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ARCHIVES

The Case for Four Adverbs

Reflections on Chalcedon

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FOR many years it has been fashionable to deprecate any and all attempts, whether past or present, at formulating Biblical truth. Theologians have belittled such efforts by pleading that propositional theology fails to capture and convey the *recitativ* of the kerygma; and philosophers of religion have contended that any undertaking which proposes to systematize revelation was and is foredoomed to failure because of the limitations and instability of human speech and language. As a consequence the prevailing mood in large areas of Christendom is one of pessimism toward all endeavors to work at the unity we seek by drawing up sets of theological propositions. This is accompanied by a spirit of indifference to formularies created in the past.

This attitude has its source in two major fallacies. On the one hand, the line between what is called *kerygma* and what is referred to as *didache* has been too sharply drawn because of a failure to realize that the purest recital by the apostles and evangelists of the great acts of God was couched in concepts that had been rather fully fixed and for that reason could serve to evoke a response in the thought patterns of the persons addressed. On the other hand, too much has been made at times of the fact that language is a fragile instrument. In part this is a solid reaction against those moments in the church's life when individuals and groups seemed to work in the conviction that the language of revelation could be translated and structured into absolute formulations. There have been persons who quite obviously set about the tasks of theology as though it were possible to capture God at the end of a neatly contrived syllogism. But here the principle *abusus non tollit usum* applies.

In point of fact the church has at times been able to state her faith carefully and precisely enough to meet circumstances and movements that threatened the good news with fatal perversion. Such effective formulation, however, has been achieved only when the persons engaged in this particular task took the time, by choice or under compulsion, fully to analyze the situation to which they were addressing themselves and when they did so with an appreciation of what the church had already accomplished along this line in previous generations. Such moments have produced churchmanship of the highest order, which has succeeded in structuring the *traditum* of God's revelation of Himself in such a way as to make evident, by the results, that the *actus tradendi* belonged to the Holy Spirit.

One of the most notable instances of this kind of formulation is the statement of faith known as the Symbol of Chalcedon, accepted by the church in 451. A thorough reflection on the wording of this formulary, with its decisive effect on the future of the church, will reveal the ingredients of a constructive method in propositional theology. For the achievement of the Chalcedonian *ekthesis* amounted to nothing less than absorbing into itself several divergent ways of speaking about the Christ and producing a wording that gave direction to the thought life of the church for many centuries. A by-product of such a study, incidentally, may well be that of developing an awareness of the fact that even the adverb, a humble part of speech in comparison with the verbs of our Hebrew heritage and the nouns of our Greek tradition, can find a significant place in the job of serving the Lord not only with the heart but also with the whole mind.

The heart of the Chalcedonian Symbol, signed by 452 bishops in behalf of more than 600 diocesan representatives assembled for what is now known as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, is the assertion that the unity of the person of Jesus Christ is made known to, or is apprehended by¹ [men], in two natures "without confusing the two (ἀσυγχύτως), without supposing that one changes or is parts or levels (ἀδιαιρέτως), and without contrasting their functions

¹ The difference between the Greek γνωριζόμενον and the Latin *agnoscendum* is reflected here.

subsumed by the other (*ἀτρέπτως*), without separating them into (*ἀχωρίστως*).” All four of these adverbs were included by design. Each one was intended to play a part in producing a solution to the vexing problem of the Lord’s humanity in terms that would meet the particular needs of that troubled age.

The involved question of the relationship between the deity and the humanity of our Lord had torn the church wide open not only on the level of theological discussion but, unhappily, also in the field of ecclesiastical power and influence. Both Alexandria and Antioch were, at that moment, contending most vigorously for the minds and souls of men in a manner which suggested that the acceptance of the terminology of one necessarily excluded any interest in the phraseology of the other. The fathers of Chalcedon employed the four adverbs under discussion as part of their effort at reconciliation. As they went about their task, they were determined not to compromise the truth but rather to bring each of the two aggressive theologies into balance in the light of that tradition which reached back through Constantinople and Nicaea to the days of the New Testament and even to the ancient prophets. Our four adverbs can serve as an illustration of their method, which consisted essentially in using terms that were familiar throughout the church in such a way as to preserve the integrity of the contending factions and extracting the basic Gospel message from each, with a sensitive concern for the vital deposit of each section of the church as it related to the single problem confronting the church as a whole. The magnitude of this achievement can be seen only against the backdrop of the problems and personalities involved in this great assembly, the largest ever to have come together up to that time.

