

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 32

The Nature of Jesus (and the assertion of Papal authority)

Last week, we studied the 5th century controversy over the humanity of Jesus. We will continue that study this week, bringing it to the resolution at Chalcedon in 451. As part of that study, we also see an assertion by Leo, the Bishop of Rome, of papal authority in that dispute. The goal of this class, therefore, is twofold: First, bring resolution to the controversy over the nature of Jesus as man. This involves a captivating story of drama, intrigue, and politics, as well as theology! Second, we will use this class to begin discussing the historical development of the authority of the Bishop of Rome over the church at large.

BACKGROUND TO CHALCEDON

Last week, we laid the necessary foundation for understanding the road to Chalcedon. We will not have time to repeat all we discussed last week; so instead, we will put a synopsis here and urge you to read last week's lesson (or listen to the class off of the internet – www.biblical-literacy.com) for a fuller appreciation of what we include here as background.

The 4th Century was a time when the church disputed whether Jesus was 100% God or something lesser. The Arian¹ controversy was settled through the councils of Nicea and Constantinople. Jesus was fully God, existing from eternity to eternity.

With the divinity issues resolved, the 5th Century crisis concerned how human Jesus was. Did Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, have a human mind or a divine one? Could Jesus make a mistake on a school test or was he omniscient? Did Jesus have human will power or divine will power? Could Jesus truly be tempted? Did Jesus have human emotions or divine emotions? Did Jesus cry as a baby? Did Mary give birth to a fully human, fully divine child? Or, was Jesus fully divine in some sort of a human shell?

Enhancing the discussions/debates (fights?) over these issues was the power struggle at play in the church. There was an inherent struggle between the church's seats of power in Rome and Constantinople -- both capital cities with emperor connections; both churches with great resources and claims of authority. There was also a struggle between the churches at Antioch and Alexandria.

¹ Arius taught that God created Jesus. See the earlier two lessons on Arius.

Antioch approached scripture with a clear historical/literal interpretation. Alexandria considered such an approach too base and simple, losing the richness and insight of scripture that was unfolded only through an allegorical approach.

Both Alexandria and Antioch jockeyed for the positions of influence and power that were found in Constantinople. In the 420's, it was Antioch that secured the position of Bishop of Constantinople. Bishop Nestorius rose to power over the church in Constantinople, and he hailed from Antioch.

The differences between the Antiochene and Alexandrian churches dramatically unfolded over the humanity of Jesus controversy. Antioch taught that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. As Theodore of Mopsuesta² would say, If only half of Adam fell, then half a Jesus could save. But if all of man fell, then only a fully human Jesus can pay the price for sin and bring salvation. The Alexandrians, on the other hand, felt that the Antiochene approach to the two natures of Christ was wrong and dangerous. They believed that an overemphasis on the humanity of Jesus would lead to a justification that mankind could get on its own. In other words, if a human body (Jesus) could receive divinity and be perfect, then why cannot we achieve a similar salvation through our good works in conjunction with God?³

Things came to a head starting in 428 when the Antiochene Nestorius, in his role as Bishop of Constantinople, preached a Christmas sermon that seemed to barb the Alexandrians for using a term (*theotokos*) that conveyed that Mary was “God bearer” as the mother of Christ. Nestorius believed this term minimalized the humanity of Christ. Nestorius would say that Mary did not bear or give birth to God; rather, God always existed. Mary’s role was to give birth to the human aspect of Christ. Hence, Mary should be called “Christ bearer” (*Christotokos*) not “God bearer.”

Ultimately, this led to a council at Ephesus in 431 where Cyril of Alexandria saw that Nestorius was deposed from his position as Bishop and sent into exile. The council of Ephesus attempted to resolve the question of the nature of Christ, but really did not do so. That resolution came at the council of Chalcedon in 451.

So with that review in mind, let us continue on the story of the church determining the nature of Christ’s humanity!

² Mopsuesta was a town northwest of Antioch in modern Turkey. Theodore was an important Antiochene thought leader who has many writings still available today for our reading.

³ Another heretic condemned at the council of Ephesus in 431 was Pelagius. We discussed him briefly in a lesson on Augustine. Reputedly, Pelagius taught a works righteousness.

Coming out of the Council of Ephesus were some key language differences. The Eastern Church is still using Greek (the language of commerce and government for most people in the east) for their theology and teaching. By this time, the Western church is using predominantly Latin, the language of Rome. The differences in language contributed to the ambiguity over whether the church in the East was saying the same thing as the church in the West.⁴

Ultimately, the dispute in language boiled down to a few terms. In Antioch, the people would speak of Jesus having “two natures” after the union of God and Man in the incarnation. The two natures, of course, were that of God and man. Alexandrians, however, seemed to tolerate a use of the terms “two natures after the union” as long as there was an understanding that what was meant was “one nature after the union”! In fact, Cyril of Alexandria consistently taught and preached on the “one incarnate nature of the Word.”

