemned the heresy of Apollinarianism, which denied the full humanity of Christ. Pope Timothy's leadership was instrumental in reaffirming the orthodox teaching on the dual nature of Christ, both divine and human.

The Church of Alexandria's prominence continued with St. Cyril of Alexandria, who presided over the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus in 431 AD. This council dealt with the Nestorian heresy, which separated the divine and human natures of Christ. Pope Cyril championed the concept of the hypostatic union, asserting that Christ was one nature out of two natures, divine and human. His efforts were crucial in preserving the unity of the Church and upholding the orthodox understanding of Christology.

Beyond the Ecumenical Councils, Alexandria housed the renowned School of Theology, attracting scholars and students from far and wide. This institution became a hub of theological inquiry and learning, producing some of the most influential theologians in Christian history, such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Didymus the Blind. The Alexandrian School's focus on exegesis, philosophy, and apologetics shaped Christian thought and contributed significantly to the development of early Christian theology.

The intellectual prowess and leadership of the Alexandrian Archbishops earned them great respect and authority. They were often consulted on matters of faith and doctrine by other Christian communities and presided councils for this reason. Their ability to convene and preside over councils further solidified Alexandria's position as a prominent center of Christianity. However, this prominence also aroused envy and strife from other Sees, leading to occasional tensions and rivalries.

The Heresy of Eutyches

About two years after St. Cyril of Alexandria's death in 444AD, in combating this assertion of Patriarch Nestorius, the teachings of Eutyches took wind. Eutyches, an influential abbot of a prominent monastery in Constantinople, gained notoriety for his unorthodox beliefs regarding the nature of Christ. He steadfastly maintained that that the human nature was absorbed and dissolved in the Divine nature as a drop of vinegar in the ocean. In this way, he denied the human nature of Christ.

This theological stance, known as Monophysitism, deviated significantly from the widely accepted teachings of the Church, which emphasized the dual nature of Christ, both divine and human.

In response to the growing influence of Eutyches and his followers, Flavianus, the bishop of Constantinople, convened a local council in Ephesus in the year 448 AD. The council, attended by prominent theologians and church officials, thoroughly examined Eutyches' beliefs and ultimately reached a decision. After careful deliberation, the council excommunicated Eutyches from the Church, declaring his teachings to be heretical and incompatible with orthodox Christian doctrine.

However, Eutyches felt deeply aggrieved by the council's decision. He believed that he had not been given a fair opportunity to present his case and defend his beliefs adequately. He maintained that the excommunication was unjust and that he had not been granted a proper platform to engage in a meaningful debate before such a drastic measure was taken against him. In an attempt to rectify the situation and seek redress, Eutyches composed a series of letters. These letters were addressed to influential figures within the Church hierarchy, including Pope Leo I of Rome. In these communications, Eutyches passionately defended his theological positions, arguing that they were based on sound scriptural interpretation and were in alignment with the teachings of the early Church Fathers. He implored the recipients of his letters to reconsider the council's decision and to grant him a fair hearing.

Eutyches' letters shed light on his unwavering commitment to his beliefs and his deep sense of injustice at being excommunicated without due process. They also provide valuable insights into the theological debates and controversies of the early Christian Church, particularly regarding the nature of Christ and the relationship between the divine and human elements within him.

The 2nd Council of Ephesus [Ephesus II of 449AD]

In the year 449 AD, news reached Emperor Theodosius II, a ruler who held the church of Alexandria in high regard and devotion. The Emperor, seeking to resolve a theological dispute, entrusted Pope Dioscorus, the patriarch of Alexandria, with the responsibility of overseeing a second council in Ephesus to hear the case of Eutyches, a monk who had been accused of heresy.

The second local council of Ephesus convened with Pope Dioscorus presiding as the president. The local council of Ephesus II (449AD) granted Eutyches an opportunity to repent and renounce his alleged heretical beliefs. Eutyches, under pressure from the council, submitted a written statement in which he acknowledged his errors and reaffirmed his adherence to the true faith.

The council, convinced by Eutyches' apparent repentance, readmitted him into the ranks of the clergy. However, in a controversial move, they also took punitive action against Pope Flavian of Constantinople and several other bishops who had supported him. The council accused Pope Flavian and his allies of political scheming and deposed them from their positions.

The events of the second council of Ephesus highlight the complex interplay between religious and political power in the Byzantine Empire. The Emperor's involvement in ecclesiastical matters underscores the extent to which the state and the church were intertwined. The council's actions against Pope Flavian and his supporters demonstrate the readiness of the church to use its authority to silence dissenting voices and consolidate its power.

