

A Brief Historical Survey of the Council of Chalcedon

V. C. SAMUEL

In a previous article published in *The Indian Journal of Theology* for January, 1961, the present writer has pleaded for a fresh study and evaluation of the Chalcedonian schism. To bring out more clearly the point of the plea it is necessary to deal briefly with the history of the Council of Chalcedon and also with the theological position of its ancient critics in the East. Of these two, the present paper intends to take up the first; the second will be discussed in a paper to be published in the next number of *The Indian Journal of Theology*.

The Background of the Council of Chalcedon.—There are five facts which constitute the background of the Council of Chalcedon. They are: (1) The Christological teaching of the Antiochene and the Alexandrine ways of theological thinking; (2) the Council of Ephesus in 431, which condemned Nestorius as a heretic; (3) the *Formulary of Reunion*, by which in 433 Cyril of Alexandria, the leader of the Alexandrine party, and John of Antioch, the leader of the Antiochene party, arrived at a concordat; (4) the Home Synod of Constantinople, which in 448 excommunicated Eutyches as a heretic; and (5) the second Council of Ephesus in 449, which, having reinstated Eutyches, deposed his judges at Constantinople as well as a number of the leading men on the Antiochene side.

It is not possible to discuss these topics within the short space permissible in this paper. It may simply be noted that there was a conflict between the Antiochene and the Alexandrine points of view; that the Council of 431 was an absolute victory for the latter; and that the *Formulary of Reunion* did ratify the decisions of the Council of 431. But neither the Home Synod of Constantinople nor the Council of Chalcedon endorsed fully the theological emphasis of Ephesus. On the other hand, they ignored the third letter of Cyril to Nestorius, which the Council of 431 had definitely declared orthodox, and assigned to the *Formulary* the status of a document of the faith, which the Alexandrines had not wished to grant it. The second Council of Ephesus expressed a reaction, invoking the authority of the Council of 431.

The Condemnation of Eutyches.—The decisions of the Council of Chalcedon had a negative and a positive side. Negatively it assumed the rightness of the condemnation of Eutyches and brought about the deposition of Dioscorus of Alexandria; and positively it accepted the *Tome of Leo* as a document of the faith and drew up a definition of the faith. Of these four points, we shall look into the condemnation of Eutyches first.

There is rather unanimous agreement among scholars that Eutyches was not a theologian. He must have been a troublemaker on the side of the Alexandrines. But to class him as a heretic with men like Paul of Samosata, Arius, Apollinarius, and so on is not a compliment to those able minds. In the words of R. V. Sellers, 'if we are to understand Eutyches aright, we must not think of him as the instructed theologian, prepared to discuss the doctrine of the Incarnation. Rather does he appear as the simple monk who, having renounced the world, had also renounced all theological enquiry'.¹ J. N. D. Kelly admits that Eutyches was 'a confused and unskilled thinker', and that he 'was no Docetist or Apollinarian' as the bishops who had condemned him at Constantinople had decreed. Kelly thinks that 'if strained in that direction', his views would be 'possibly susceptible of an orthodox interpretation', but that it lacked 'the required balance'. In any case, 'If his condemnation is to be justified, it must be in the light of more far-reaching consideration'.²

With reference to the condemnation of Eutyches, there is one important point which deserves to be mentioned. When Eutyches appeared before the Synod at Constantinople in 448 and his trial started, he held forth a paper, testifying that it contained his confession of the faith and requested that it be read. No one present was apparently keen on knowing its contents and the paper was not given a reading.³ At the second Council of Ephesus, before he was rehabilitated, his confession was read. In it he anathematized all heretics, Manes, Valentinus, Apollinarius, Nestorius, and all others back to Simon Magus. Then he went on to register his dissent from those who maintained that the body of our Lord had come down from heaven, and added these words: 'For He Himself who is the Word of God descended from heaven, without flesh, was made flesh of the very flesh of the Virgin unchangeably and inconvertibly in a way that He Himself knew and willed. And He who is always perfect God before the ages, the Same also was made perfect man for us and for our salvation'.⁴

¹ R. V. Sellers: *The Council of Chalcedon*, p. 59.

