

## **The Council of Chalcedon**

This lesson is the last one in this section of the course. The title is “Two Whole, Perfect, and Distinct Natures—the Council of Chalcedon.” Before I introduce what this lesson will cover, let us join in prayer using an ancient collect, or prayer, from the fifth century about the time of the Council of Chalcedon.

*“Bless all who worship Thee, from the rising of the sun, unto the going down of the same. Of Thy goodness, give us. With Thy love, inspire us. By Thy Spirit, guide us. By Thy power, protect us. In Thy mercy, receive us now and always. Amen.”*

I have spent some time talking about Saint Augustine. While Augustine was doing battle with the Donatists, Pelagians, and the pagans, there was another issue that was troubling the church. It was another theological battle. Augustine lived and worked in the West. This other theological problem affected both the East and the West, but particularly the East. The West was able to settle it at the Council of Chalcedon, but the issue lived on in the East, and it even continues to be a matter of discussion and controversy in certain parts of the church in the East in our present day. This lesson is going to be a roadmap to help us get through the theological thicket of Christology in the fourth and fifth centuries. This is not an easy topic, but I will attempt to say some things that will help us make our way through this history.

When the apostolic fathers talked about Christ, they were concerned to assert that He was God, even though before the Council of Nicea the language was not established for them to know exactly how to say it. On the other hand, and even more so at first, they were very concerned to say that He was a real person. The earliest heresy related to the person of Christ was that of the Gnostics, what is known as Doceticism. This heresy said that the real Christ could not come into contact or into union with a material body. Their fear was that Christ would be contaminated by contact with a body that was material. Even though it was not necessarily a sinful body, it was still something that some people could not conceive. So the apostolic fathers continually said, in opposition to Gnosticism and Doceticism, that Christ had a real body, just like us.

Then came the Council of Nicea, in the early fourth century, which was in opposition to those who said that Jesus Christ is similar to the Father but not at the same level as the Father. This brought forth the great word, *homoousios*, which clarified that the Son was of the same substance as the Father. In the aftermath of that council, however, another question arose. If Jesus is a real person, and if He really is God, then how do the manhood and the deity unite in the one person of Jesus of Nazareth? That debate lasted for several centuries. It is called the “two natures” debate.

One of the early attempts to answer the question came from a church leader named Apollinaris, whose teaching we call Apollinarianism. He was from the city of Laodicea in Asia. As an Apollinaris thought about this issue, he concluded that if there are two perfect entities—perfect deity and perfect humanity—they cannot combine. There cannot be two whole perfect things coming together in any way. Apollinaris did not find that in the Bible, but it was a philosophical concept that guided his thought. With that in mind, then, he concluded that Christ’s human side must have lacked something, a place for the divine to fit in. The more he thought about it, he decided that while Christ had a human body, the man Jesus did not have a human soul. The human soul of the man Jesus was missing, but it was filled by the divine Christ, the second person of the Trinity. One of the best ways to illustrate the teaching of Apollinaris is that of slipping a letter into an envelope. The letter represents the divine person of Christ, and the

envelope represents the human body of Jesus. So the divine is placed into the human and serves as the soul, or the rational part of the human.

For some time, people thought that might be an acceptable way to explain the issue. But it was not too long before others pointed out that there are serious problems with that teaching. It would mean, if you follow Apollinaris, that Christ is not a complete human being like us, but only a partial human being of some sort, with a divine part that fills up what is lacking in the human part. Jesus would then be a kind of God enfleshed. To many people that seemed too much like the old Docetic heresy. Such a teaching does not present a real person but merely a divine person who has taken on a human body for a particular use.

The teaching of Apollinaris was attacked by the very determined group of theologians known as the Cappadocian fathers, whom I talked about earlier. They saw that his teaching would lead the church into some very serious problems. Gregory of Nazianzus said, "What was not assumed was not healed." In other words, if Christ did not take our human flesh, our human body, our humanity in its totality in His incarnation, then He did not provide salvation for whatever He did not assume. He has to be fully human in order to be our savior. It was similar to when Athanasius had said that Jesus had to be fully God to be our savior.

In the ecumenical council that met at Constantinople in 381, the second ecumenical council, the church condemned Apollinarianism and said that Jesus Christ is truly human, not just partly human. That stopped that heresy, or at least it answered that heresy. But it did not answer the question of how the true, full humanity of Jesus united with His true, full divinity.