Nicaea and First Constantinople had satisfactorily settled the matter of Christ’s deity. However, even before this question had been disposed of officially, the other side of the mystery in the incarnation came under serious and often violent discussion. The First Council of Ephesus had set forth the unity of the person of Christ, specifically condemning as heretical the language of Nestorius and by indirection strongly disapproving of the Christology of Antioch. This Third Ecumenical Council, however, had said nothing about the manner in which the Godhead and the manhood

of Christ were united with each other. It set out to fix the doctrine of the unity of the Lord's person; and this it accomplished.

Eutyches soon began to suggest that the humanity of Christ had been subsumed by the Logos at the moment of incarnation. He spoke of a unity derived from two natures, thus creating a "third something." He appealed to the writings of Cyril in support of his point of view, even though the difference between the two might be described, according to the categories employed by Wolfson,² as that of a union of confusion on the part of Eutyches and one of predominance in the case of Cyril.

The Home Synod of 448 attempted to correct this imbalance, but without much success. For Dioscorus, Cyril's aggressive successor, accepted the condemned Eutyches into fellowship with his church in Alexandria. Moreover, he proceeded at once to capture the whole Eastern Church and to isolate Rome, using the formula, "one incarnate nature of God the Word," as his measure of orthodoxy and imposing his will on Second Ephesus, often referred to as the "Robber Synod."

Dioscorus owed much of his success to the backing of the emperor, Theodosius II. In 450, however, the latter was killed by a fall from his horse. At that point Pulcheria, his sister, offered both her hand and the throne of the East to General Marcian. These two then became empress and emperor respectively. Both had made up their minds to bring peace to the church. With them this matter received priority listing, in point of fact. Therefore they convoked a council. The bishops of the church were ordered to assemble at Nicaea in September 451. However, an invasion of Illyria by the dreaded Huns upset the emperor's timetable. The opening of the council was delayed until October; and Chalcedon, a suburb of Constantinople, was designated as a more convenient place of meeting.

This council set out at once to undo the effects of the "Latrocinium." So far as the assembled bishops were concerned, this was the only matter that deserved serious consideration and bold action. The emperor, however, made it very clear at the beginning of the third official session, held on October 13, that he expected

² As used and applied in Sec. II of Chap. XVI in Harry A. Wolfson's *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Harvard University Press, 1956), I, 372-386.

the assembly to produce an *ekthesis* of faith just as the "318" of Nicaea and the "150" of Constantinople had done. When the imperial commissioners broached this matter, the bishops unanimously declined to accept the suggestion, loudly insisting that nothing new should be created by way of a declaration of faith.³

Despite the reluctance of the assembled bishops to consider the formulation of a new Christological statement, the chief issue of the day had already come before the council in the first session, when, after the acts of the Home Synod and the minutes of the "Robber Synod" had been read, Eustathius of Berytus had found it proper to warn the bishops that in their support of any doctrine of "two natures" they should make it clear that they were not thinking of any "dividing" on the order of Nestorius. At this juncture Basil of Seleucia had made the suggestion that they could safeguard the truth by stating that while the two natures in Christ were not to be "divided," they were also not to be "mingled." His own words are significant for the final formulary to come out of Chalcedon. He said: "We apprehend the natures, but we do not divide them; we say that they have been neither sundered nor confused."⁴

The emperor's commissioners concluded that the opposition to their request for a *definitio fidei*, as they had placed it before the third session, could not be ignored. They suggested, therefore, that a committee be appointed to consider the matter at some length. But this proposal was also voted down. The bishops were content to have the documents of previous councils and Leo's Tome read to them for renewed acceptance. The secretary read them. At this point the bishops of Illyria and Palestine raised objections to certain phrases from Leo's document. They expressed their concern particularly over the statement, "Agit enim utraque forma." This sounded to them like crypto-Nestorianism. The bishops agreed to examine all the documents very carefully. Then the council adjourned for five days.

At the opening of the fourth session the imperial commissioners

³ The minutes of this council are given in both Greek and Latin in Volumes VI and VIII of Giovanni D. Mansi's *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Florence, 1762).

