

ORTHODOXY IS A RESPONSE TO HERESY **The Worth of Chalcedon**

by Sam Andreades

Each forward step of orthodox biblical doctrine taken in history has been taken as a step away from a rising heresy besetting the church. For example, before the Enlightenment the doctrine of revelation could not find the fuller expression it enjoys today because European culture had not so fully challenged the Bible's ultimate authority.¹ This growing fullness is reflected in the space given to the doctrine in various texts. The subject of revelation, which Calvin discusses in seed form in a few pages of the final edition of the *Institutes*,² becomes the large section *Principium Cognoscendi Externum* in the Introductory Volume (but only the introductory volume) to Berkhof's Systematic Theology,³ and today is standardized as a large part of the "traditional" theological curriculum.⁴ Similarly, the Protestant doctrines of church government were formed in response to the dual error, as the Reformers thought it, of the over-structuring of the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and the chaos of the Anabaptists on the other.

The church's journey to Chalcedon (AD 451) is an excellent example of such a flight from heresy. The final Christological formulation established there emerged from a series of three clarifying controversies: the Apollinarian Controversy of AD 362-381; the Nestorian Controversy of AD 428-431; and the Eutychian Debacle of AD 444-449.

The Council of Nicea (AD 325) and the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), the first two ecumenical councils, had opened the road to Christology by decisively defeating Arianism, and by outlining the doctrine of the Trinity with the inclusion of the Holy Spirit. The Cappadocian Fathers⁵ had thus paved the way for the church's understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ to be explored. Christians had divided into two camps, both of which affirmed that Jesus was fully God and fully man, but each of which differed in emphasis. The Alexandrine school concentrated on the divinity of Jesus while the Antiochan school stressed his humanity. As is the

¹ An organic process of God working throughout an apostle's life to create his finished writing as God-breathed, rather than, say, a process of dictation, was absent from earlier formulations of New Testament inspiration.

² Book 1, chapters 6, 7, and 8, published in 1559.

³ First published in 1932.

⁴ Westminster Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary, as of 1999, both held the Doctrine of Revelation and Scripture as the first of the seven great headings of systematic theology, preceding Doctrine of God, Trinity, Attributes and Deed, Doctrine of Man, Person and Work of Jesus, Ministry of the Holy Spirit in Salvation, Doctrine of Church and Sacraments, and Eschatology.

⁵ Basil the Great (AD 329-379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335-395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 329-389), the last of whom was appointed chair of the second council.

case when one side of a balanced truth is emphasized, some people tended to go too far, damaging the dialectic.

The first principle controversy actually preceded the council of Constantinople. Apollinaris, Bishop of Laodicea, was a staunch defender of the Nicene Creed. From the vantage point of Chalcedon, he overcorrected against the heresy of Arianism and, being an Alexandrine, finished in denying Jesus' humanity. Interestingly, it was arguments of anthropology that drove both the Apollinarian formulation and its criticism. Apollinaris' trichotomist view of humanity gave him a means of explaining Jesus by division.

For Apollinaris, the spirit was composed of mind and will, the latter being sinful by definition. The soul referred to affections, or the Aristotelian life essence that was not by nature sinful. So, to uphold the sinlessness of Jesus, his neat solution was to say that Christ had a human body and human soul (i.e. affections), but that his spirit (i.e. mind and will) could not be, and so never was, human. Since the Laodicean bishop believed that the image of God in man consisted in rationality, he asserted that the divine Logos replaced the mind of the creature in Jesus Christ. This resulted in a Christ who was fully divine, but only two-thirds human. The Cappadocian Fathers responded by questioning how a Christ who did not have a human mind could be human at all.

This only got things started. The discussion heated up with the Nestorian controversy in AD 428. Nestorius, the fiery patriarch of Constantinople, responded to the popular appellation for Mary "Theotokos" ("God-bearer") by asking, "Has God a mother?"⁶ In reaction he concluded, "He who was formed in the womb of Mary was not himself God," a view that was seen to be not only an over-emphasis of the humanity of Christ, but downright adoptionistic. Nestorius further stressed the separateness of Christ's natures, rejecting the hypostatic union and asserting that in Christ there were not only two natures, but also two persons in the one body. The Council of Ephesus (AD 431), the church's third ecumenical council, propelled by the politically motivated Cyril of Alexandria, condemned Nestorius' views with twelve anathema's.

The final defining controversy swirled around Eutyches, an archimandrite in Constantinople and front-man of Dioscorus, the vile patriarch of Alexandria. Eutyches espoused that Christ's human nature was absorbed by his overwhelming divine nature, as a drop of wine might be absorbed by the ocean. This left Christ with one, different, divine nature, *tertium quid*. So in Eutychianism, Christ had one nature, one person, and one body. The local bishop of Constantinople, Flavian, heard this monophysism coming out of the monastery and opposed it – an act which eventually cost him his life at the hand of Dioscorus.