The council's decision to reinstate Eutyches and depose Pope Flavian sparked outrage among many Christians, who believed that Eutyches' heretical views had not been adequately addressed. This controversy laid the foundation for further disputes and divisions within the church, contributing to the turbulent religious landscape of the Byzantine Empire in the years that followed.

Pope Leo I of Rome

In the year 449 AD, when the 2nd Council of Ephesus convened, Pope Leo the Great, the Bishop of Rome, did not attend personally. Instead, he dispatched delegates carrying his renowned document, known as 'The Tome of Leo.' The document was written in Latin, despite the fact that Greek was the predominant language of the Eastern Church.

Shortly after the council, Emperor Theodosius II, who had initially denied Pope Leo's request for another council, passed away. His sister, Pulcheria, succeeded him as Empress. Recognizing the opportunity, Pope Leo traveled to Constantinople to congratulate Pulcheria and to present his case regarding the Tome of Leo and the position of the Church of Rome. Pope Leo argued that the Church of Rome, as the apostolic see founded by Saint Peter, held a unique and elevated position among the Christian churches. He emphasized the importance of unity and orthodoxy in matters of faith and doctrine.

Pulcheria, convinced by Pope Leo's arguments, agreed to convene a new council to replace the previous two Eutychian councils. Pope Leo had previously attempted to persuade Emperor Theodosius to call for such a council, but his request had been denied. However, with Pulcheria's support, the path was now clear for a new council to address the theological controversies that had plagued the Church.

Chalcedon – 451 AD

In the midst of a significant gathering, several notable absences marked the Council of Chalcedon – first, that of Pope Leo. Rather than attending in person, he chose to send delegates to represent him, accompanied by a significant document known as the Tome. This Tome held great importance, carrying within its pages profound theological concepts that would shape the course of Christian history.

Many historians hold the belief that this council was not convened with the intention of introducing new doctrines or teachings into the Christian faith. Instead, it is widely regarded as a strategic maneuver orchestrated to ensnare Pope Dioscorus, who had taken a controversial stance during the previous council. Over 520 bishops were given a seat at the council, Pope Dioscorus was not. Emperor Marcian summoned Dioscorus to answer for his actions of Ephesus II and to discuss his views on Christology at Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The Romans quickly mustered a massive army of bishops from the West to join the East European prelates at Chalcedon in Asia Minor, while Dioscorus was detained by the imperial guard under a kind of house arrest, and the Council summarily condemned and exiled him to the island of Gangra in Paphlagonia near the southern shores of the Black Sea where he died a few years later.

The Tome, a document carefully crafted in Latin, was presented to Pope Dioscorus for his perusal. However, he perceived the Tome as promoting a Nestorian ideology, which posited that Christ possessed two distinct and separate natures – human and divine. This interpretation led Pope Dioscorus to declare Pope Leo excommunicated, an act that provoked strong opposition from the rest of the council.

The Council of Chalcedon became a stage for a dramatic confrontation between the Egyptian contingent and the rest of the attendees. The Egyptians found themselves isolated and outnumbered, as the majority of the council vehemently opposed their stance. This opposition ultimately led to the reaffirmation of Pope Leo's position and the condemnation of Nestorianism as heretical.

Pope Dioscorus

In a bold move to assert her authority, Empress Theodora exiled Pope Dioscorus, the reigning patriarch of Alexandria. This decision was met with mixed reactions, further dividing the church in Alexandria. The empress, determined to maintain her control over religious matters, swiftly appointed a new patriarch for Alexandria. This move caused a slight schism within the church, as the new See established by the empress, known as the Melkites, continued to exist even to this day. The term

"Melkites," which translates to "of the king," signifies the patriarch's appointment by the palace, highlighting the empress's influence over religious affairs. In response to the empress's actions, the Church of Alexandria, unwavering in its autonomy, appointed their archbishop, Timothy II, as the legitimate patriarch. This act of defiance further solidified the split between the two factions within the church of Alexandria. The appointment of Timothy II reinforced the church's commitment to its own authority and its refusal to yield to imperial pressure. The schism that ensued from these events left a lasting impact on the unity of the church in Alexandria, creating two distinct branches that operated independently from one another.

Chalcedon vs Non-Chalcedon

The Council of Chalcedon split the Christians into two groups. From that day on, we were incorrectly labeled as Eutychians, or Monophysites. We comprise the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and our current sister churches are the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, (Indian Orthodox Church), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and finally, the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

The Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 AD, was a pivotal moment in the history of Christianity. It sought to address the theological dispute surrounding the nature of Christ, specifically, whether He possessed one or two natures. The council's declaration, known as the Chalcedonian Creed, affirmed the dual nature of Christ, both human and divine, in one person.

