

LESSONS ON THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (451) FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), a defining moment in Christian theology, articulated the doctrine of Christ's two natures-divine and human-yet its imposition fractured the unity of African Christianity, particularly in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nubia. This study examines the council's theological, sociopolitical, and cultural implications for African Christian communities, arguing that its legacy is one of both division and resilience. While the Chalcedonian Definition weakened imperial-aligned churches in North Africa, it catalyzed the consolidation of Miaphysite traditions, fostering distinct African Christian identities that endured under Byzantine and later Islamic pressures. This study notes the council's dual role: fragmenting African Christianity while enabling its adaptation and survival. The postcolonial lens reveals how theological disputes were intertwined with power dynamics, offering insights into the broader trajectory of Christianity as a decolonized faith in Africa. It is therefore argued that there are obvious lessons for Christianity as a living reality today in Africa in the midst of differing religious, political and cultural dispositions especially when aligned with contemporary scholarly approaches to religion and power.

INTRODUCTION

The Council of Chalcedon was called by Emperor Marcian to resolve disputes arising from the earlier Council of Ephesus (431 CE) and the subsequent "Robber Council" of Ephesus (449 CE). The central issue was Christology, specifically, how to reconcile the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. The council rejected the teachings of Eutyches (Monophysitism), which argued that Christ had only one nature (divine), and instead affirmed the doctrine of the Incarnation as articulated in what came to be known as the Chalcedonian Definition: that Jesus Christ is one person (hypostasis) in two natures (physis)-fully divine and fully human-united without confusion, change, division, or separation. This formulation was based on the Tome of Pope Leo I and supported by the majority of bishops present. The council also reinforced the ecclesiastical hierarchy, elevating the status of Constantinople to a patriarchate equal to Rome, which caused tensions with the Alexandrian Church in Egypt, a major center of African Christianity at the time. This study notes that the impact of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) for Christianity in Africa extends beyond its immediate theological and ecclesiastical outcomes, shaping the continent's religious, cultural, and political landscape in profound and enduring ways. While the council aimed to standardize Christian doctrine across the Roman Empire, its decisions had a paradoxical effect in Africa: they both fragmented the Christian community and catalyzed the development of distinct African Christian identities that resisted imperial hegemony, offering cogent lessons for African Christianity today.

The Council of Ephesus (431) had earlier rejected Nestorius and endorsed the Alexandrian view of the relationship between the two natures of Christ but the debate was far from over. Three major characters at this council had simultaneously passed away: John the bishop of Antioch in 440, Cyril of Alexandria in 444, and in 446, Proculus the new bishop of Constantinople, leaving behind Nestorius, who was still living in Egypt. In 441, Deacon Leo (later Pope Leo the Great) was elected as the new Pope, with Theodosius II as emperor. A theological controversy broke out afresh in 448 about the true meaning of the Incarnation. It was this that led to the fourth General Council of the Church called the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. Again, three

persons emerged around whom the debate revolved: Eutyches, the monk from Constantinople, Flavian the saintly bishop of the imperial city and Dioscorus the bishop of Alexandria. At the end, Chalcedon countered two centuries of doctrinal errors (dualism, docetism, adoptionism, modal monarchianism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism and Monophysitism), as a summation of Christian doctrines four centuries after the resurrection. Specifically, against Arius the Church affirmed Jesus was truly God; against Appollinarianism that he was truly man; against Eutyches it confessed that the deity and humanity Jesus were not changed into something else, and against Nestorius that Jesus was not divided, but was one person. This position was the foundation of the doctrine of salvation, by a unique God-man, Jesus Christ.

Contextualization of Chalcedon: Issues and outcome

The Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 CE in the city of Chalcedon (modern-day Kadıköy, Turkey), was a pivotal ecumenical council in the history of Christianity. It addressed significant theological disputes, particularly concerning the nature of Jesus Christ, and its outcomes had far-reaching implications for the development of Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical structures, including in Africa. According to Eckman (2002)

The touchstone of theological orthodoxy is the person of Christ. Both the deity and His humanity must be affirmed, or the entire doctrine of salvation is affected. Only a Jesus who is truly God and truly man can provide a complete salvation for humanity (p.32).

This position clearly paints a picture of the issues which led to Chalcedon (451). A major problem which the early church had to contend with was an explicit explanation of the relationship between the deity (divinity) and humanity of Jesus. Fundamental questions related to how His two natures blend in His earthly life. Was He more God or more man? How are we to view the union of these two natures in the one person? This debate troubled the church for over three hundred years until the Council of Chalcedon.