⁴ *Ibid.* VI, 744: γνωρίζομεν τὰς φύσεις, οὐ διαιροῦμεν· οὔτε διηρημένας οὔτε συγκεχυμένας λέγομεν.

asked to hear the conclusions the bishops had reached individually. This gave Sozon of Philippi an opportunity to suggest that the true doctrine could be preserved if the two natures were kept "unconfused and unchanged and unseparated" (ἀσυγχύτως καὶ ἀτρέπτως καὶ ἀδιαίρετως).⁵ Moreover, thirteen Egyptian bishops, adamant in their refusal to accept Leo's Tome, submitted an *ekthesis* of their own, determined to cling to Dioscurus' statement, "We say that no confusion, no abbreviation, no change takes place," i. e., in the Logos Incarnate.⁶ This combination of voices persuaded Anatolius, the patriarch of Constantinople and ecclesiastical host of the assembly, that more would need to be done than accepting documents from the past. On the evening of October 21, therefore, he and a handful of bishops, selected by him, drafted a new document, which was based almost entirely on the confession of faith submitted by his predecessor, Flavian, to Theodosius at the time of the Home Synod.

It is evident from the fate of this document, no copy of which is extant, that the papal legates had not been invited to the discussions that led to the preparation of this *definitio*. For when this statement was read in the fifth session, on October 22, it was subjected to severe criticism by the representatives from Rome. But these were not the only ones to take exception to Anatolius. Some of the Oriental bishops expressed their opposition to the inclusion of the phrase "out of two natures," which had been taken over from Flavian. John of Germanicia also subjected the document to withering fire.

Anatolius tried to defend his effort. But the papal legates threatened to go home unless some crucial terminology from Leo's Tome were included. The council was on the verge of breaking up when the imperial commissioners decided to stake everything on a direct approach to the problem. They confronted the assembly with an either-or choice between Leo and the discredited Dioscorus. They pointed out that the Alexandrian had said, "I will accept the 'out of two natures.'" Then they continued: "But the most holy archbishop Leo says that two natures are united in Christ, uncon-

⁵ Eduard Schwartz, *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum* (Berlin, 1927 ff.), II, 1, 2, p. 102.

⁶ Mansi, VI, 676 f.

fused and unchanged and unseparated [ἀσυγχύτως καὶ ἀτρέπτως καὶ ἀδιαιρέτως]. Now, whom do you follow?" The bishops, of course, had no real choice. They shouted that Leo was right. "Well, then add that the two natures are joined together unchanged and undivided and unconfused [ἀτρέπτως καὶ ἀμερίστως καὶ ἀσυγχύτως]." ⁷

The emperor ordered that a committee of bishops proceed with the formulation of a new statement. The session then recessed. Six bishops from the Orient and three each from Pontus, Asia, Thrace, and Illyria were appointed to work with the papal legates and with Anatolius on the task of preparing a new document.

Since no serious objections had been raised against the first part of Anatolius' original *definitio*, this was left intact. But the drafting committee rewrote the second section almost completely. This was the paragraph that dealt with the crucial issue of the way in which the natures were united in the person of Christ. As their source material the committee of bishops used the Synodal Letters of Cyril, the Formulary of Reunion, Leo's Tome, and Flavian's profession of faith. At the same time they had before them the acts of previous councils.

What this committee produced has been described as a mosaic.⁸ It was just that, a carefully designed conflation of Eastern texts, many of which had got into Leo's Tome. The sanctified judgment and procedure of these bishops becomes most evident in their choice of the four adverbs that follow the words "in two natures." These four actually break down into two pairs, carefully balanced against each other. The first two, ἀσυγχύτως καὶ ἀτρέπτως, had the effect of saying that the Alexandrians had been sincere in their insistence that they were not teaching a doctrine of confusion. Moreover, this pair of adverbs made it clear that the Alexandrians did not propose to explain the incarnation in terms of subsumption of any kind.⁹ The second pair, ἀδιαιρέτως καὶ ἀχωρίστως, was inserted into the document to bring the theology of Antioch into

⁷ Schwartz, II, 1, 2, pp. 124-125. An excellent account of this incident is given in Grillmeier and Bacht's monumental work, *Das Konzil von Chalkedon* (Würzburg, 1951), I, 397.

⁸ This term is used by Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina in Grillmeier-Bacht, I, 398.

⁹ Sellers points out that this combination of two adverbs is repeatedly used by Cyril. Cf. R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon* (London, 1953), p. 215.

balance by pointing out that the person of Christ was not to be separated into parts or levels according to functions.