This almost blind peace continued between the churches through the death of Cyril in 444. After Cyril died, his successor was a rascal named Dioscorus. Dioscorus was trouble...big time. Olson and others believe that the motives for Dioscorus’s actions were much more based on ousting the influence of Antioch from Constantinople once and for all than for seeing a Godly resolution to a thorny theological question.⁵ Dioscorus insisted the church eliminate the terms, “two natures” and instead use “one incarnate nature of the divine logos” or “after the union, one nature.”⁶

Dioscorus took advantage of every situation to try and eliminate from the church the Antiochene view and anyone who held it. So, when an old monk named Eutyches in Constantinople denied that Jesus was the same substance as every other human, the Antiochene reaction led to a dramatic power play by Dioscorus. Eutyches believed that the humanity of Jesus was, at best, a “drop of wine in the ocean of his deity.” Eutyches taught that Jesus’ human nature, when combined with his divinity in the Christ child, was transformed so completely that what remained was of no consequence. In other words, full deity descended upon humanity, but the combination of the two changed humanity to where it was

⁴ The language differences were more and more the source of other communication differences. As the Roman Empire, and the Roman peace, disintegrated, travel became more and more difficult. The Greek speaking Eastern world was losing touch with the Latin speaking Western world in places. So the Bishop of Rome, for example, found it more and more difficult to find staff that was fluent in Greek. See, Price and Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, (Liverpool University Press 2005), Vol. 1 at 11 and 19.

⁵ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (IVP 1999) p. 225.

⁶ R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Survey* (London: SPCK, 1961), p. 33.

barely existent and certainly had no influence on the divine. This really bordered on a new version of the old Gnostic heresy (remember many lessons ago?) that taught that Jesus was a human who had God come indwell him and then depart shortly before his death. The only difference is that with Eutyches, God came to indwell Jesus in the womb, rather than at the baptism, and God left after the resurrection rather than shortly before the crucifixion.

Eutyches and his teaching were an open door for the scheming Dioscorus from Alexandria. A gathering of Bishops in Constantinople spent two weeks working to excommunicate Eutyches. The process was not easy! Eutyches was friend and counselor to many, including the Emperor. Eutyches handled his cross-examination by the Bishops quite well. He never fully committed to any strong position beyond what the interrogators themselves said. Most scholars see the hand of Dioscorus at work here.

Though Dioscorus was actually *sympathetic* to the views of Eutyches, he arguably instigated the gathering of the group of Bishops to condemn Eutyches. After the Council concluded with the excommunication of Eutyches, Dioscorus offered Eutyches Alexandria as a place both to live and to continue in church fellowship. A council of the church bishops was set for Ephesus in 449 to deal with the issues. Before the council, Eutyches was seeking the support of Pope Leo from Rome, and Dioscorus was using his money and contacts to try and get the Eastern Emperor on his side as well.

Dioscorus worked hard to make sure he had the necessary votes at the council, before the doors even opened! As an added security measure, Dioscorus brought some rough and tough monks from Egypt. Now in fairness, travel was quite dangerous in that day. Marauding tribes had long destroyed the peace of Rome, and travel was a precarious adventure. It might seem natural to take a few bodyguards who were well equipped to secure one's safety while traveling.

Apparently Dioscorus brought his thugs along for another reason as well. When the Council began, the thugs were the enforcement that Dioscorus needed to run the Council exactly as he saw fit. Dioscorus took over the Council. He quickly turned the tables on the Antiochenes and the Bishop of Constantinople who had anathematized (read that "kicked out") Eutyches. The Council held that Eutyches was correct in his view of "two natures before the union, one nature after the union." Instead of Eutyches being condemned, Dioscorus turned the tables, and had the Council put the Antiochenes on trial and excommunicated!

Pope Leo from Rome did not travel to the Council. But he did send his position through messengers. Those messengers brought a papal position paper that history has labeled *Leo's Tome*. The paper set out a clear position that explained the error

of Eutyches. Accordingly, the paper was not well received at Dioscorus's carefully orchestrated church takeover! When the Bishop of Constantinople tried to read the Pope's position paper, the rogue Egyptian monks/bodyguards beat him up so bad, that many historians see his death shortly thereafter as likely a result of the physical abuse.⁷

By the time the Council was over, Dioscorus had the Emperor Theodosius II on his side, along with the necessary votes to kick out of the church the Antiochenes and anyone who disagreed with an Alexandrian/Eutychian view that Jesus was fully divine with little humanity at all. This really was heresy, but it held the day at Ephesus under the careful and cunning (and physically violent) hand of Dioscorus.

