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Chalcedon After Fifteen Centuries

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

THIS year marks the fifteen hundredth anniversary of one of the most important councils of the ancient Church, the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Chalcedon is generally regarded as the conclusion of almost a century and a half of theological discussion centering in the doctrine of the person of Christ. This discussion came to a focus at the first four ecumenical councils — Nicaea in 325, Constantinople in 381, Ephesus in 431, and Chalcedon in 451. Out of these four councils and the theological work that went into them there emerged the dogmas of the Trinity and of the person of Christ which have since become the common property of ecumenical Christendom. This fact alone would make Chalcedon an important event in Christian history.

It is all the more important in view of the issues it discussed and settled. For regardless of the varying answers they may offer to it, Christians are agreed that the question of the relation of Jesus to God is central to Christian thinking and to the Christian faith. The dogma of the Trinity was the way the ancient Church sought to express its understanding of that relation, and around this theme most of its theological controversies revolved. Questions like justification and the Sacraments, which have so divided Christendom in the last five centuries, were by-passed in favor of the Trinitarian and Christological issues. So important were these questions to the ancient Church that most of its theologians felt compelled to deal with them at length.

After a millennium and a half the question is not out of place: What is the relevance of all this today? If these issues are as central as the early Christians thought they were, the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas should certainly speak to the modern Church as well. The fact that they do not, or at least that their address is considerably muffled, is due at least in part to the fact that the forms of thought and expression into which the ancient councils cast these dogmas belong to a frame of reference unfamiliar to modern Christians and oftentimes even to modern theologians. As

a result, many hold to those dogmas with dogged persistence and little understanding, while others reject them without ever having understood their basic religious intention.[1] Contemporary theology needs to discover what a recent interpreter has termed "the perennial meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity . . . the immanent actuality of the transcendent meaning of life in history and in human experience on the basis of the presupposition that God is knowable only through Jesus the Christ."[2]

Because of the importance of these issues to the Christian faith in any age a historical appreciation of their formulation in a particular age is always valuable. On the occasion of the fifteen hundredth anniversary of Chalcedon this essay will seek to analyze the problem that confronted the council, the settlement at which the council arrived, and the relation of that settlement to the theology that followed.[3]

I

Soon after the Council of Nicaea in 325 it became apparent to many observers that the solution it had discovered to the Christological problem was by no means final and that it left many important issues unresolved. For more than a century after Nicaea, theologians in various parts of Christendom grappled with those issues, and several approaches — or, as the textbooks usually term them, "schools" — evolved. At least two of these are important for the Council of Chalcedon, since the council was asked to choose between them.

The first of these, generally known as the "Antiochian school," was represented in the fifth century by one of the finest theological minds of the ancient Church, Theodore of Mopsuestia. After having been hidden by polemics for many centuries, the true character of Theodore's theological concern is only now beginning to emerge from modern historico-theological research.[4] The predominant tone of his theological work was exegetical, this in sharp contrast to most of his contemporaries and adversaries, including the orthodox ones. On the basis of his exegetical research, Theodore came to the conclusion that much of the Christological speculation of his time was selling the humanity of Christ short and that the earthly life of our Lord did not occupy a sufficiently prominent place in that speculation. He and his pupils sought to restore the picture

of Jesus which we have in the Gospels to its proper place, lest a theological speculation that concentrated exclusively on His pre-existence rob the faith of its historical locus. This attempt was in many ways justifiable, in view of the form which that speculation was taking. Sure it is, as this journal pointed out recently, that without the concrete historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth the Christian faith is impossible.[5] No theological speculation is valid which obscures this fact, and the Antiochian school was giving voice to a legitimate Christian concern in protesting against such speculation.

Meanwhile, the other principal "school," the Alexandrian, was attempting to maintain the full scope of the Church's faith and confession of Christ as κύριος and Savior, which it saw threatened by the Antiochian school.[6] Modern research in the history of dogma, spearheaded by Adolf Harnack, has not been as kind to the Alexandrians as it has to the Antiochians, largely because of Harnacks' own anti-Trinitarian bias.[7] Nevertheless, a study of the work of Cyril of Alexandria reveals a profoundly Christian concern at work in his opposition to the overemphasis upon the humanity of Jesus. The salvation which was wrought in Jesus Christ is the work of God, and Jesus Christ is God in person. The Jesus of the Gospels is the Christ in whom God has brought about our salvation, and no theological formulation is legitimate which obscures this unity, or homoousia, between the Father and the Son. For without it the work of Christ loses its eternal validity and relevance. The task of the theologian, then, as Cyril understood it, was to formulate the doctrine of the person of Christ in such a way as to preserve that unity. That had, indeed, been the intention of the dogma of the two natures from the beginning, to assert that men can take hold of God personally in Christ Jesus, His Son and our Lord.