Before I continue with how that question was eventually answered, let me make one important point. What was happening in this Christological debate was not pure theology. There was much personal rivalry and jealousy between church leaders. And there was also rivalry between cities. In particular, the cities of Alexandria, in Egypt, and Antioch, in Syria, and later Constantinople, were in rivalry with one another. Alexandria and Antioch were very bitter rivals. Alexandria espoused the spiritual interpretation of the Bible, while Antioch taught the literal interpretation of the Bible. Alexandria stressed the divine side of Christ, His divinity, while Antioch stressed the human side of Christ, His humanity. Those two cities were quite different in how they thought of the Bible and how to interpret it and how much emphasis they would place in their teaching of the person of Christ.

As this rivalry was going on another city became very prominent. Just five years after the Council of Nicea, Constantine founded his new capital of Constantinople. The Council of Nicea had established an understanding of precedence of the churches. The church of Rome was to be viewed as number one. The church of Alexandria was number two. And the church of Antioch was number three. Then there were other churches that were thought of as important as well. But it was not long before Constantinople had pushed ahead of Alexandria and became number two. So you can see why rivalry existed between those cities. Soon the rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople expressed itself in a personal rivalry between two church leaders, one from each city.

Nestorius was bishop of Constantinople. He had been trained in the Antiochene tradition, and he very much insisted on the full integrity of Christ's human nature. As Nestorius thought of the question of the two natures of Christ, he was particularly disturbed by an expression that was used in Alexandria. The expression was *theotokos*, which was a word used about Mary that meant "bearer of God" or "mother of God." Alexandria insisted on using this phrase, not to elevate Mary, but to make very clear that the

person who was born of Mary was indeed God. So the Alexandrians saw it as an orthodox statement that insisted on the full deity of Christ as set forth in the Council of Nicea.

Nestorius was afraid that such an expression would confuse people's understanding of Christology. He said that if you are going to use the expression *theotokos* then you also need to use *anthropotokos*, which means "bearer of man." He said that it would be best to avoid both expressions and simply speak of Mary as *christotokos*, "bearer of Christ." The person who was born of Mary was Christ, who is both God and man. Nestorius also said that in order to be safe, it would be wise not to use the word "union." He said that the idea of "union" of the human and the divine might promote an improper understanding of how the human and divine natures of Christ are related in His person. He was concerned that there not be a mingling or confusion of the human and the divine. When speaking of the divinity and manhood in Christ, he said that it would be better to use a word such as "conjunction." So, one would say that the human and the divine "conjoin" in Christ, rather than unite.

Nestorius was opposed in all of this by Cyril, who was the bishop of Alexandria. A great battle ensued between Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, and Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria. It is not very edifying to read about this point in church history. The debate on the two natures is probably one of the most bitter in all of the history of the church. Cyril certainly did not help matters. Cyril was an intelligent and acute theologian. He was more often right than wrong. But he was a stubborn and belligerent type of church leader. It is difficult to admire or like Cyril because of his personality, but one may admire his intellect and intelligent writing.

Cyril accused Nestorius of so stressing the independence of the two natures that he was in effect teaching a doctrine of two sons. If Nestorius felt that the Alexandrians were pressing the two natures together so much that they destroyed any distinction between them, then the Alexandrians felt that the Nestorians were pushing the two natures apart in such an extreme way that the result was two sons. One illustration that has been used of Nestorianism in order to understand what it stood for is that of oil and water. The two substances may be put together, but they never really mix. The oil is always there and the water is always there, but they do not mix. Even if they are in the same container, the oil and water never mix.

Cyril was able to win the battle with Nestorius. The Council of Ephesus in 431, which also condemned Pelagianism, condemned Nestorianism and asserted that Jesus Christ is one person, not two. That was the right decision, but it was a rather disgraceful affair. The Council of Ephesus, the third ecumenical council, was a kind of farce. The membership of the council was stacked on one side, against the Nestorians. The Nestorians actually arrived a bit late and Cyril had actually started the council and condemned them before they even arrived. There was not a real discussion of the issues.

At this point, let me ask and answer a few questions. First, was Nestorius a Nestorian? It might seem that it is obvious that he was. But church historians since his time who have studied the period have felt that Nestorius was probably greatly misunderstood. He was trying to avoid an error, and his enemies pressed his views to radical conclusions. Paul Tillich wrote, "If we say that Nestorius became a heretic, we could say that he was the most innocent of all heretics. Actually he was a victim of the struggle between Byzantium [or Constantinople] and Alexandria." John Young wrote, "Nestorius himself vigorously denied that he was a Nestorian, as his enemies described Nestorianism. He died a man misunderstood by the Western church, rejected by the Eastern church, and unjustly condemned by the politics of both." Most people now think that Nestorius was indeed misunderstood and that his teaching can be judged as orthodox by the standards of Chalcedon. If that is true, however, and while giving him the benefit of the doubt that his intentions were good in trying to protect the integrity of the two natures,

it can be said that many of his statements were at least provocative. He did not always explain himself very well, and his ideas and terms were often open to misunderstanding. We can summarize the battle between Cyril and Nestorius by saying that Nestorius' ethics were probably superior to his theology, while the theology of Cyril was certainly superior to his ethics.

Some Christians, particularly those outside the bounds of the Roman Empire, in the Persian Empire, the areas that are today in Syria and Mesopotamia, broke away from the Catholic Church. That is why we now have a church we can call the Nestorian Church, a church of the East. That church was heavily influenced by the theological school of Edessa, one of the main centers of Antiochene Christology, and influenced by Theodore of Mopsuestia, who was a teacher of Nestorius. The Nestorians are centered now in Persia. It was the Nestorians, as I will describe later, who first conducted the mission into China. The Nestorians spread Christianity into the Far East over the next several centuries. The adherents of the Nestorian Church should probably not be viewed as true heretics, just as Nestorius himself is not really viewed as a heretic by many church scholars, but rather as a person misunderstood and misrepresented.

With Nestorianism put down, there was the opportunity for the Alexandrian to emphasize the oneness and the divinity of Christ. That is what happened with a monk named Eutyches, whose teaching is known as Eutychianism. This monk was pro-Cyril, but he went further than even Cyril. As a result, he fell into the chasm that exists on the extreme edge of Alexandrian Christology. He essentially denied the reality of the two natures. Eutyches said that the human nature was absorbed into the divine nature at the incarnation. He said, "Before the union of the two natures, I recognize two natures, but in the incarnation, after the union, there is only one nature." He went on to say something that people could not let stand: "The flesh of the Lord is not like ours." He described it as a divinized nature, a human nature that has become divine. We can use the illustration here of wine and water. If you mix wine and water, you get something else altogether. The two do not stay apart. It is not like oil and water. Wine and water Christology is Eutychian Christology. In the incarnate Lord, according to Eutyches, the divine and human merge into one single unique nature, which is not like ours.

For a time it seemed that the Eutychian view might prevail. There was a church council that met at Ephesus in 449 that supported Eutychianism. But the teaching very much angered the pope in Rome, Pope Leo I, one of the first great, strong Catholic popes of Rome. Leo called the council at Ephesus a "robber synod" and a "den of thieves." He understood, correctly, that Eutychianism was not orthodox theology. Leo intended that his writing on the subject, called the *Tome*, be read at the council and be heeded. When the council just ignored him and his *Tome*, he was understandably irritated and set out to reverse what had happened at the Council of Ephesus in 449. Nestorius, who had been exiled to the Egyptian desert, read Leo's *Tome* and he was greatly encouraged. He felt that Leo was saying what he had said, or something close to it, against the Christology of Eutychianism, which is now often called the Christology of the Monophysites. The Monophysites are those who advocate "one nature." The result of Leo's determination to reverse the decision of Ephesus was the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which condemned Eutychianism and stated that Jesus Christ has two distinct natures.

All of these complex and confusing proceedings that I have been describing are the background of the Council of Chalcedon. It was the fourth ecumenical council and the largest that had met up to that time, with over 500 bishops present. All but four of the bishops came from the East because the West was in a state of disarray resulting from the barbarian invasions. Most of what happened in Chalcedon was the result of the work of bishops and theologians of the East.

The Council of Chalcedon created the statement that most of the church has accepted to the present. In that way, it parallels Nicea in 325. Nicea in 325 dealt with the Trinity. Chalcedon in 451 dealt with

Christology. The council determined that “Christ is one person in two perfect natures.” That statement speaks against Apollinarianism, which said that the human nature of Christ was imperfect, that it had a vacuum into which the divine nature entered. But Chalcedon said no, Christ was one person in two perfect natures. It also added the words “without confusion or conversion.” That means that the two perfect natures are not confused; they are not mingled. That part of the statement speaks against Eutychianism. No “water and wine” view was to be allowed. Then Chalcedon went further to say that, not only is Christ one person in two perfect natures, but also those natures are “without division or separation.” That was meant to speak against Nestorianism. And finally, the two perfect natures of Christ come together in a real, basic, hypostatic union. Defining the word “hypostatic” is difficult. It basically means that the union is real. It is not simply “voluntary.” Perhaps one way to explain it is to say that you have a hypostatic union of your body and your soul. You did not decide to unite those two things. They are just united. And so, the union of the divine and human in Christ is a real union.

Chalcedon does not explain how the union works. It certainly does not solve the problem of how the divinity and the humanity were united in the one person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is something that is inexplicable. We can illustrate the heresies: a letter in an envelope, oil and water, or wine and water. But we cannot provide a fitting illustration for the true doctrine of the union of the two natures of Christ. It is always difficult to illustrate truth in theology. It is much easier to illustrate heresies in theology. I am not saying there is no illustration that can be used, but it is difficult to think of a way to illustrate this truth because we are dealing with a mystery. Chalcedon acknowledges that. It does not explain how the divinity and humanity were united in Christ, but it states that they were united, really united. And they were united without confusion, change, division, or separation. I like the way the Dutch theologian G. C. Berkhouwer wrote about this. He said, “The Chalcedonian pronouncement was comparable to a double-row of beacon lights, which mark off the channel in between and warn against the dangers which threaten to the left and to the right.” If you go too far to one side, you will fall into Eutychianism. If you go too far the other way, you will crash on the rocks of Nestorianism. But between those lights there is a safe channel. Even though Chalcedon does not empty the doctrine of its mystery, it at least tells us that there are bounds that we ought not to go beyond on either side.

It would be nice to say that Chalcedon solved everything. Unfortunately, history is never quite that simple. The battle raged in the East for a long time after 451. The West accepted Chalcedon, so it was not a problem with Rome in the West. The Far East, the church in Persia, had already become Nestorian and broken away. The Near East continued to struggle with the issue, however, at it was a dismal story. Church leaders and political leaders were all involved in the struggle. It was both a religious and political struggle. As often as not, the emperor in Constantinople was trying to settle things, usually on the wrong side.

The battle was between the Chalcedonians and the Monophysites. The Chalcedonians were ones who said Christ is one person in two natures. The Monophysites were ones who said Christ is one person in one nature. The key point is obviously the question of two natures or one nature. Eventually another church council, Constantinople II in 553, said that Chalcedon was right and the Monophysites were wrong. But even that did not settle things. Over 100 years later, in 680, another church council, Constantinople III, once again reaffirmed Chalcedon. That did not totally settle things either. By that time, some churches, beside the Nestorian Church, had broken away to form their own Monophysite Church. And also by that time, some unsavory things had taken place in this long dispute over Christology. One pope of Rome had excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople over the issue. The patriarch of Constantinople in turn excommunicated the pope of Rome. Another pope of Rome was kidnapped by agents of the emperor in Constantinople and brought to Constantinople, where he was flogged, imprisoned, and starved until he finally died. Then there was a theologian and monk whose

name was Maximus who was arrested by the emperor. His tongue was torn off because he said the wrong thing. And his right hand was cut off because he signed a document that the emperor disagreed with. All of that surrounded the discussion of the two natures of Christ. It is rather overwhelming to think of the bitterness and the extremes to which people went in order to make their point in this debate.

By the time the dust settled, as it eventually did, there were separate Monophysite Churches, primarily in Egypt and Syria. There were also some in Armenia, Ethiopia, and India. Those churches are now called the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Monophysite churches still exist. They make the sign of the cross with one finger in order to indicate the one nature. Around the time of the end of this dispute there were four churches: the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Nestorian Church in Persia, and the Monophysite Church in Egypt, Ethiopia, Armenia, and India. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox had not technically split yet, which would not happen until 1054. But with popes and patriarchs excommunicating one another, it would not be long before the final division between those two major bodies of the church.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

When we think about these disputes that took place, sometimes we wonder if those on different sides were saying the same things but simply using different words. That is possible. The words involved in these disputes are difficult ones to use clearly. Another problem in the disputes over this issue was that some people were using Latin words and some were using Greek words. That makes things more confusing. Furthermore, any view can be pressed to its extreme conclusion and be shown to lead to heresy. It may be that Copts and the Monophysites misunderstood Chalcedon. And it may be that the Chalcedonians misunderstood the Coptic view. But when we read the Copts’ explanation of the two natures of our Lord, they say, “We believe that He is perfect in His divinity and He is perfect in His humanity, but His divinity and His humanity were united in one nature.” That final phrase “in one nature” is the problem for anyone who accepts Chalcedon. The Copts wanted to stress the union so much that they did not like to think of two natures, so they said one nature. They thought if you say two natures you will fall to the Nestorian side and create two persons. The Chalcedonians thought if you said one nature then you were mingling the two like Eutyches did.