The doctrine of Christ, from Nicaea (325) to Chalcedon (451) had led to various interpretations, many of which were heretical. This challenged the church to think and reflect more deeply in asserting and defining the relationship of Jesus' dual natures. Debate on this led to the emergence of two schools of theology, one in Antioch and the other in Alexandria. The Alexandrian school had prominent people like Athanasius and Origen. Influenced by Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, the Alexandrians elevated the spiritual (deity) more than the humanity. Their position was the precursor to the heresy propagated by Apollinarius (bishop of Laodicea C. 315-392), the friend of Athanasius, Basil the Great and teacher of Jerome. In other words, in an attempt to counter Arianism, he ended up deviating from orthodoxy. He taught that Jesus was fully God but that the divine *logos* supplanted his *rational soul*; that is, Jesus was not completely human:

Humans are made up of body, soul and spirit (mind), and this last element is what constitutes the intellectual core of the personality. In the case of Christ, the spirit was replaced by the Logos (the divine intellect), because it was impossible for two personalities to merge into one. Thus, while He possessed perfect Godhead, He lacked complete manhood (Clouse et al, 2002, p.54).

The second major school of theology in Antioch was influenced by Aristotle, who saw man as a unity of soul and body, not a dichotomy. This school gave more importance to the unique distinction of Jesus' two natures. It was this Antiochene emphasis that produced the heresy Nestorianism (named after Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, 428-431). He criticized the use of *Theotokos* (Bearer of God) for Mary and suggested *Christotokos* (Bearer of Christ). The way the Alexandrians were using phrases to describe Jesus, to him, amounted to a dangerous mixing of

his human and divine natures. He therefore, sought to maintain an absolute distinction of the two natures, to the point that what connected them was the will. He declared, *I hold the natures, but unite the worship*. It led to a sharp controversy with Cyril of Alexandria whereby Nestorius was accused of denying the unity of the two natures of Christ.

The church had held that Jesus was both God and man. Thus, a position was needed which would combine the strengths of both proposals (Alexandrian and Antiochene). Eutyches, the head monk of the monastery proposed a model for understanding Christ, which in his view, would reconcile Apollinarius and Nestorius. He was not a very learned man but by his position, and ascetic life, he became famous and was admired. After the emperor and bishop Flavian, he was the third man in order of importance, and was also the spiritual father of the emperor Theodosius II; the eunuch Chrysaphios, minister to the emperor, was his god son.

As an opponent of Nestorius, he taught that there is only one nature, the divine nature in Christ. Since Jesus is not a human person, he has no soul as we all have. This may be illustrated with the dropping of a few drops of oil into a bucket of water; in this case, both the oil and water are present but the distinction between the two is not clear, is it pure oil or pure water? Or what is the extent of the mixture, hence the relationship? This teaching resulted to more confusion, that Christ is not fully God or man. In Church history, the heresy of Eutyches is known as Eutychianism or Monophysitism or one nature theory.

During the Synod of 448 called by Flavian the archbishop of Constantinople, Eusebius, bishop of Dorylaeum, accused Eutyches as a heretic and demanded that he be summoned to answer the charges. It was this Eusebius who first denounced Nestorius in 429. After the resistance of Flavian, the summons was subsequently sent and after about fourteen days of delay, Eutyches appeared, with one hundred of his monks and imperial guards. He was finally heard, leading to arguments and counter arguments, whereby he refused to agree to the two natures of Jesus. The Synod then proclaimed him a heretic, deposed him from his post in the monastery, and forbade him from teaching in the future. It is reported that 32 bishops and 33 heads of monasteries signed the document of condemnation.

A twist to this decision however came with the *Robber Synod* of Ephesus in 449 which reversed the earlier decision, due to the fraternity of the emperor Theodosius II and the bishop of Alexandria, Dioscorus, even when Pope Leo had confirmed the sentence passed on Eutyches.

During the two years and two months that elapsed between the *Robber Synod* and the Council of Chalcedon, emperor Theodosius died and Marcian (450-457) a loyal Catholic became emperor following the death of the former. With the change of guards on October 8, 451, over 550 bishops all from the East, apart from the Pope delegates from Leo, met in the church of Saint Euphemia in the city of Chalcedon, close to the capital. The delegate of Pope Leo, Paschasius, bishop of Lilybaeum in Sicily, perished over the Council. After much deliberation, a new formula on the two natures of Christ was made for the bishops to sign: *according to the decision of Pope Leo in Christ these are two natures, united and inseparable*. This was the western position set forth by Leo in his *Tome*, (long letter), which was based on the Christology of Tertullian. For Leo, in Christ were two completed natures, divine and human, united in one person. This union was described with the use of four important words: unmixed and unchanged; undivided and inseparable or unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably. The first two attacked the position of the Alexandrian school, which tended to unite the two natures into one by mixing or changing them. The second two words were directed after the Antiochene school, which tended to disunite the natures by dividing or separating them. The Leo's *Tome* thus addressed the person in which the two natures are united- in the person of the Son, *not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Boer 1976, p.171). Chalcedon thus confessed the full divinity of Christ and his full humanity: Christ has a fully human mind as well as a fully human soul and body. The *person of Christ* is however divine, not human. Though the how of this is not explicable to the human mind, what is certain is that it was in accordance with the words of John: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace*