In their attempt to formulate and express the valid insights they both had, the Antiochian and Alexandrian theologians were both driven to extremes of form and content that tended to jeopardize the very point they were seeking to maintain. For by the time Theodore's follower Nestorius had completed his development, he had evolved a Christology in which the duality of natures, taught by all parties, tended to become a dualism instead. To what extent this was Nestorius' own position is still a matter of historical

debate,[8] but there is almost common consent that, consistently carried out, the approach of the Antiochian school led to such a separation of the divine and the human in Christ as seriously to impair the unity of His person. At the opposite extreme lay the outriggers of the Alexandrian position, in which the humanity of Jesus tended to become merely a traditional slogan rather than a religious reality, and the deity so thoroughly absorbed the humanity that Eutychianism and later Monophysitism, the theory of only one nature, were a logical result. In the two decades between the Council of Ephesus and the Council of Chalcedon in 451, theological scholarship, ecclesiastical manipulation, and imperial politics combined in an attempt to force a decision.

It is noteworthy that the principal antagonists on both sides of this great debate were Eastern theologians. This was not because the West did not concern itself with the Christological and Trinitarian problems. Tertullian's essay *Ad Praxean*[9] and Augustine's *De Trinitate*[10] are still essential to an understanding of the history of those problems. But the West did not view the problematics of these dogmas in the same way as did the East. The tradition of Western thought, as represented by Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, has tended to regard the alternatives between Antiochian and Alexandrian Christology as poorly drawn. Though there have been exceptions, as we shall note later, this has been the traditional line of Western theology. It was the line taken by Pope Leo the Great, who combined to a rare and remarkable degree the qualities of capable theological scholarship and prudent ecclesiastical statesmanship. That combination enabled him to carry the day at Chalcedon, for in his famous *Tome* he evolved a formula on which all could agree and at the same time added prestige to the already illustrious reputation of his episcopal see.[11]

II

The settlement of the Christological issue at which Chalcedon arrived becomes clear from a study of the pertinent section of its decrees. The text has not been transmitted to us without adulteration, and some doubt exists about critical portions of it. Nevertheless, the best available evidence seems to point to the following reading:[12]

"Following, then, the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: perfect in deity and perfect in humanity; consubstantial with the Father according to the deity and consubstantial with us according to the humanity; like us in all things except sin; begotten of the Father according to the deity before the ages, but of Mary the virgin mother of God[13] according to the humanity in the last days for us and for our salvation; one and the same Christ, the Son, the Lord, the Only-begotten; known in two natures[14] without being mixed, transmuted, divided, or separated — the distinction between the natures is by no means done away with through the union, but rather the identity[15] of each nature is preserved and concurs into one person and being[16] — not divided or torn into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; just as the prophets of old and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself have taught us about Him, and as the symbol of the fathers has transmitted to us."

Viewed in terms of the controversial viewpoints we discussed earlier, this statement represents a keen insight into the problem involved and a precise delineation of the Church's answer to that problem. Many modern interpreters, for whom the issues raised at Chalcedon have lacked existential significance, have viewed the Chalcedonian settlement as a compromise between the two alternatives posed by the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools.[17] It seems, however, that the statement of the council seeks to occupy a position not between those alternatives, but beyond them. Over against the Christology characterized by Theodore it defends the unity of Christ's person εἰς ἓν πρόσωπον καὶ μίαν ὑπόστασιν. Over against the extremes potentially present in the Alexandrian Christology it declares σωζομένης . . . τῆς ἰδιότητος ἑκατέρας φύσεως. And it battles against both with a quartet of alpha privatives: ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως.[18] This is no compromise solution, but rather an attempt to preserve both aspects of the Incarnation in opposition to viewpoints which, while legitimate in and of themselves, threatened to make a rational construct out of something that had to remain a paradox of faith. The whole structure of two φύσεις in one ὑπόστασις had come into being in order to safeguard that paradox against movements like Docetism, Sabel-

lianism, and Arianism. At Chalcedon the Church found it necessary to carry its refinement of the Christological dogma a step further because of the new antitheses that had arisen.

