

A Study in Pursuit of Reconciliation within the Body and Bride of Christ



*And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of
many generations; you shall be called
the repairer of the breach, the restorer of
the streets to dwell in – Isaiah 58:12*

I. POLITICS AND THE CHURCH

As the emperor Constantine ascended to a solidified power in Rome in 324AD, the church was emerging into a new political situation in which it found great favor within the Roman Empire. By 381AD, under the leadership of Theodosius I, it was the Christian faith that was declared the faith of the empire. The 4th and 5th centuries would see the emergence of an expanded understanding of metropolitan powers where the authority and reign of certain bishops would extend beyond the administration of their local city, but in a more regional structure. The five major cities, or sees, that would comprise what would later become known as the pentarchy, led by bishops that would be called patriarchs, would be that of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem.

In the first ecumenical council of 325AD in Nicaea, the sees of Rome, Antioch and Alexandria were recognized as metropolitans of the church. In the second council, meeting in 381AD, Constantinople was elevated to a place of primacy in the East, being named in the 3rd canon as a 'New Rome,' with only Rome itself having a place of greater honor. This would pit Antioch and Alexandria, already developing into two varied schools of thought regarding interpretation, in a heated rivalry for influence over Constantinople that would impact the subsequent councils in the 5th century.

As all of this was unfolding, the faith was forming in greater ways in expressions beyond the imperial borders of Rome. These expressions would be attached to forms of thought labeled heretical in either the Council of Ephesus (431AD) or the Council of Chalcedon (451). It would take decades to see the dust clear from the decisions of these councils, but by the 6th century it was clear that a significant branch of the Christian faith, directed south of Alexandria and east of Antioch and mostly Syriac in form and expression, would be lost to the imperial faith of the Roman Empire. With Islam arising in the 7th century and taking control of this divided region, Christianity in its most eastern forms would thrive not as a favored faith, but as a minority faith under Muslim rule.

II. THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS (431AD)

Following the first councils of the 4th century that focused on the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, the 5th century debates focused on the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity. At the center of this debate were the major interpretive schools of Alexandria and Antioch.

- A. **Alexandria versus Antioch** – Along with Rome, these two ancient sees could trace their heritage and formation to that of the apostles. The ancient faith that emerged out of each was reflective of the cultural emphases and histories unique to each city. Alexandria, rooted in philosophical underpinnings, supported an allegorical approach to scripture that looked for meaning beyond the literal stories and symbols of the text. Antioch, rooted in Syria and shaped by a more Semitic approach, focused on the literal meaning of the text. In the discussions on the union of Christ's divinity and humanity, this led those in Antioch to focus on his humanity and the distinction of his persons, known as *diophysitism* (meaning two natures), while Alexandria focused on his divinity and *monophysitism* (meaning one nature).

- B. **Cyril, Nestorius and the *Theotokus*** – In 428AD an Antiochan, Nestorius, was made Patriarch of Constantinople. Nestorius quickly attacked a growing movement that was calling Mary, the mother of Jesus, *theotokus*, meaning ‘mother of God.’ Nestorius believed this undermined Jesus’ humanity and supported calling her *christotokus*, meaning ‘mother of Christ.’ At its core, the argument was not about Mary, but about Christology.

The Alexandrian Patriarch, Cyril, promptly attacked Nestorius’ view, and in 431AD a council was held in Ephesus to determine the proper theology. With the support of the imperial court, Cyril presided over the council and Nestorius was labeled a heretic and deposed. The hastiness of this council was seen in the fact that it was convened prior to the newly appointed bishop of Antioch, John, being able to arrive. John subsequently held his own council, condemning the decisions of Ephesus, and it would not be until 433AD that two sides would come together in the Formula of Reunion that emphasized Christ in two natures, supporting the Antiochan’s, and the usage of the *theotokus*, thus supporting Alexandria.

- C. **The Aftermath** – The excommunication of Nestorius, and forced exile of his supporters, did not end the debate of the nature of Christ’s humanity and divinity. Christianity outside of the empire was already forming a degree of independence, as can be seen with the formation of an autocephalous patriarch in the Sassanid Empire (Persia) in its capitol city of Seleucia in 410AD. By 424AD this independent church was no longer looking east to the imperial church of the Roman Empire and did not view itself under the authority of its bishops and councils.

