

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ijt\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php)

# A Plea for a Fresh Study and Evaluation of the Chalcedonian Schism

V. C. SAMUEL

It is a strange anomaly of history that a judgment on an issue once passed rightly or wrongly, if it happens to be perpetuated for some length of time, will become invested with a kind of authoritative status. This is a common weakness of erring humanity, which has greatly coloured our traditional view of the Chalcedonian schism. But this view has been challenged by several branches of the Church in the East from the time of the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 to our own times, and it is not right on our part not to listen to our critics.

Our traditional view of the Chalcedonian schism may be summarized here in a few words. In the fifth century, we are told, there was a Monophysite heretic by name Eutyches. He came to be supported by Dioscorus, Archbishop of Alexandria, who manoeuvred through a Council held at Ephesus in 449 to make out that the teaching of Eutyches had been the faith of the Church. This was opposed by many in the Church, and Leo I, Archbishop of Rome, denounced the Council as *Latrocinium* (Robber Council) and exerted all his influence and weight for the eradication of the mischief brought about by Dioscorus. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon was convened to settle the matter. This Council condemned the Monophysite heresy and excommunicated both Dioscorus and Eutyches. But in spite of the conciliar action, the heresy found supporters in the East, and they continued to maintain organized existence. However, in course of time there arose among them men who modified the original Monophysite heresy to look almost like the Chalcedonian affirmation of the faith.

Though this is the view widely held, it is not fully endorsed by a few scholars of the present century who have worked with documents connected with the controversy. The point of view of these scholars is something like this. The phrase 'One nature', on which the critics of Chalcedon based their stand, is misleading. Therefore, though perhaps untimely, Chalcedon which excluded it deserves to be defended. The Chalcedonian Definition of the

Faith, these scholars would maintain, is basically sound and orthodox. But, they agree, its critics, including Dioscorus whom Chalcedon had done away, had not really been guilty of a charge of heresy, as they had excluded the misleading idea connoted by the phrase 'One nature'.

In so far as this point of view goes, one should admit that it is a step forward in the right direction towards an objective understanding of the Chalcedonian schism. However, one does not get the feeling that it has said the whole truth about Chalcedon and its critics. In fact, one wonders whether the scholars concerned have not started their investigation with one or both of two possible preconceptions. Have they not, for instance, assumed that the phrase 'One nature' is bad? Leo of Rome in the fifth century was, as a matter of fact, led by this preconception, and that rendered him incapable of understanding the Alexandrian Christology. We should certainly get over that prejudice. Secondly, have not, at least some of these scholars, accepted as an article of faith that Chalcedon was an Oecumenical Council, and that therefore its doctrinal statement should be considered inviolate? Behind this latter assumption there lies a conception of the nature of the Church based on conciliar authority. This conception cannot be assumed without proving its tenability on the basis of an objective examination of facts connected with historical incidents like the Chalcedonian schism. In fact, if these scholars have started with the two preconceptions mentioned above, one wonders whether their conclusions have not really called in question their assumptions. For instance, if Dioscorus and his successors did not teach any heresy though they repudiated Chalcedon and insisted on the phrase 'One nature', it would mean that Chalcedon was not a necessity, and that there was nothing wrong in their maintenance of the phrase with which they had been fully conversant.

A fresh study and evaluation of the Chalcedonian schism seems to me significant for us in two ways. In the first place, the ancient critics of Chalcedon, as we have noted above, have maintained an organized existence in history, claiming loyalty to the Alexandrian theological heritage and tracing their ecclesiastical history to pre-Chalcedonian times. We cannot afford to ignore them in our search for the recovery of the lost unity of Christendom; neither can we accommodate them without an objective understanding of their actual history and theological affirmations. Secondly, we are faced today, more than ever before, with the need for formulating the doctrine of the nature of the Church. The doctrine that we formulate should be both Biblical and true to the facts of history. From the point of view of the second of these two conditions, the Chalcedonian schism is of paramount importance.

We shall now pass on to mention a few of the most salient facts about the Chalcedonian schism, which have not received the kind of attention they deserve.

1. The issue was primarily a conflict between theologians of the Alexandrian and the Antiochene ways of thinking. In order to give expression to their position, Alexandrians had employed a number of phrases, the most important of which were: 'Of two natures', *Hypostatic* union', and 'One incarnate nature of God the Word'. These phrases had been opposed by the Antiochenes, who insisted on 'Union in *prosopon*', and 'Two natures after the union'. The Alexandrians, on their part, were most critical of these Antiochene phrases.

2. In condemning Eutyches as a heretic, the Home Synod of Constantinople in 448 did definitely assert that the Alexandrian phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word' was heretical, and that the Antiochene phrase 'Two natures after the union' was unquestionably orthodox. In the historical setting, this could be taken only as an Antiochene assertion.

3. The *Tome* of Leo, which was sent to the East after the adjournment of the Home Synod, showed no understanding of the nature of the controversy. It made matters worse, as it, in spite of its acceptance of the term *Theotokos* as applied to Mary, gave expression to a theological exposition, which, for the Alexandrians, was no improvement on the view ascribed to Nestorius.