The Council of Chalcedon, the church's fourth ecumenical council (AD 451), answered all these controversies. Emperor Theodosius II, who had been manipulated by Dioscorus, died in AD 450 and was succeeded by his daughter Pulcheria and her husband Marcian. They bound with Leo I, Patriarch of Rome, against Dioscorus by calling a council at Chalcedon, including over 600 bishops from all over Roman Empire. Eutyches was banished forever. Dioscorus was brought to trial, and was likewise banished and excommunicated. The doctrinal result of the

⁶ Nestorius suggested replacing "theotokos" with "christotokos" or "anthropotokos."

council was the reaffirmation of Nicea, Constantinople I, and Ephesus I. They recognized Christ's nature as fully God (against Ebionitism, Arianism and Nestorianism), fully man (against Docetism and Apollinarianism), one person (against Nestorianism), two natures (against Eutychianism), and the two natures as existing without confusion, transmutation, division or contrast (to preserve the attributes of each). Hence, the church formalized orthodox Christology, and the final formulation employed language that did not exist before the heresies it refuted.

The question is often raised as to whether the Chalcedonian result provides a useful model for Christology. The Eutychian ideas did not die, but continue to be found within Greek Orthodoxy because, as the Eutychian criticism goes, the Chalcedonian model is not helpful for engaging the biblical text. As has been said, Chalcedon produced orthodoxy, not clarity.

But in order to answer the useful model question, we must ask another: useful for what? It may not be pretended for a moment that the formula of Chalcedon explains the mystery or answers all the pressing questions about the Incarnation. But it is useful in the same way that all orthodoxy is useful – it contradicts heresy. Athanasius' alleged description⁷ of the Nicene Creed could just as well apply to Chalcedon: "a signpost against all heresy."

Note that this answer does not preclude further theological development. There is no doubt that the six hundred bishops at Chalcedon established the parameters, the boundaries, within which the church may usefully exegete the Scriptures and think about Jesus. Not much more was said on this subject for the next thousand years. The Reformers, however, focusing on Christ's work, went beyond the Chalcedonian formula to speak of Christ's nature in terms of the work he did and the offices he fulfilled. More recently, D. M. Baillie justified his Christological explorations by refusing "to acquiesce in the idea that nothing can be said about the Incarnation except in negatives."⁸

The conception of orthodoxy as reaction to heresy is not only an historical truth. It is a biblical one as well. In the midst of his classic teaching on schisms in the Corinthian church, Paul made the remarkable statement that heresies are necessary for the church: "For it is necessary that even heresies be among you, in order that the tried and true among you become manifest."⁹ The import of this statement is easily missed because the Greek *haireseis* is usually translated as "factions" or "divisions," but it may also quite legitimately be translated "false teachings" or "heresies." A moment's reflection shows that this latter meaning gives Paul's words much more sense. Paul cannot be casting these "factions" in a good light, speaking of

⁷ I must say "alleged" because I am unable to find this farsighted epithet in Athanasius' writings myself. Baillie, 83, quotes the actual Greek phrase but then mysteriously refers to Foakes-Jackson, 330. The citation in Foakes-Jackson is made with a suspicious footnote to another history, "Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 59." Because Harnack has gone through many editions and translations, and sometimes appears as a multi-volume, the scanty Foakes-Jackson reference has proven difficult to trace.

⁸ Baillie, 83.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:19. I am indebted to Sinclair Ferguson for pointing out this rendering during a lecture on divisions in the church, at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, January 27, 1999.

positive diversity, because healthy diversity would not distinguish “those who were true” from those who were not. Yet, why would the apostle say that these bad things are necessary? These bad things are good, according to Paul, because they make manifest those who are true. Truth comes out by trial. Although Paul mentioned this principle offhandedly in a discussion about coming properly to the Lord’s Supper, it seems to apply to how the church comes to proper doctrine as well. God allows the agony of heresy to goad the church to her creeds, to manifest the truth. When the gospel confronted the world of Hellenistic thought, such goading happened in Chalcedon. Assaulted by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, the church creeds have more recently extended to circumscribe human reason in its service to God. There is no reason to expect, as human culture continues, that orthodoxy will ever happen otherwise.

Seen from this perspective, God’s command to “fill the earth”¹⁰ must be taken as more than a geographical instruction. Humanity can be seen instinctively to fulfill the cultural mandate in exploring further intellectual territory. From the standpoint of the Scriptures, however, this exploration is carried out by fallen man who, suffering the noetic effects of sin, speaks new heresy. The church’s theological task is to respond to these explorations by constructing the orthodox road through the new intellectual space. Through this process of fighting heresy as creation unfolds, the church can further articulate the truth that was always inherent in the Bible. We find new paths to understand, and so to love, God.

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¹⁰ Genesis 1:28.