



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 25 – The Doctrinal Divisions among the Eastern Christians

Whereas Western Christendom became more and more subject to the pope and his bishops, Eastern Christendom was dominated by the Byzantine emperors who ruled from Constantinople. These emperors took it upon themselves to intervene in doctrinal controversies, and they often made their decisions based on political considerations rather than on Scripture. This was true already in the days of Constantine the Great and his successors, who promoted the Nicene or Arian doctrines based on which one they favored and who tried to settle doctrinal controversies on the basis of their own best political interests.

The councils of Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD) ruled in favor of the true Biblical doctrine concerning the full deity of Jesus Christ over against the Arians. They also confirmed the Biblical doctrine that there is one God in three equal persons (the Trinity). But even though these councils united the vast majority of Christians in orthodox Christian doctrine, a conflict arose between two schools of thought – one based in Antioch and the other based in Alexandria. The school of Antioch emphasized the human nature of Christ, and the school of Alexandria emphasized the divine nature of Christ, although both schools agreed that Jesus was both true God and true man.

As these discussions were going on, Apollinaris of Laodicea claimed that Jesus had a human body but not a human soul, and that His deity occupied the place of His soul. The school of Antioch objected to this teaching, arguing that if Jesus did not have a human soul, He was not a true human being. The Council of Constantinople rejected the view of Appolinaris.

By this time, the head of the Eastern Christians (the Eastern pope, so to speak) was the bishop of Constantinople, which was the capital of the Eastern Empire. Neither the bishop of Antioch nor the bishop of Alexandria was the head. Both of these schools of thought tried to get the bishop/patriarch of Constantinople to support their views. When Nestorius, an Antiochene, became the bishop (patriarch) of Constantinople in 428 AD, the Alexandrians were eager to find false doctrine in his teachings, and they found it.

Nestorius was troubled by the increasing emphasis on Jesus' mother Mary among the people – some were beginning to exalt her above other Christian women and even began to direct prayers to her instead of to her Son. Some were calling her "mother of God", and this was too much for Nestorius. But in rejecting this terminology, Nestorius was denying a Bible teaching, namely that Mary's Son was indeed true God from the moment of His conception in her womb. It was therefore correct to call Mary "the mother of God", for she was indeed

the mother of the One who was God from conception. She did not give birth to one who became God at a later time.

In defending his views, Nestorius began to divide Jesus into two separate persons. He claimed that Mary was the mother of the human person but not of the divine person. But the fact is that Jesus was (and is) both God and man from His conception, and therefore Mary gave birth not only to the human nature but to Him who was both God and man in one person. Cyril of Alexandria opposed Nestorius, and Cyril was supported by the Western Church as well as by the Eastern emperor. Cyril called for a council to meet at Ephesus in 431 AD. This council called Nestorius a heretic and removed him from office. The representatives from Antioch, however, arrived late for this council, and the decision had been made before they arrived. Because of this, they had council of their own and declared Cyril a heretic and reinstated Nestorius. Both parties in this dispute did not always act in a Christian manner. After a series of discussions between the two parties, it was decided that Cyril's view was correct. Nestorius was exiled to the city of Petra (in present-day Jordan), which was distant from both Constantinople and Antioch.

Very soon another controversy arose. Eutyches, a monk in Constantinople, taught that Jesus' two natures merged into one new nature, so that He was not one person with two natures but one person with one nature. This new nature was neither divine nor human but a merging of the two. The bishop of Constantinople correctly condemned this view, for it denied the Biblical teaching that Jesus Christ, from His conception, was not only true God but also true man, with a human nature like ours.

Dioscorus, who replaced Cyril as bishop of Alexandria, maneuvered Emperor Theodosius II into calling for a council at Ephesus in 449 AD. The Alexandrians bribed the emperor with a gift of gold so that he would support them. They wanted to defend Eutyches and to condemn those who attacked his teaching. This council did not permit other views to be heard. They would not even permit a letter from Pope Leo of Rome to be read. Theodosius II judged in favor of Eutyches. But at this point God intervened. Theodosius II fell off his horse, broke his neck, and died.

His successor Pulcheria (with her husband Marcian) realized that this council was riddled with error. So another council was called in 451 AD, the famous council of Chalcedon. Leo's letter was finally read, and the council agreed with his confessional statement: that in Christ there are two natures in one person. The council condemned Dioscorus and Eutyches and drew up a statement that has remained as a truly orthodox confession to this day on the person of Christ and the relationship between His divine nature and His human nature (see the statement below). Both Nestorius, an extreme Antiochene, and Eutyches, an extreme Alexandrian, were condemned for their teachings.