It is not accurate, therefore, to designate the Christological and Trinitarian dogmas as stated at various councils, including Chalcedon, as attempts to explain the faith rationally. Despite their somewhat formidable philosophical apparatus these dogmas were not intended to clear away the paradox of the faith and the "mystery of godliness." On the contrary, they were intended to make clear precisely how paradoxical and how mysterious is the Christian faith, and particularly its central event in Christ. In order to do this, they made use of the available philosophical concepts and terms of their time; and as Professor Pauck has pointed out in the essay quoted above, "the terminological difficulties of the ancient theologians should be slowly criticized by those who, in spite of the much more refined and complex philosophical and scientific instruments available in modern times, have not succeeded in interpreting the Christian God-idea as grounded in the divine revelation in Jesus in such a manner that what the ancients meant to achieve by their doctrines of the Trinity is effectively expressed for the modern Church in modern terms." [19]

At the same time there are discernible in the Chalcedonian settlement, as in some of the earlier conciliar decisions, marks of a Greek preoccupation with the person of Christ rather than with the work of Christ. For the New Testament neither of these two themes seems to be very far from the other; but in the course of its theological development the Church has tended to separate them.[20] Because the early controversies dealt with the relation of the divine and the human in Christ rather than with the significance of the Cross, the conciliar decisions were addressed to the issue of this relation, too. In the process, however, the meaning of the Cross and the nature of the Atonement did not receive particular attention from the councils, with the result that the ancient Church has given us an interpretation of the person of Christ worked out in meticulous detail, but no interpretation of the work of Christ — or, rather, so many that students of patristics are still debating about the principal Atonement metaphors of the early fathers.[21]

What Chalcedon did represent was the Church's Both-And to

a false Either-Or. Its formulation sought to state the unity of Christ's person in the interest of identifying the redemption as an act of God Himself. It sought to state the duality of natures in the interest of identifying the Redeemer with the common lot of all humanity. And it sought to say both these things simultaneously and clearly.

III

At least one question remains, the question of the adequacy of the Chalcedonian settlement. That question is a purely academic one without the perspective that the intervening centuries provide. Viewed from that perspective, the work of the Council of Chalcedon takes on proper proportion. It was a temporary settlement of the issues which its time directed to it. Specifically, it represented a temporary victory of the Western approach over the Eastern. It provides a formulation of the Christological issue that transcended both the false alternatives confronting fifth-century theology, and without it later theological development would probably not have gone as it has.

But later theological development there was. The question of the divine and human in Christ is so central to Christian thinking that no theologian has been able to avoid it. And it is indicative of the importance of Chalcedon that though its formulation may not have been detailed and precise enough to meet all the possible Christological theories that were to arise, subsequent Christological discussion could not avoid Chalcedon when it took up those theories. There are at least three episodes in the history of that discussion which illustrate the place of Chalcedon in the history of the doctrine of the person of Christ.

The most immediate of these was the Christological development of Eastern theology after 451.[22] Those who were concerned with maintaining the unity of Christ's person at any price continued their insistence even after Chalcedon. Political considerations were present, too, and in 482 these brought the Emperor Zeno the Isaurian to issue his *Henotikon,* which was to serve as a rallying point for those who believed that Chalcedon threatened the unity of the person of Christ for those who feared the increasing power of the Roman See. Despite its name, the *Henotikon* ultimately produced even more splits in the Monophysite party. Under Justinian, Chal-

cedon suffered further interpretation, until the fifth ecumenical council in Constantinople in 553 rendered an official exegesis of the Chalcedonian formula in terms of the theology of Cyril. But by this time the refinements of viewpoint that had arisen had rendered Chalcedon obsolete, since it could not be expected to solve such questions as: Did the flesh of Christ become immortal at the time of the Incarnation or at the time of the Resurrection? Cast as it was in a predominantly Western mold, Chalcedon was too simple and naive a formulation for later Eastern development.

This is not to say that the West did nothing about Christology after Chalcedon. But the major Christological controversy of Western theological history did not come until more than a millennium later. This was the controversy between the Lutheran and the Reformed, presaged in Luther's soteriological Christology as stated against Zwingli. Both sides saw parallels to their opponents' viewpoint in one or another ancient heresy. The Lutherans called the Reformed "Nestorians," and the Reformed called the Lutherans "Eutychians." As a result of this polemic, Lutheran theologians devoted much research to ancient Christology and to Chalcedon, all the more because the Reformed professed to be following Chalcedon. The scope and significance of that research would be an apt subject for a separate essay,[23] but in the present context it indicates the hold that Chalcedon still had over Christian theology after a full eleven centuries had passed.