² J. N. D. Kelly: *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 333.

³ See the trial of Eutyches by the Home Synod of Constantinople as reported in Mansi, VI, 729-748.

⁴ The above passage is a translation from the Latin version contained in Hahn's *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der alten Kirche*. Severus of Antioch refers to this passage in a letter published in *Patrologia Orientalis*, Vol. XII, pp. 266-268.

At Chalcedon, the confession of Eutyches was read only up to the place where he expressed his disagreement with the view that our Lord's body had come down from heaven. At that critical moment Eusebius of Dorylaeum, his accuser, interrupted the reading by saying that Eutyches did not specify where our Lord's body was from. Then there followed a tumult, after which the subject changed to something else, and the words of Eutyches which answered the charge of Eusebius were not read at all.⁵

In other words, the Council of Chalcedon did not prove a charge of heresy against Eutyches, but assumed without even looking into his own confession of the faith that he was a heretic.

The Deposition of Dioscorus.—The Council of Chalcedon opened its first session on 8th October, 451. No sooner had the assembled delegates been seated than the leader of the representatives of the Roman see demanded the exclusion of Dioscorus from the Council. On being asked the reason for the demand by the Imperial Commissioners—men appointed by the emperor as presiding officers at all the sessions of the Council—the Roman delegation answered that Dioscorus had dominated the Council of 449, and that his expulsion from the Council was the wish of the Archbishop whom they represented.⁶ Rather unwillingly the Commissioners granted the demand and Dioscorus was removed from his seat in the assembly to the place reserved for men on trial.

Now on the strength of a petition against Dioscorus the Council proceeded to examine him. The charges contained in it as well as those spoken against him in the course of the session were based on the main allegation that he dominated the Council of 449, and they were chiefly four: (i) He had infringed upon the faith of the Church by trying to establish the heresy of Eutyches as orthodoxy; (ii) he did not let the *Tome of Leo* be read to the Council of 449; (iii) he caused a number of men to be unjustly deposed; and (iv) he employed so much of violence at the Council that, in order not to be exposed, he distributed blank papers and forced the delegates to copy his version of the Council's minutes.⁷ To investigate the charges the minutes of the Council of 449 were read. No other evidence, not even a single word of his either spoken or written or an action of his apart from what had happened at Ephesus, was ever so much as mentioned against him.

⁵ See Mansi, VI, 633.

⁶ In this connection the Roman delegation made a statement which contains these words. Dioscorus, they said, 'seized and dominated the office of the judge, and dared to conduct a Council without authorization from the Apostolic See, a thing which has never happened and which ought not to happen' (Mansi, VI, 580-581). The assertion that no Council had met earlier or ought to meet in the future without an authorization from Rome has no basis in history. Are we justified in assuming that this assertion had nothing to do with the way the Council was conducted?

⁷ This charge was answered by Dioscorus. When it was made by Stephen of Ephesus, Dioscorus was horrified. In the end he requested that his copy of the minutes be compared with that of Stephen himself to see whether there was any truth in the accusation (Mansi, VI, 625).

It should be remembered that the party opposed to Dioscorus at Chalcedon counted heavily on the support of the state, and that they hoped to hold him solely responsible for the decision of 449. The Commissioners, however, did not agree with them fully. For at the close of the long process of trial they gave their verdict. Dioscorus of Alexandria, they said, Juvenal of Jerusalem, Thallassius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Ancyra, Eustathius of Berytus, and Basil of Seleucia were the men who had controlled the Council of 449, and that they should all be deposed forthwith. This verdict itself is based on the questionable assumption that Eutyches had been justly condemned. At the same time it is significant, for it virtually called in question the justifiability of singling out Dioscorus as the man responsible for the Council of 449 and established the fact that its decisions were conciliar.