However, a significant number of Christians, including many in the Eastern regions of the Roman Empire, rejected the Chalcedonian Creed. They argued that Christ had only one nature out of two, divine and human nature. These Christians became known as Miaphysites. The rejection of the Chalcedonian Creed by the Miaphysites led to a division within Christianity. The ōn-Chalcedonian churches, also known today as the Oriental Orthodox Churches, maintained their theological convictions and separated from the Chalcedonian churches. The Oriental Orthodox Churches include:

1. The Coptic Orthodox Church: Traces its roots back to the earliest days of Christianity, with a lineage that extends to the evangelization of Egypt by Saint Mark the Apostle in the 1st century AD. The term "Coptic" derives from the Greek word "Aigypptos," meaning Egypt, signifying the church's deep connection to the land and its people.
2. The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch: Rooted in the ancient patriarchate of Antioch, this church has a rich heritage of Syriac Christianity and is primarily present in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Middle East.
3. The Armenian Orthodox Church: An ancient and independent church, the Armenian Orthodox Church is rooted in the Armenian Apostolic Tradition and is primarily present in Armenia, Georgia, and the Middle East.
4. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (Indian Orthodox Church): Based in India, this

church traces its origins to Saint Thomas the Apostle and has a strong presence in Kerala and other parts of India.

5. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: One of the oldest Christian churches in the world, with roots dating back to the 1st century AD, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is the largest Oriental Orthodox Church and is primarily present in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Middle East.
6. The Eritrean Orthodox Church: A relatively new church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church became independent in 1993 when it split from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. It is primarily present in Eritrea and the Middle East.

These churches collectively form the Oriental Orthodox communion, also known as the Miaphysite communion, and have maintained their unique theological perspective on the nature of Christ while preserving their own distinctive traditions and liturgies.

What Happened?

During these early centuries of Christianity, a significant struggle for power emerged, characterized by unlawful political influence on religious matters. Pride played a detrimental role, affecting both Christian and non-Christian individuals. One of the prominent barriers experienced during this conflict was the difference in language between the parties involved, making communication and understanding challenging.

Looking back at the 20th century, the split within the church became evident. However, despite these divisions, churches have affirmed that there is a shared belief in the core tenets of faith. However, the political and social differences that have arisen will require careful consideration and resolution.

Miaphysites hold a unique belief regarding the nature of Christ. The belief that Christ possesses a single nature, which is of both Divine and Human aspects, merged into one indivisible entity. This understanding of Christ's nature differs from other Christian denominations and contributes to the ongoing theological discussions. The Eastern church speak of two nature united in one hypostasis.

The complexities of the conflict extend beyond theological disagreements. The unlawful political influence on religion resulted in a power struggle, where individuals and institutions sought to gain control and dominance. This interference distorted the purity of faith and hindered the true spiritual growth of believers.

Takeaways for Service

This lesson warns of the dangers of pride and self-seeking, however our Lord is merciful and strives to bring back the lost sheep of the Church. We must put Christ before politics time and again. There will always be a need for Biblical conflict resolution: “moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:15-17) Our God is merciful and we must honor Him, as well as interpret His Word corrected to live a pious life: “so then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (James 1:19-20)

This serves as a cautionary reminder of the perils associated with pride and self-seeking services. It emphasizes the merciful nature of our Lord, who strives to bring back the lost sheep of the Church. It stresses the importance of prioritizing Christ over political matters, recognizing that conflicts will inevitably arise.

The passage from Matthew 18:15-17 provides a framework for resolving conflicts within the Church. It advocates for direct communication with the offending brother, seeking resolution privately. There will always be a need for Biblical conflict resolution: “moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:15-17)

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Review Questions

1. What language was the Tome written in?

- a. English
 - b. Latin**
 - c. Greek
 - d. Aramaic
2. Who was not present at Chalcedon in 451 AD?
 - a. Pope Leo I**
 - b. Emperor Marcian
 - c. Saint Cyril of Alexandria
 - d. Saint Augustine of Hippo
3. Who were two people, from the Church of Alexandria, who played a great role in the events leading up to Chalcedon?
 - a. Cyril and Dioscorus
 - b. Athanasius and Pope Timothy I**
 - c. Nestorius and Eutyches
 - d. John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia
4. Who did the Empress exile?
 - a. Pope Leo
 - b. Pope Athanasius
 - c. Pope Dioscorus**
 - d. Pope Timothy
5. What is a takeaway from this lesson? (A: Be careful of the dangers of pride.)



Books & References

1. [Christology and the Council of Chalcedon](#)**Ishak, Shenouda.** *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.