4. The second Council of Ephesus in 449 was an Alexandrian reaction to what had to be taken for granted as an Antiochene assertion.

5. The Council of Chalcedon which met to decide the doctrinal issue opened its first session with a display of extreme antagonism to the person of Dioscorus expressed by the representatives of Leo. This was followed by a trial, intended to make out that Dioscorus had been solely responsible for the decisions of 449 and to punish him for that ecclesiastical crime. Basic to this procedure, there lies the assumption that the Antiochene assertion implicit in the decision of 448 had been right and that the Alexandrian reaction to it was wrong. Though this assumption was definitely unjustifiable, it received no attention at the Council and the trial of Dioscorus went on. So far as we have record in the *Minutes* of the Council, Dioscorus answered with dignity and composure every one of the charges brought against him; at the same time he did not receive any answer to the issues which he raised. In the end, the presiding officers (men appointed by the emperor and the empress who had no sympathy for Dioscorus) gave their verdict, condemning Dioscorus and five other men as persons responsible for the decisions of 449. This verdict itself was based on the questionable assumption that the Antiochene assertion of 448 was right and that the Alexandrian reaction to it was wrong, and therefore it was one-sided. Granting this, it must be said that, in effect, it was tantamount to calling in question the justifiability of the initial display of antagonism against Dioscorus, with which the Council had been opened.

6. Following this verdict, Dioscorus and possibly the other condemned men were kept under custody by the State. A few days later, about two hundred of a total number of about three

hundred and fifty Bishops met together, most probably in a place different from the one where all the sessions of the Council were held. Led by Leo's representatives, these Bishops proceeded against Dioscorus. They served him with three summonses, one after another, demanding his presence. He answered, in effect, that, because it seemed to him that the Bishops opposed to him were trying to entrap him in the absence of the presiding officers and the men condemned with him, he could not be present, unless they also would take part in the proceedings. Since this condition was not agreeable to the Bishops, they did what they could to express their personal hatred of Dioscorus. In the meantime a deacon from Alexandria submitted a petition to this assembly, which contained the story that Dioscorus had, on his way to Chalcedon, excommunicated Leo of Rome. From then on this came to be mentioned as a new charge against Dioscorus, though no prior awareness of it by any one present at Chalcedon is recorded in the documents. To this, the representatives of Leo added another, without indicating source, that Dioscorus had offered *koinonia* to the excommunicated Eutyches before his rehabilitation by the second Council of Ephesus in 449. What actually is meant by it, or how much of truth is there in it, nobody knows, though this is being taken as proof that Dioscorus had broken the discipline of the Church. Finally, on a charge of contempt of the 'great and oecumenical Synod' he was deposed by this gathering of about two hundred Bishops.

7. We can say with some amount of certainty that the imperial authority wanted to get two things done through the Council of Chalcedon. (a) To defend Rome against Alexandria. (b) To declare Constantinople supreme over the entire East. The Council, in fact, carried out both these ideas. But, in achieving this goal, the Council paid only lip service to the Alexandrian theological position.

8. At the third session of the Council (I regard it wrong to consider the meeting of the Bishops who deposed Dioscorus a session of the Council) the *Tome* was accepted as a document of the faith. This was followed by the drawing up of the Council's *Definitio* with the phrase 'In two natures'. This phrase was opposed by the vast majority of the Bishops present. But they were silenced by the presiding officers by the logic that it was conserved by the *Tome* which they had approved and that opposition to it would be tantamount to taking the side of Dioscorus.

9. Dioscorus had followers in the East. In the face of a ruthless imperial policy of enforcing Chalcedon, the Church in Egypt and considerable sections of congregations in Palestine, Syria and other parts of the East stood firm with Dioscorus protesting against Chalcedon. They continued in their allegiance to the Council of Ephesus in 431 and to the Alexandrian theological tradition.

There arose from this group, during the centuries that followed Chalcedon, some of the ablest minds in the East. In spite of the many disabilities brought on them both by the Byzantine

emperors and by the Arab rulers after them, they have produced commendable works in the fields of Biblical Exegesis, Theology, Church History, and Liturgiology. As for their doctrinal position, there is ample evidence that they excluded every vestige of Monophysitism, and that their interpretation of the Person of our Lord deserves a much better evaluation than it has so far been accorded. To characterize them as Monophysite, or to ignore their positive contribution to Christian life and thought, on the ground that they repudiated the Council of Chalcedon, is definitely undesirable.

The plea made in this paper is that, since the views so far expressed regarding the Chalcedonian schism are one-sided, and since they imply an adverse judgment on a section of the Christian Church in the East, a fresh study of the documents and a re-appraisal of the schism is an absolute necessity.

---

*I am son and husband and father and friend, but none of these are me. I myself am simply he whose death God's love has encompassed, and who comes to his death in meeting God. When man meets God and is defeated by Him, then has begun for him the victorious life. We must learn to live by this love with which we are loved. Only so do we learn to live at all. For we live most deeply when we live in the passive voice.*

D. T. NILES: Preaching the Gospel  
of the Resurrection.