Pope Leo got wind of what had happened and was deeply upset. He wrote a letter to the Emperor setting out the error of the Council, condemning Eutyches, and insisting that the power structure of the Eastern Church be returned to those wrongfully deposed. Leo called the death of the Bishop of Constantinople murder, and insisted the rogue monks be arrested. Leo coined a term for the Ephesus Council; he called it a "Robber Synod."⁸ That name has stood throughout history and is still known as the shorthand title of the Council of Ephesus on 449. Leo insisted that the Emperor Theodosius II call a second true Council to undo the heresy of the Robber Synod.

The Emperor refused the entreaties of Pope Leo. He refused to call a new council, refused to arrest anyone involved with the death of the Bishop of Constantinople, and refused to remove his prior recognition of the Council of Ephesus.⁹ This left Leo to appeal to the Western Emperor to set an independent council in the West. Ultimately, the church was headed for a horrendous split.

But history is often made (or altered) by small events that occur in a split second. Such happened here. As Olson puts it, "God intervened. Emperor Theodosius II was killed on July 28, 450, in a freak accident."¹⁰ Actually, the Emperor was hunting and thrown from his horse on July 26. He died two days later! This left

⁷ See Olson at 229.

⁸ The Latin term used by Pope Leo was *Latrocinium*, literally a council of thieves or robbers.

⁹ Price and Gaddis point out that the Bishop of Alexandria (called "Pope" by the Alexandrians) held great power by virtue of a "stranglehold" he possessed over the Egyptian economy. Egypt was a crucial supplier of food to Constantinople, and the farmed food went through the port of Alexandria. The Emperor of Constantinople needed that food!

¹⁰ Olson at 230.

the Emperor's sister, Pulcheria, in control of the Empire. Pulcheria was a virgin set aside for service to God (think "nun," although our "nuns" are still not quite on the scene as we know them today). Pulcheria "married" a general named Marcian for ruling purposes, though she remained chaste even in her marriage. The two had already been schooled on the heresy of the now deceased emperor by Pope Leo, and understood the truth. They immediately went to work to undo the heresy reigning at the moment.

CHALCEDON

Marcian and Pulcheria called a new church council. Before hand, they distributed Pope Leo's position paper, "*Leo's Tome*" which had caused the death of the Bishop of Constantinople at the Robber Synod. They also had the body of that Bishop brought back to Constantinople for full burial honors at the church Hagia Sophia. The Council was ultimately held at Chalcedon, across the river from Constantinople.

Dioscorus was ordered to attend this council, and had to see the writing on the wall! The council was being held close enough to the palace that the Emperor's guards could keep order (rather than a band of rough and tough Egyptian monks!). *Leo's Tome* was mandatory reading for those in attendance. The government was behind those opposing Dioscorus. Not one to leave things well enough alone, Dioscorus made the journey and even found time to excommunicate Pope Leo while traveling!¹¹

We should pause here and note that we have a very good verbatim record of what transpired during this Council of Chalcedon in 451. There were transcribers who actually took down in shorthand the entire proceedings (they were called "notaries"). We still have copies of the proceedings today. In fact, for the first time in 2005, Liverpool Press put out an English translation and publication of those proceedings. They are incredibly interesting to read, even though most, if not all, the decisions at the Council were made outside of the formal proceedings. The formal proceedings served more to recognize, usually with a unanimous vote, what people had already worked out in private sessions.

¹¹ The transcript of the proceedings has Paschasinus, the Bishop of Sicily, speaking against Dioscorus saying, "Manifest are the deeds committed with lawless audacity by Dioscorus bishop of the city of Alexandria....The aforesaid, however, thinks it a matter of distinction to persevere in evil, when he ought, as is fitting, with bowed head and groans to be lying prostrate on the ground, because he did not even allow the reading of the letter of the most blessed pope [at the Council of Ephesus].... But he has greatly surpassed his first crimes with his later ones, and had the presumption to pronounce excommunication against the most holy and sacred Leo archbishop of Great Rome." (*Acts of Chalcedon*, Third Session, section 94, translation of Price and Gaddis).