and truth. Rooted in scripture, in the words of Eckman (2002, p. 34), it has *singularly remained the most important declaration about Jesus Christ in the history of the church.* As a proclamation of Jesus to be both God and man in one person (God-man), without any confusion of the two natures, salvation for those who professed faith in Jesus was secured because His sacrifice was as both saving God and identifying man.

Implications for Authentic Christianity in Africa

In as much as it had Implications for Christianity in Africa such as division in the African Church due to the rejection of Chalcedon by much of the Egyptian Church which led to a schism between Chalcedonian (often called "Melkite" or "Imperial") Christians and non-Chalcedonian (Miaphysite) Christians (Meyendorff, 1989); strengthening of Coptic identity (Atiya, 1968); political and religious persecution (Frend, 1972); and decline of North African Chalcedonian Christianity (Burns and Jensen, 2014), there are lessons to learn from the Council for better understanding of authentic Christianity in Africa

There are lessons which can be derived from Chalcedon in a bid to realize authentic Christianity in Africa. This becomes imperative as it is a continent of various religious traditions, political pervasions and cultural diversities.

- i. In Africa are numerous cuts which threaten Orthodox truth at all times. The events at Chalcedon teach us of the need to use precise words or language in defining doctrinal matters. Words used to describe Christ without fullest denotations and implications or which diminish his divinity or his humanity, should be regarded as incorrect and hence rejected.
- ii. The miracle of the Incarnation should make meaning to the African mind. Salvation demands a confession which preserves both the complete deity and humanity of Jesus in one person. This is the whole essence of faith in the God-man, Jesus Christ. To describe Christ as an Ancestor in African pantheon runs contrary to this.
- iii. Matters of discipline. Apart from the declaration on the relationship between the two natures of Christ, as unmixed, unchanged, unseparated and undivided, various regulations or canons were enacted which streamlined the governance pattern of the church. These include the authority of bishops over all monks in their own dioceses, and other rights and privileges, conduct for priests, monks, nuns and principles of acceptance of women as deaconesses. This is a clear demonstration of order, which teaches that Christianity abhors disorder, disloyalty, confusion, and insubordination to constituted authority. The expansion of Christianity in Africa will mark remarkable progress if such canons are adhered to.
- iv. Christianity should be orthodox in its theology. In church history, orthodox Christianity referred to the majority opinion; that which won the support of the overwhelming majority of Christians, expressed by most of the official proclamations or creeds of the church. Theology on the other hand refers to human understanding of revelation and the effort to clearly express it in teaching and preaching influenced by the culture or philosophy of a people. This becomes germane as Christianity spreads to new peoples who have divergent ways of thinking. It is especially relevant in the issues of missions and evangelism, which makes the gospel meaningful and relevant to people with whom it makes contact. The Chalcedonian declaration is today worthy on account of its orthodox state in its theology.
- v. In as much as Christianity in Africa strives to be modern with prevailing realities, it must not shirk off its history or oblivious of historical antecedents. The *Tome* (long letter) of Leo I, *The Great* to Flavian which was the background to the Chalcedonian declaration, presented the generally held view in the West as stated by Tertullian years earlier. According to Latourette (1975), Tertullian had stated that

in Christ Jesus, there was neither manhood without true God-head
nor the Godhead without true manhood, that in Christ two full and

complete natures came together in one person, without detracting
from the properties of either nature and substance (p.171).

Unless Christianity in Africa recounts in history, it may lose its story in modernity.