It is of the utmost significance that this series of adverbs begins with ἀσυγγύτως. This order alone reveals to what extent the committee had taken the measure of the situation confronting the council. In his day Cyril would have insisted on starting with ἀδιαιρέτως, believing that Nestorius and Antioch constituted the chief threats to the faith. By the time of Chalcedon, however, the church's unity was threatened by the "confusion" of Eutyches. The drafting bishops, therefore, took up this issue first in their adverbial foursome.

This first adverb went back not only to Basil, who had said to Eutyches at the time of the Home Synod: "If you do not say 'two natures after the union,' you are introducing a mixture and confusion."¹⁰ It is found repeatedly in Cyril, notably in his *Letter to Succensus*, in which he wrote: "We confess that the Logos has come from God the Father unmixed, unchanged, without turning into something else."¹¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia employed the term when he wrote, "This manner of union according to purpose preserves the natures unconfused and unseparated."¹² It occurs also in Nemesius' attack on Eunomius for the latter's insistence on the point that the "ousiai" were not to be joined, but only the "dynameis." "It would be better," Nemesius remarked, "to say that a union takes place as each nature in the essence remains unconfused."¹³ We find the same objection to confusion, in fact, already in Tertullian's famous statement: "Videmus duplicem statum non confusum, sed coniunctum in una persona, Deum et hominem Iesum."¹⁴

A study of this concept in its historic depth and development strongly suggests that the Chalcedon committee was not unmindful of the need for choosing such language as had become familiar from past discussions and writings. This reveals their stature as churchmen bent on bridging the chasm that threatened the life

¹⁰ Mansi, VI, 636 f.

¹¹ Migne, PG 83, 232 B.

¹² Ibid., 66, 1013 A.

¹³ Ibid., 40, 601 B.

¹⁴ In *Adversus Praxean*, PL 2, 191 C.

of the church. It is evident from this that the formulary of Chalcedon was not imposed on the council by the West. This observation is confirmed by the fact that Theodoret of Cyrus had already made the exact distinction accepted at Chalcedon. His works had been read into the minutes of Second Ephesus, by which he had been condemned as a heretic. In his *Letter to the Monks in the East* he had written: "We confess one Lord, not dividing [οὐκ διαιροῦντες] this one being; but we believe that His two natures have become one without being confused [ἀσυνχύτως]." ¹⁵ In fact, he had written an entire dialog, the one between Eranistes and Orthodoxus, just on this adverb.¹⁶ It would seem, therefore, that one of the heroes of Chalcedon was Theodoret.

The second adverb, ἀτρέπτως, goes back at least as far as Athanasius. His *Letter to Epictetus* ¹⁷ is an attack on a Christology which assumed that a change had taken place in the Logos when He became man. Cyril used it in his *Letter to Succensus*, writing as follows: "The two natures come together into a unity that is neither sundered nor confused or changed."¹⁸ It was a favorite word in Antiochene theology because it served to support the impassibility of the Logos. This particular interest in the term may have left much to be desired; yet its use at Chalcedon indicates that the drafting committee was determined to bring about a reconciliation within the church on the basis of terminology that had been widely used. At the same time, of course, due credit must be given the emperor for his plan to have all parts of the church represented on the episcopal committee. Any divergent nuances in each term could in this way be discussed face to face.

Aloys Grillmeier points out how much the adverb διατρέτως owed to its use by Cyril.¹⁹ Sellers makes the same point.²⁰ This was, in fact, a key term in the Christology of that distinguished bishop. It had served as his yardstick at Ephesus and at other times when he felt constrained to proceed against Nestorianism of any

¹⁵ PG 83, 1424 A.

¹⁶ Ibid., 105—220.

¹⁷ PG 26, 1056 B—1061 A.

¹⁸ PG 77, 232 C.

¹⁹ I, 176 f.

²⁰ Page 215, fn. 2.

kind. He himself upheld a distinction between *diaphora* and *diairesis*, allowing the former and rejecting the latter.²¹ We have seen that Theodoret was not unfamiliar with the expression.²² When, therefore, the imperial commissioners used this term in setting forth the position of Leo, they put to work a word that had become something of a rallying cry for all those determined to uphold the personal union of our Lord.