It should be noted in the present context that the Home Synod of Constantinople had condemned Eutyches, assuming as orthodox three propositions: One, that Jesus Christ is 'two natures after the Incarnation'; two, that He is 'of the same substance with us' as well as 'of the same substance with the Father'; and three, that He is *not* 'one incarnate nature of God the Word'. The Council of 449 showed that a considerable part of Eastern Christendom would resist the theological position based on these propositions, and that Dioscorus was its leader. It would appear that the men who were at the leadership of the Council of Chalcedon endeavoured, counting on state support, to throw overboard Dioscorus and make out that the entire East stood with the theological basis of the condemnation of Eutyches. However, the verdict of the Commissioners, condemning six men, and not Dioscorus alone, did not seem to have left room for its achievement. Was it this problem that the victorious party was trying, as we shall see in a moment, to get over by arranging a special gathering of their own and passing a resolution in favour of deposing Dioscorus?

In the absence of the men condemned by the Commissioners, who were most probably taken under custody by the state, the second session of the Council met on 10th October. With a view to arriving at a decision regarding the question of the faith, the Commissioners ruled that the Creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople, the second letter of Cyril to Nestorius, the *Formulary of Reunion* and the *Tome of Leo* be read to the assembly. The third letter of Cyril to Nestorius was not even mentioned in this connection, though the Commissioners referred to the *Formulary* which had been composed only in 433 as a document read and approved at Ephesus in 431.⁸ The Palestinian and the Illyrian bishops, however, raised objection to three passages in the *Tome* and Atticus of Nicopolis asked for time to read and compare the *Tome* with the third letter of Cyril to Nestorius. In the end the Commissioners declared a period of five days as interval for the

⁸ Mansi, VI, 937.

bishops to meet with Anatolius of Constantinople and have their doubts cleared regarding the *Tome*.

Three days later, on 13th October, about two hundred⁹ of a total number of about three hundred and fifty¹⁰ bishops met together without the Commissioners. Presided over by the chief of the Roman delegation, this gathering took up for examination a new petition against Dioscorus containing only the old and unproved charges. The Patriarch of Alexandria was now summoned three times to appear and make his defence. He refused to comply on the main ground that he could not be present before an assembly which was meeting without the Commissioners and the men condemned with him. During its sitting four other petitions against Dioscorus were also submitted. One of them, presented by a deacon of Alexandria, alleged that Dioscorus had, on his way to Chalcedon, excommunicated Pope Leo of Rome.¹¹ To this the Roman delegation added another charge, namely that Dioscorus had offered *koinonia* to Eutyches before the latter had been reinstated by the Council of Ephesus in 449.¹² Taking the word in the sense of Eucharistic fellowship, scholars like Kidd, Hefele, Sellers, and others have blamed Dioscorus for violating the discipline of the Church. However, the fact is that if it meant Eucharistic fellowship, Archbishop Leo was not less guilty of that offence than Dioscorus; for the Roman delegation testified at Chalcedon that he had offered *koinonia*¹³ to Theodoret of Cyrus while the latter was awaiting exoneration by Chalcedon against a sentence of deposition pronounced by the second Council of Ephesus.

Before the bishops gave their verdict against Dioscorus the Roman delegation made a rather lengthy statement about him. It was concluded in these words:

Wherefore, Leo, the most blessed and holy Archbishop of the greater and elder Rome, has by the agency of ourselves and the present Synod, in conjunction with the thrice-holy and all-honoured Peter, the Rock of the Catholic Church and the Foundation of the orthodox Faith, deprived him of all the episcopal dignity, and severed him from every priestly function. Accordingly, this holy and great Synod decrees the provisions of the canon on the aforesaid Dioscorus.¹⁴

In their verdict the bishops simply said that Dioscorus was deposed on the ground of disobedience and contempt of the Council.¹⁵ On a later occasion Anatolius of Constantinople, one

⁹ Hefele: *History of the Councils of the Church*, Eng. tr., Vol. III, p. 320. Mansi's list of participants at this session has only two hundred names.