That hold is evident, at least negatively, in more recent Christological developments as well. The nineteenth century took it upon itself to replace the "Christ of faith" with the "Jesus of history." In order to do this, it directed its criticism at the doctrine of the two natures and at Chalcedon.[24] As we have already mentioned, this type of thinking dominated many leaders of scholarship and thought in historical theology to such an extent that most manuals in the field of *Dogmengeschichte* do not accord Chalcedon a fair evaluation, while so-called conservative scholars do not display sufficient critical insight to make their analysis plausible.[25] From the very vehemence with which it has been attacked and defended, the importance of Chalcedon is evident. Now that current New Testament research has demonstrated the impossibility of separating "the historical Jesus" from the "Christ of

faith," it is to be hoped that current research in the history of theology may produce insights into the origins and development of the Christological and Trinitarian dogmas that will do justice to both fact and faith.

NOTES

1. Symptomatic of that situation is the rather embarrassed way Emil Brunner deals with "Ort und Geschichte der Trinitaetslehre" in his *Dogmatik,* I (Zurich, 1946), pp. 251—255.
2. Wilhelm Pauck, "The Character of Protestantism in the Light of the Idea of Revelation," *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Boston, 1950), p. 138.
3. Indispensable for an interpretation of Chalcedon are the two standard manuals on the history of dogma: Adolph Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte,* II (3d ed.; Leipzig, 1894), pp. 242—267; and Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte,* II (Leipzig, 1923), pp. 242—267. There is a useful translation of the most important documents in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.* Second Series, XIV (New York, 1916), pp. 243 to 295. A neat summary of the council is in B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to A.D. 461,* III (Oxford, 1922), pp. 311—339. Nevertheless, Harnack's complaint, *op. cit.,* p. 351, note 1, is still in order: "Trotz dieser Arbeiten besitzen wir eine kritische Darstellung der Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte fuer die entscheidenden Jahre vor dem Chalcedonense noch nicht."
4. That research was still going on a few years ago and will probably continue; cf. R. Abramowski, "Neue Schriften Theodors von Mopsuestia," *Zeitschrift fuer die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft,* XXXIII (1934), pp. 66 to 84, who comments "dass wir ueber ihn . . . keine brauchbare Monographie besitzen."
5. F. E. Mayer, "Historical Relativism of Dialectical Theology and Biblical Study," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXI (1950), pp. 707—709.
6. Cf. P. Rohrbach, *Die alexandrinischen Patriarchen als Grossmacht in der kirchenpolitischen Entwicklung des Orients* (Berlin, 1891) for the interrelation of theology and ecclesiastical politics in Alexandria.
7. See Professor Pauck's critique of Harnack's handling of the Trinity, *op. cit.,* pp. 136—138.
8. The literature and problems of this debate can be consulted in Seeberg, *op. cit.,* pp. 210—220. It is interesting that even Luther defended him against the traditional interpretation.
9. *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* III (Buffalo, 1885), pp. 597—627.
10. Of the many studies of *De Trinitate,* one of the best known to me is M. Schmaus, *Die psychologische Trinitaetslehre des heiligen Augustinus* (Muenster, 1927).
11. Leo's *Tome* appears in English translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, loc. cit.,* pp. 254—258.
12. A critical edition of the text, which I have followed in my translation, appears in August Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der alten Kirche* (2d ed.; Breslau, 1877), pp. 84—86. This supersedes the defective text transmitted by Evagrius and reprinted in the Catalog of Testimonies, *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, 1921), p. 1108.
13. The question of whether Mary should be called θεοτόκος was one of the principal issues raised by Nestorius.