- vi. One of the major things that Chalcedon did was the creation of patriarchates. Constantinople assured a prime place in the East comparable to Rome in the West. Others in the East were Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. If Christianity is to be meaningful, there is need for decentralization of authority for ease of administration.
- vii. Christianity in Africa needs to articulate her self-identity, through prayer, transmitting the teaching of the apostles and community life. Her relationship to African religious tradition is gradually being appreciated. She should however not forget that in doing this, persecution is likely to take place. While the doctrine of the faith may not change, committed witnessing of Christ should stand as a challenge and encouragement for the healthy growth of the church in its hierarchical and institutional charisms. In the midst of internal divisions and interferences of political authorities in the affairs of the church, Christianity has to articulate her stand with reference to divergent religious traditions and cultures. It is this stance that would help Christianity articulate better for self-identity in Africa.
- viii. In a similar vein, Christianity in Africa needs to ask herself what the Holy Spirit is saying to her with regard to other religions in Africa such as Islam, Eckankar, and the indigenous religious tradition. Religious plurality has come to be a major challenge of modern life, enabled by the relative ease of travelling and the increasing desire of people to go to other lands made possible by modern means of transportation and communication. In the midst of these, Christianity should look deeper into the Scripture, the sacred tradition of the Church and the teachings and lives of the early apostles and saints. The point being made here is that Christianity should have a positive attitude to and have a will to cooperate with people of other religious convictions without necessarily compromising her heritage.
- ix. One reality in Africa is the plurality of cultures. The early missionaries to Africa were Europeans. There is then the danger of associating Christianity with European culture. It is instructive that Christianity does not put obstacles in the way of the people in course of its evangelization. Rites, customs and ways of life that are not opposed to the Church should be respected and preserved while those that are anti-church should be rejected without compromise.
- x. A better understanding of authentic Christianity in Africa cannot but do a self-introspection. In maintaining this worldwide faith, one Lord, one baptism, one faith, in what ways can this universal Church become meaningful to the local people? How does the Gospel become incarnated in the culture of the African? As Francis (2004) asks:
How can the tree that is Christianity grow in these and similar cultures as on its own native ground and produce local fruit which can at once be recognized as Christian and at the same time as authentically local? How can the Church live, work and be seen as indigenous and not as a visitor with passport and visa? What local gifts, has the church in these cultures produced and offered for sharing and exchange to the Universal Church? (p. 24)
- xi. What is the place of ecumenism in the Chalcedonian definition of faith? The fact here is that ecumenism works to promote the reunion of Christians. Christians in the East came together to confess and express their faith at Chalcedon. This does not mean that they had no diversity. A reunited Christianity in Africa should seek ways to garner this variety and maintain diversity in unity. Christianity has the capacity to meet all cultures, to exalt, adopt and adapt all it can, and to challenge what deserves to be changed and maintain what deserves to be preserved.
- xii. Christianity exists outside the Church building; it is alive, dynamic and contributes to modern society and people's everyday life. How is the gospel to be translated to the

realities of the African life? What has it to say to people about their relationships, love, marriage, trade, politics, science and ecological matters? Christianity in Africa should be able to meet the social and political needs of the contemporary African if it must remain meaningful.

- xiii. Christianity should speak to the conscience of the African in his day to day activity, in bridge-building and social works. The multiplicity of denominations and institutionalization of Christianity should not scare people away from the Church.
- xiv. Many of the religio-cultural issues which Christianity in Africa faces are not new. The early church had suffered as much if not more.
- xv. Chalcedon gives an understanding of the complexities and richness of Christianity. Many individuals and groups had contributed to the stability of the church in diverse ways. Christianity in Africa then needs to be tolerant and appreciative of those who may be opposed to her as long as these do not diminish her doctrine.
- xvi. Lastly, the experiences of Chalcedon reinforce the Christian's belief that the Church will march one and the gates of hell shall not prevail. Jesus' saying, *I will build my Church*, now assumes a richer and relevant meaning to Christianity in Africa.

The foregoing issues raised are relevant in addressing the issue of a better understating of authentic Christianity in Africa based on the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). They show how Christianity can be a living reality today in Africa in the midst of differing religious, political and cultural dispositions.

CONCLUSION

The fourth ecumenical Council of the Church held at Chalcedon (Turkey) in 451 AD. It was convoked by the emperor Marcian (450-457) and attended by over 500 bishops or their representatives, being the largest and best documented of the early Councils. After a series of deliberations, it condemned the historian separation of Christ's two natures and Eutyches' merger of the two into one and set canons for the smooth administration of the Church, including the recognition of Mary as the Mother of God (Theotokos). The Chalcedonian Definition made it clear that in Christ are *two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably and indivisibly, inseparably*. As indicated, its declaration is imperative for a better understanding of authentic Christianity in Africa, in relation to mundane ecclesiastical, liturgical, doctrinal, cultural and political matters. A significant lesson of the Council of Chalcedon for Africa lies in its dual legacy of fragmentation and fortification: fragmentation of African Christianity by creating a lasting divide between Chalcedonian and Miaphysite communities, contributing to the decline of the former in North Africa under external pressures. Simultaneously, it fortified non-Chalcedonian traditions, enabling the Coptic, Ethiopian, and Nubian churches to develop resilient, indigenous identities that withstood centuries of change. This duality underscores a key theme in African Christian history: the ability to adapt and thrive amidst diversity and adversity, a pattern that continues to shape the continent's religious landscape today in the midst of religious plurality.

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