Nestorius and his supporters were readily accepted and hence the church became later known as the ‘Nestorian Church.’ While accepting the first two councils of the 4th Century, this form of Christianity outside the imperial boundaries of Rome and the Byzantine East would grow in isolation and later under Islamic rule. The Church of East would eventually split in the 16th century and become the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East, while many adherents would later form a communion with Rome, the Chaldean Catholic Church.

III. COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (451AD)

As the Christological debates continued, so did the deplorable character in which they were now being undertaken. This resulted in two councils, one in Ephesus which would later be renounced and another in Chalcedon, which would define orthodox Christology for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

- A. **Robbers Synod (449AD)** – The Patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, and that of Alexandria, Dioscorus, were in discord with one another following the excommunication of a staunch monophysite teacher, Eutyches. Alexandria supported him, as well as the emperor who did not care for Flavian, and a council was held in Ephesus that would be later called the Robber’s Synod. Delegates were forcibly led to sign a deposition and Flavian was beaten so severely that he would die from his injuries within a few days. Excommunications abounded, a new Patriarch of Constantinople was declared, and who in turn declared a new bishop of Antioch.
- B. **Orthodoxy and Division** – In 450AD, the Eastern emperor, Theodosius II, was thrown from his horse and died. His sister and successor, Pulcheria, subsequently married Marcian, a general, who in 451AD sought to heal the growing divisions between Antioch and Alexandria by calling

another ecumenical council in Chalcedon. The Christology of Pope Leo I in his famous Tome was adopted as orthodox, Dioscorus was deposed, and Eutyches and the previous council were formally renounced.

- C. **The Aftermath** – Despite the appearance of union and orthodoxy, the Council of Chalcedon became one of the most significant events in regards to the division of Christianity. Most Coptic Egyptians in Alexandria rejected the decision of the council and over the next century began developing independently in what is now known as the Coptic Orthodox Church. Those within its jurisdiction, such as Ethiopia and later Eritrea, would be lost with it. Chalcedonian supporters in Alexandria and Egypt were labeled Melkites (meaning supporters of the king) for their allegiance to the empire and its form of orthodoxy.

Another split would occur among the Syrian supporters of *monophysitism* in what would become known as the Jacobite Church. More formally separated in the 6th century, we know now this church as the Syriac Orthodox Church.

Other churches outside of the Roman and Persian empires would also be divided with this council. Already an established church beyond the borders of the Christological controversies, the church in India would adopt alternative views of the Chalcedonian faith of the empire, or the Nestorian faith of the Persians, and align with the Jacobite Church. Armenia, a Christian empire at the turn of the 4th century, would find itself separated through Marcian's and Pulcheria's failure to support the nation as it was invaded by Persian armies.

IV. THE LOST HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

In the 15th century, most of the churches outside of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy would experience persecution that would push them into the fringes of our historical memory. Despite this destructive period, these churches thrived for centuries under Islamic rule and developed missions to the East that would allow them to rival both Rome and Constantinople in regards to size and influence. One of the great tragedies is the lost history of these churches whose voices have much to speak into our present day and the growing globalization of the faith.

One sign of this tragedy is that when most Christians from Latin or Greek traditions think of the church, they tend to only think of it within the boundary of these two languages and the confines of the Roman Empire. Other ancient sees that could equally trace their apostolic foundations were relegated to obscurity, despite many of these believers still using the language of Jesus and his apostles, Aramaic (Syriac). The unfortunate history of these churches outside the eyes and care of those who would be separated from them in the 5th century, is one of a persecution so severe that most have barely survived and yet to recover.

As the Middle East experiences on-going tumult and radical Islam attacks minority Christian communities, the remnants of these ancient churches are once more finding themselves under the heavy hand of persecution. Their fragmentary historical remains speak a prophetic word to a divided church that has not yet experienced such persecutions.

TOPICS AND DEFINITIONS

I. CHALCEDONIAN ORTHODOXY

Following the theological position of Tertullian which was summarized in Pope Leo I's Tome, the council of Chalcedon in 451 stated their full belief of the person and nature of the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Declaring two full natures in one single person held together in hypostatic union, this position became the orthodox understanding of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and most protestant churches.

II. MONOPHYSITISM

Influenced by the rich tradition of Egyptian and philosophical interpretations of Alexandria, *monophysitism* emphasizes the divine nature of Christ. While it is best to think of this view in terms of a spectrum, the two integral views within this sliding scale are Christ in one nature as only divine or a synthesis of divinity and humanity. It is labeled *mono* in its singular emphasis of the nature, or physis, of Christ.

III. DIOPHYSITISM

Like *monophysitism*, the *diophysite* view was equally influenced by the rich tradition of the literalist school of Antioch. This distinct view has a tendency towards emphasizing the humanity of Christ. Also like *monophysitism*, it is best to think of this view in terms of a spectrum as well which holds to the two natures of Jesus, divine and human, but either sees them as distinct or held loosely together. Nestorian held *diophysite* views, though not as strongly as many have thought, and thus the churches which hold to this theological grid have been labeled Nestorian, a misnomer at best.

IV. MIAPHYSITISM

Many of the *monophysite* churches were labeled as such by their opponents, but traditionally hold to a more nuanced view of the person of Christ which is in fact closer to Chalcedonian orthodoxy. This view holds that Jesus has one nature, but that it is a combination of his divine and human held together without separation or confusion. The Oriental Orthodox churches have been labeled *monophysite*, but hold to a *miaphysite* theology.

5TH CENTURY CHURCH DIVISIONS

I. PERSIAN

Due to persecution of Christianity in the Persian empire as it was viewed as the faith of a foreign agent and enemy, the Roman empire, Christians in Persia formed an autonomous church that would make the faith distinctly not Roman. In 410AD in the capitol of the Persian empire, Ctesiphon, the church named its own Patriarch. Following the decrees of the third ecumenical council in Ephesus which condemned Nestorius and those who held to his views, many of his students went east from Antioch to Persia and established a school in Nisibis. Hence what is now known as the Church of the East came to be known as Nestorian and rejected the decrees of the council of Ephesus.

II. ARMENIAN

Tracing its roots to the first century, the Armenian Apostolic Church became the first national church in 301AD when it was declared that Christianity would be the official faith of the empire. Christianity became forever intertwined with Armenian national identity and in the 5th century when the Persians sought to impose its rule and faith, Christianity became the rallying point for the nation. Theodosius II, emperor of the Byzantine empire promised to aid them but then died and his successors, Pulcheria and Marcian, failed to uphold this promise right as the council of Chalcedon was convening. Needless to say Armenia was invaded and rejected the decisions of the council.

III. COPTS, JACOBITES & MELKITES

Following the split that followed Chalcedon, Alexandria became divided and two movements eventually unfolded within it and those who followed its lead. Those who rejected Chalcedon formed the independent church which has come to be known as the Coptic Church, *copt* meaning Egyptian. Not all rejected Chalcedon and were thus labeled Melkites, meaning royal or imperial, as they held to Chalcedonian theology and the patriarch of Constantinople. In Syria a similar divide happened and the non-Chalcedonians, *monophysites*, were organized under the leadership of Jacob Baradaeus and became known as "Jacobite."

7 ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

The Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are in agreement and communion in regards to the first 7 ecumenical councils. The Church of the East, and its derivative churches, only affirms the first two councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. The churches that form the Oriental Orthodox Communion affirm the first three councils, supporting the decrees of the first Council of Ephesus. While these four major branches of the Christian faith disagree as to the number of councils and the decrees and dogmas that have arisen from them, all of these branches affirm the Nicene faith as found in the Nicene Creed.

Year	Council	Key Issues	Decision
325	Nicaea	Equality of Jesus and the Father	Affirmed the divinity of Jesus and his equality with the Father by affirming him as being of the same essence as the Father; Creed of Nicaea.
381	Constantinople	Trinity; Holy Spirit	Declared God as three persons in one; Nicene Creed
431	Ephesus	Nestorius and dividing the nature of Christ; Mary as Theotokus	Condemned Nestorius and affirmed Jesus as both divine and human; Mary is Theotokus.
451	Chalcedon	How was Jesus divine and human	Jesus Two natures in one person in hypostatic union.
553	Constantinople II	3 Chapters	Condemned the 3 Chapters and Origen.
680	Constantinople III	Does Christ have two wills or energies, or one.	Condemned monothelitism (Jesus was two natures with one will) and monoenergism (Jesus was two natures, but one energy).
787	Ephesus II	The use of icons in worship	Affirmed icons and condemned iconoclasm.