The Council began on October 8, 451, and there were 16 sessions. The first session dealt with Dioscorus and the “Robber Synod.” On October 10, the second session, the Council read aloud *Leo’s Tome* and began discussing it. The third session was a Saturday session on October 13. Here, Dioscorus was finally tried and excommunicated. By October 25, the Bishops put together a statement of faith that the Emperor signed off on as well. The unanimous position statement set out that Jesus was, “the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rationale soul and body.” Jesus was the same substance (“consubstantial”) as God and also the same substance as man. Mary was *Theotokos* (God bearer) as regarded Christ’s manhood¹²

By the time the Council ended on November 1 (some argue the date was October 28), the Council had repeated the condemnation of Nestorius from decades earlier, and reinstated the condemnation of Eutyches. On the issue of Christ’s humanity, the Council protected the mystery of the incarnation. There is no “final solution” in the sense of a full explanation. Instead, there are what scholars have come to call “four fences” that were set up for orthodoxy. The idea is that these four concepts fence in orthodoxy. As long as one stays within these four fences, one may ruminate and speculate on the incarnation. But once one crosses one of these fences, one has left orthodoxy and gone into heresy!

The four fences are that Christ has two natures, divine and human, in one indivisible union. These two natures are, “without confusion [fence 1], without change [fence2], without division [fence 3], without separation [fence 4].”

THE PAPACY

With Chalcedon, the influence of the Alexandrian church was severely curtailed. The Bishop of Constantinople was elevated to equality with that of Rome...sort of! The Council ruling is a bit ambiguous in that regard! There is one place where it notes that the two great Bishops (“Patriarchs”) stand side by side over all other Bishops. What has become known as “Canon 28” of the council reads, “The fathers appropriately accorded privileges to the see of Senior Rome because it was the imperial city and, moved by the same intent, the 150 most God-beloved bishops assigned *equal privileges* to the most holy see of New Rome [Constantinople].” Yet, right after the “equal privileges” announcement, the canon continues to assert that the bishop of Constantinople is “second after her” that is, second in authority to the Bishop of Rome.

¹² See lesson last week and the Christmas sermon of Nestorius in 428.

Pope Leo, who was not in attendance at the Council, having sent emissaries instead, was not at peace over the way his authority was minimalized. Still, he was certainly pleased with the orthodoxy that came out of the Council. The Council basically followed the explanations and theology set forth in his position paper. Ultimately, Pope Leo ratified all aspects of Chalcedon except that of Canon 28.

In Chalcedon, and the history that surrounds it, we have actions of Pope Leo I that most clearly emulate, for the first time, the role of the Papacy in the church for centuries to come. As we look even closer to Leo's service as Bishop of Rome, we see him taking on leadership roles of governing much of the land we now consider Italy. Next week, we plan on closely examining the historical development of the office of Bishop of Rome, the rise of the term "Pope," as well as the scriptural considerations that both Roman Catholics and Protestants consider relevant on the Papacy.

THE AFTERMATH OF CHALCEDON

Meanwhile, we need to note a few consequences from Chalcedon that we have yet to discuss! There were large groups that did not agree with the Council of Chalcedon. They split off and formed their own fellowships or churches. A number of Syrian churches and those east of Syria still embraced the teaching of Nestorius. These churches broke off and formed Nestorian churches. They continued to emphasize the humanity of Christ in a separate and divisible way that was "outside the fences" of Chalcedon.

Similarly, although on the exact opposite side, a number of Egyptian churches were outside the fence in their belief of "one nature" to the exclusion of Chalcedon's teaching of two natures. These churches broke off and formed "one nature" churches (The theological term is "*monophysite*" meaning "one nature"). These churches are still around today as the "Coptic Church of Egypt."

The Coptic Church would be quick to point out that the Council of Chalcedon did not accurately portray their belief in "one nature." But the Coptic liturgy does not sit within the four fences of Chalcedon. It sits within three of the fences! In the declaration at the end of the liturgy is stated that Christ's divine nature is united in one "without mingling, without confusion, and without alteration."

The Coptic Church sees that Chalcedon may have had ulterior motives for its exclusion of the Coptic Christians. The Coptics believe that maybe the politics of church and state caused the exiling of the church. Coptics argue that their Egyptian Pope (Dioscorus) was independent of the state, and that the state sought to make Bishops a part of their authority rather than independent.

The Coptic Church today is proud of its heritage, still claiming a line of succession from St. Mark who they claim founded the church in 62 A.D. They are also proud of the catechetical school (read that seminary) that is still ongoing. This is the school of Origin, Cyril, Dioscorus and others. It is considered the oldest Catechetical school in the world.¹³

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.... Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:20-24).
2. “We speak God’s secret wisdom... None of the rulers of this age understood it... but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit... No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God... This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:7-14).
3. “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ, all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (Col. 2:8-10).

¹³ More can be read of the Coptic Church from their website at www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica.