

CHURCH HISTORY

The Councils of Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon

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Early Church History, part 14

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Once it was determined at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) that Christ was equal with God in substance, the question arose as to how Christ could be both God and man at the same time.
- B. Great controversy arose as to how Christ's humanity, if he were God, could be tempted.
- C. Practically all the discussion went on in the East. Most of the leaders were from Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria, etc. They were trained in handling speculative problems of theology.

II. THE FIRST COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE (A.D. 381)

- A. This council, which was attended by 186 bishops, settled two basic issues; (1) the deity of the Holy Spirit; and (2) the true humanity of Christ.
- B. *Deity of the Holy Spirit:* Arianism had not died out completely, for there were many who came to hold a semi-Arian position known as "Macedonianism" because it was espoused by Macedonius. This view held that the Holy Spirit was created by Christ, and therefore that the Holy Spirit is the creature of a creature, and not divine. All the Nicene Creed had said on the Holy Spirit was, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Sabellianism was not dead either, which saw the Holy Spirit simply as a mode of God's manifestation. After the death of Athanasius, three very prominent men came to the fore to defend the orthodox Christian Faith: Basil of Caesarea; Gregory of Naziansuz; and Gregory of Nyssa. These men were called the "three great Cappadocians" because they came from the province of Cappadocia in Asia minor. At the First Council of Constantinople, the church refuted semi-Arianism, Macedonianism and Sabellianism as heresy. The Council declared of the Holy Spirit that he was "the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who, with the Father and Son together, is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the

prophets.” Thus the doctrine of the Trinity was completed and the deity of the Holy Spirit was set forth as a fundamental of the Christian Faith.

- C. *True Humanity of Christ:* Apollinaris, the bishop of Laodicea, tried to set forth his position on the relationship of the humanity of Christ to his deity. Apollinaris denied the proper humanity of Christ, but did not deny his deity. He conceived of a man as consisting of body, soul and spirit, and sought the solution of the problem of the two natures of Christ in the theory that the Logos took the place of the human spirit in Jesus. He did not deny the deity or sinlessness of Christ, but denied that Christ had a human spirit, making him less than a man. Thus, at the First Council of Constantinople, Apollinarianism was rejected as false teaching. The Council stated the full humanity of Christ, but still did not state how the two natures were related.

III. THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS (A.D. 431)

- A. Now another issue arose. If Christ is truly God and truly man, how are the two natures related? Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, acknowledged two persons in Christ, mystically united. Thus, the two natures were two distinct persons, making Christ have a dual personality. The two personalities had little relationship with one another, so that the divine did not have a part in the sufferings of the human personality of Christ.
- B. Cyril of Alexandria opposed the teaching of Nestorius, perhaps more for political reasons than for theological reasons. In any event, he correctly argued that Christ could not have two persons. Cyril was not always clear on his teachings. He taught that the Logos took upon himself a human nature, making two distinct natures, but he saw the unity of the natures by means of a mutual communication or transference of attributes between the two natures.
- C. The Nestorian controversy led to the calling of the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431). The Council met and anathematized the teachings of Nestorius before the Nestorian party arrived. When the outlawed party arrived, it set up a rival council. The Emperor finally decided against the Nestorians, and Nestorius was banished to the desert of the Thebaid.

Nestorius had many followers in Syria and Persia, and they formed the Nestorian Church. In its early days this church expanded remarkably rapidly. It established itself strongly, first in Persia and then in Armenia. Its missionaries then pressed further eastward and by A.D. 625 had reached China

by way of Central Asia. This church still exists in Mesopotamia and Armenia in spite of terrible persecutions from the Muslims.

IV. THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (A.D. 451)

- A. The Council of Ephesus left many churchmen unsatisfied on the two natures of Christ. Eutyches, who had opposed Nestorianism successfully, set forth with conviction that Christ's human nature was absorbed into his divine nature, leaving him with only one nature in one person. Thus, the distinction between Christ's two natures was obliterated. This view would make the body of Christ everywhere present and make the humanity of Christ all knowing.
- B. In light of Eutyches' position, there was a need for a further clarification on the two natures of Christ. Thus, the Council of Chalcedon was called in which 500 bishops participated. Eutyches, a hero at the Council of Ephesus, much to his surprise found his teaching to be declared heretical at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). This Council did not bring final settlement for some. Groups in Egypt, Syria and Palestine continued to propagate the teachings of Eutyches. To this day the doctrine of One Nature (Monophysitism) lingers among the Jacobites of Syria, and the Copts of Egypt and Abyssinia.
- C. At the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and even the teachings of Cyril of Alexandria were condemned as heretical. The conclusions of the Council were: (1) Christ was truly God and truly man; (2) Christ was homoousias with God and homoiousias with man; (3) Christ was like man but without sin; (4) Christ was begotten on Mary, the Godbearer; and (5) Christ had two distinct natures and one person, without fusion or change or division of these natures. By the term "Godbearer," the Council intended to state not that Jesus' divinity proceeded from Mary, but rather that Mary was the mother of the person (Jesus) who was God.
- D. The church never said how or why Jesus had two natures. It only declared what the Scriptures seemed to teach. Jesus Christ is perfect humanity and undiminished deity united in one person forever without transference or communication of the attributes of one nature to another. The Creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon remain today as the expression of the faith of the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches.

V. THE SECOND AND THIRD COUNCILS OF CONSTANTINOPLE

- A. There were still many who held out for one nature of Christ. Ultimately, they were able to force a fifth ecumenical council, the second at Constantinople, in A.D. 553, which ratified the Chalcedonian Creed and made slight changes which tended to favor Eutychianism.
- B. Once again the controversy arose over the two natures of Christ. Certain ones felt Christ had only one will, the divine will. If he possessed a human will, it would have succumbed to temptation and sinned.
- C. Another council was held, the Third Council of Constantinople (A.D. 680-81). The decision was to ratify the Chalcedonian Creed with the addition that Christ had two wills, the human and divine, the human will being subject to the divine.