14. Here the best Greek manuscripts have ἐκ δύο φύσεων, while the ancient Latin text has "in duabus naturis," apparently derived from the reading ἐν δύο φύσεσιν. Most scholars regard this latter reading as the more probable; see the testimonies cited by Hahn, *op. cit.*, p. 84, note 347. It is interesting to note, however, that J. A. Dorner makes a noteworthy case for the genuineness of the ἐκ, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Lehre von der Person Christi,* II (Berlin, 1853), pp. 129—130, note 41.
15. The word is ἰδιότης, meaning "identity" or "peculiar nature." It is singularly ambiguous in that Nestorius could maintain that each nature has its ἰδιότης.
16. συντρεχούσης εἰς ἓν πρόσωπον καὶ μίαν ὑπόστασιν. Is there a distinction intended here between πρόσωπον and ὑπόστασις? If so, what is it? Seeberg, *op. cit.*, p. 262, note 1, explains the construction as a pleonasm.
17. So, for example, Karl Heussi, *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte* (10th ed.; Tuebingen, 1949), p. 142, speaks of "das dogmatisch vermittelnde Chalcedonense. . . . Die Annahme des Chalcedonense kennzeichnet daher ebenso den Mangel an Wahrheitssinn wie die Wiedererstarkung der kaiserlichen Gewalt in der oestlichen Kirche."
18. Johann Gerhard's exegesis of these terms is concise; "1. ἀσυγχύτως, without being mixed, since out of the two natures there was no third nature or essence made through a σύγχυσις; 2. ἀτρέπτως, without being transmuted, since the divine nature was not changed into the human, nor was the human changed into the divine; 3. ἀδιαιρέτως, without being divided, since after the incarnation the Λόγος cannot be divided from the flesh, nor the flesh from the Λόγος; 4. ἀχωρίστως, without being separated, since the two natures, once united, are never separated." *Loci Theologici,* ed. by E. Preuss, I (Berlin, 1863), p. 500. See also the interpretation of Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom,* II (New York, 1896), p. 65.
19. Pauck, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
20. Though one may not be willing to go all the way with him, there is much truth in Karl Barth's analysis: "Die Unterscheidung von persona und officium . . . ist nun gewiss logisch korrekt und scheinbar unvermeidlich. Ihre Anwendung auf diese persona und dieses officium ist dennoch unmoeglich, sofern sie eine eigentliche und nicht eine lehrhaft-dispositionsmaessige sein sollte. . . . So . . . wird im Neuen Testament von Jesus Christus geredet, waehrend eine schematische Verteilung die Folge haben musste und gehabt hat, dass man das Geheimnis der Person Christi unterschaetzte, weil man die Art und den Umfang seines Werkes nicht unmittelbar vor Augen hatte, und umgekehrt dieses nicht verstand, weil man sich nicht Rechenschaft darueber gab, dass man es als Werk dieser Person zu wuerdigen hatte." *Kirchliche Dogmatik,* III-2 (Zurich, 1948), pp. 71 to 72.
21. One attempt to resolve the problem of patristic atonement-theory is Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor,* tr. by A. B. Hebert (London, 1931); but the problem seems to me to be far more complex than Aulén makes it, historically as well as doctrinally.
22. On this entire development in its political context, cf. Gutav Krueger, *Die monophysitischen Streitigkeiten im Zusammenhang mit der Reichspolitik* (Jena, 1884); on the later influence of Chalcedon in the East, cf. the learned discussion of Friedrich Loofs, *Leontius von Byzanz* (Leipzig, 1887), p. 72 ff.
23. Chalcedon is referred to, for example, in Luther's "Von den Konziliis und Kirchen," *Saemmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis Edition), XVI:2233—2248;

in Johann Brenz, *Recognitio propheticae et apostolicae doctrinae de vera majestate Domini nostri Jesu Christi* (Tuebingen, 1564), p. 18 and *passim;* Martin Chemnitz, *De duabus naturis in Christo* (1571; reprinted, Frankfort, 1653), p. 86; Aegidius Hunnius, *Libelli IIII de persona Christi* (Frankfort, 1590), pp. 259—261. Franz Pieper believes that "eine unbefangene historische Forschung wird immer zu dem Resultat gelangen, dass die lutherische Kirche in ihrer Christologie den Konsensus der alten Kirche fuer sich hat, waehrend die reformierte Kirche sich durchaus in den von der alten Kirche abgewiesenen nestorianischen Bahnen bewegt." *Christliche Dogmatik,* II (St. Louis, 1917), p. 287. Unfortunately, no such "unbefangene historische Forschung" exists, since the matter has been treated almost exclusively from a polemical angle in the books that have considered it.

24. "When at Chalcedon the West overcame the East," writes Albert Schweitzer, "its doctrine of the two natures dissolved the unity of the Person, and thereby cut off the last possibility of a return to the historical Jesus. The self-contradiction was elevated into a law. But the Manhood was so far admitted as to preserve, in appearance, the rights of history." *The Quest of the Historical Jesus,* tr. by W. Montgomery (London, 1911), p. 3.

25. One of the few exceptions to this is the analysis of Gottfried Thomasius, *Die Christliche Dogmengeschichte,* I (Erlangen, 1874), pp. 346—356: "Das Symbol selbst aber steht ueber den noch uebrigbleibenden Problemen, nicht als die theologische Vermittlung derselben, wohl aber als die zusammengefasste Einheit der wesentlichen Momente des Dogmas, soweit sie sich dem kirchlichen Bewusstsein erschlossen haben, und als die scharfe Bezeichnung der Grenzlinie, welche jede weitere Entwicklung zu vermeiden habe" (p. 355).

St. Louis, Mo.