The fourth and last adverb, ἀχωρίστως, does not occur in the directions of the commissioners to the council. Nor does it seem to have been used by Leo. However, Theodoret had put it to use in his *Demonstratio*, saying: "Whenever we say that the body, or the flesh, or the manhood suffered, we do not sever the divine nature (τὴν θεϊαν οὐ χωρίζομεν φύσιν)." ²³ Cyril, too, had written: "The one Lord Jesus Christ must not be severed (οὐ διοριστέον τὸν ἕνα κύριον)." ²⁴ It is found, moreover, in Gregory of Nazianzum's *Letter to Cledonius*, where we read: "We do not sever the manhood from the deity, but teach that He is one and the same." ²⁵

Possibly this fourth adverb was added for the sake of balance. In meaning it seems to be hardly more than an extension of ἀδιαιρέτως. Yet it may have been included to bring to an end a tendency, prevailing for the most part in Alexandria, which consisted of separating the natures according to their functions, for which the Greek fathers used the term χῶραι. Furthermore, this adverb rejects the kind of sundering found in Athanasius, whenever he described the Logos as not accompanying the body of Christ into the nether regions. There is some interesting evidence for this in an interpolation that is given in the *Letter to Epictetus* just at the point where he speaks of this descent into hell. Some ancient scribe apparently added the phrase μὴ χωρισθεὶς αὐτοῦ.²⁶

From all this the general pattern of the procedure followed at Chalcedon becomes reasonably clear. These men set out to construct

²¹ *Scholia de incarnatione*, PG 75, 1385 C.

²² Cf. Note 15, above.

²³ PG 83, 336 A.

²⁴ PG 75, 1385 C.

²⁵ PG 37, 177 B: οὐδε τὸν ἄνθρωπον χωρίζομεν τῆς θεϊότητος.

²⁶ PG, 26, 1060 A. De Urbina calls attention to this in Grillmeier-Bacht, I, 409.

a balanced theology, firmly rooted in the tradition of the church and based on terminology that had become current enough to make possible a large measure of understanding in the church as a whole. They set forth the unity of the person of Jesus Christ and then proceeded to describe the way in which the relationship of the two natures was made known. Their way of putting this last point deserves some notice. The bishops did not propose to solve the mystery of the incarnation. Nor did they care to undertake the impossible task of constructing absolute definitions. Their language was designed to be descriptive of the content of God's revelation of Himself to men in Christ Jesus. Now, although they employed four negative-sounding adverbs to accompany the significant participle *γνωριζόμενον*, the effect of this foursome was quite positive and constructive.

Apparently Harnack let his liberal tendencies lead him too far astray when he wrote of the adverbs under discussion: "The four bald negative terms which are supposed to express the whole truth, are, in the view of the classical theologians amongst the Greeks, profoundly irreligious. They are wanting in warm, concrete substance; of the bridge which his faith is to the believer, the bridge from earth to heaven, they make a line which is finer than the hair upon which the adherents of Islam one day hope to enter Paradise."²⁷ For actually Chalcedon, we might say, put down these four adverbs as buoys, marking the channel which a sound Christology would need to follow if the humanity of our Lord were not to evaporate into the gnostic and docetic kind of speculation which had threatened the church previously and would continue to do so for many generations to come.

Chalcedon can be put down as a victory for the affirmation of the humanity of Christ. Except for this *ekthesis*, reluctantly formulated by an episcopal committee but loudly acclaimed by the council as a whole, Christianity might have lost its anchor in history. If this view is correct, Albert Schweitzer was quite out of order when he said of this council: "When at Chalcedon the West overcame the East, its doctrine of the two natures dissolved the unity of the Person and thereby cut off the last possibility of

²⁷ Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma* (Boston, 1901), IV, 222—223.

a return to the historical Jesus. . . .”²⁸ The very opposite would seem to be the case. Any attempts of our day to set forth the church’s faith with respect to the humanity of our Lord cannot afford to by-pass Chalcedon, especially for its method of getting on with the business of formulating a statement adequate to the needs of that moment.

Chalcedon did not, of course, settle the problem of the incarnation for all time to come. In point of fact, it came under severe criticism very shortly, primarily because it did not spell out some of the major implications of Christ’s human nature as they affect our salvation. For example, it failed to wrestle with the question of the relationship between the human and divine wills in the God-man. Yet in the church councils that were to follow, the *definitio Chalcedonensis* provided not only some necessary guidance but also the encouragement to attempt the best possible formulation of the truths of revelation. In this way that ancient symbol can still render a distinct service to all of us. Its four adverbs can rise up to say: “Yes, it is possible to put the recital theology of the Scriptures into propositions that can, for a given time, help to clarify and communicate what is surely a most awesome mystery.”

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²⁸ *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (London, 1926), p. 3.