The Western churches accepted the Chalcedon decision, but not all of the Eastern churches. The Eastern emperors insisted on interfering in church matters, and they made matters worse rather than better. In order to bring about unity, Emperor Zeno (474-491 AD) decreed

that every church should teach what it taught before the controversy, but the Roman pope objected, saying that the emperor had no right to tell Christians what to believe or teach. This marked the beginning of the split between East and West which resulted in a permanent separation several centuries later.

In 519 AD the pope of Rome and the Eastern emperor agreed that the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon should prevail. When Justinian became emperor (527-565 AD), he attempted to satisfy the opponents of Chalcedon by condemning three theologians of the Antiochene school that were distrusted by the Alexandrians. This created such an uproar that Justinian called a council that met at Constantinople in 553 AD. The three theologians were condemned, but some of the Alexandrians were still not willing to accept the decisions of Chalcedon. The patriarch of Constantinople then reintroduced the false views of Apollinaris that had been previously rejected. His followers were called Monothelites, and for a time Pope Honorius of Rome supported this view. But another council, called the Sixth Council, met at Constantinople in 680-681 AD and condemned monothelism (that Christ had only one will) and declared Pope Honorius to be a heretic.

All these attempts at doctrinal unity on the basis of the Council of Chalcedon failed. The majority of Christians in the East accepted Chalcedon as a Biblical settlement of all the issues that had been raised, and today both the Western church and the Eastern Church, as well as many Protestant churches, accept the Chalcedonian summary of doctrine as orthodox. But there were also sizable groups that broke away from the majority and formed their own separate churches:

- For example, the Persian church was organized in 410 AD as an independent church, with its own patriarch as head. They accepted the views of Nestorius and are called Nestorians. At one time the Persian church flourished and even extended the reach of their doctrines to Arabia, India, and China. In fact, there are still Nestorian churches today in some of those regions:
- Many Armenians had become Christians as early as 300 AD. Gradually the whole country adopted Christianity, and the Bible was translated into the Armenian language. When the Armenians were invaded by the Persians, the Armenians hoped that the Byzantine Empire would come to their aid. When that did not happen and the Persians took over their country, they were not inclined to accept the Council of Chalcedon. The Armenians, therefore, also formed their own church, and they were known as monophysites (believing that Jesus had only one nature). In spite of being persecuted by neighbors on all sides, the Armenian church flourished for a time and still has some adherents to this day.

- Besides the Armenians, there were large groups of Christians in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Syria who opposed the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. They agreed with the view of Eutyches that Jesus had only one nature, and therefore they also were called monophysites. In Egypt, therefore, the Christians remained divided between the orthodox Chalcedonians and the monophysites. After the Muslims invaded Egypt, the dominant Christian group in Egypt that remained was the monophysites, which became known as the Coptic Church because of their use of the ancient Coptic language. In Syria there was a similar division between the Chalcedonians and the monophysites. In Syria the monophysites are known as Jacobite churches because one of their leaders was Jacob Baradaeus.

The Definition of Chalcedon

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it is to be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same God, perfect in divinity, and perfect in humanity, true God and true human, with a rational soul and a body, of one substance with the Father in His divinity, and of one substance with us in His humanity, in every way like us, with the only exception of sin, begotten of the Father before all time in His divinity, and also begotten in the latter days, in His humanity, of Mary the virgin bearer of God.

This is one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, manifested in two natures without any confusion, change, division, or separation. The union does not destroy the difference of the two natures, but on the contrary the properties of each are kept, and both are joined in one person and hypostasis, They are not divided into two persons, but belong to the one Only-begotten Son, the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. All this, as the prophets of old said of Him, and as He Himself has taught us, and as the Creed of the Father has passed on to us (Gonzalez: The Story of Christianity, p. 257).

Questions:

1. What was the difference between West and East in who controlled the churches?
2. What was the difference between the Antiochenes and the Alexandrians?
3. What was the false teaching of Apollinaris?
4. What was the false teaching of Nestorius?
5. What was the false teaching of Eutyches?
6. In what ways did the disputing Christians act in an ungodly fashion?
7. In what countries are non-Chalcedonian teachings still found today?
8. Find the phrase in the statement of Chalcedon that condemns Appolinaris.
9. Find the phrase in the statement of Chalcedon that condemns Nestorius.
10. Find the phrase in the statement of Chalcedon that condemns Eutyches.
11. Why is it important that all the doctrines we teach are in agreement with Scripture?