¹⁰ Mansi's list contains only about three hundred and fifty names.

¹¹ Mansi, VI, 1009.

¹² Mansi, VI, 1045.

¹³ Mansi, VII, 189-192.

¹⁴ Mansi, VI, 1045-1048.

¹⁵ Mansi, VI, 1093-1096.

of the chief figures at the Council, made it clear that Dioscorus had not been deposed on a point of faith.¹⁶

Sellers admits that Dioscorus was not 'a preacher of the "confusion" of the two natures of Jesus Christ', and that for him 'the Lord's manhood is real—for he is no follower of Apollinarius—and remains real in its union with the divine Logos'.¹⁷ In other words Dioscorus was a teacher of Alexandrine orthodoxy.

Why, then, was he deposed? Why is it that only a little more than half of the delegates to the Council participated in the act of expelling him from the Church? Why did these bishops convene a special meeting for the purpose and why did they meet in the absence of the Imperial Commissioners who were present at every session of the Council? These are some of the questions which should be answered on the basis of documentary evidence, if an accurate history of the Council of Chalcedon is to be constructed at all.

The Tome and the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith.—On 17th October, the fourth day after the deposition of Dioscorus, the third session of the Council was held with the Imperial Commissioners presiding. They opened the proceedings by summarizing the decisions of the two previous sessions, but saying not even a word about the gathering of the bishops that deposed Dioscorus on 13th October. Soon the *Tome* was accepted without the expression of a single word of disagreement from any one present. Now the bishops clamoured for the readmission of the five men who had been condemned with Dioscorus. On this occasion the Commissioners answered, 'We have referred their question to the emperor, and are awaiting his reply. As for your excommunication of Dioscorus and your decision to readmit the other five, both the emperor and we are ignorant of it. For everything that has been done at the holy Synod, it shall be responsible to God'.¹⁸

Is not this statement a clear indication that the Commissioners were not in favour of meting out to Dioscorus any special treatment?

The emperor wanted to have two ideas worked out through the Council. In the first place, he cared to have the *Tome* accepted by the Council as a document of the faith; and secondly, he was rather insistent that a statement of the faith be drawn up and approved by the assembly. As already noted, the bishops accepted the *Tome*; but when it came to the question of the statement of the faith, the Eastern bishops presented a draft definition and demanded its adoption by the Council. Surprisingly enough, it contained only the phrase 'of two natures', which had been fully approved by Dioscorus. It may be noted that the conflict between the party of Dioscorus on the one hand and that of the Antiochenes and the Westerns on the other centred round

¹⁶ Mansi, VII, 104.

¹⁷ Sellers: *The Council of Chalcedon*, op. cit., pp. 30-32.

¹⁸ Mansi, VII, 48.

two phrases. The former insisted that Jesus Christ should be spoken of only as 'of two natures'; and the latter that He must be affirmed to be 'in two natures'. The draft definition of the bishops, however, deliberately excluded the phrase 'in two natures' and employed 'of two natures'.

The Eastern delegates had come to the assembly, not only with their draft definition with the phrase 'of two natures', but also ready even to fight, if need be, for its adoption.¹⁹ Seeing their determination, the Roman delegation gave out the threat that if the phrase 'in two natures' which the *Tome* had employed was not going to be adopted in the definition of the faith, they would tender their resignation and dissociate themselves from the Council.²⁰ Even this did not perturb the Easterns, and the Illyrian bishops retorted to the effect that those who were opposed to the draft definition were Nestorians and that they might feel free to wend their way to Rome.¹²

The Commissioners had to employ different means to bring the men to a receptive mood. In the first place, they suggested the formation of a Committee to draw up a new statement. The bishops could see no need for that. Secondly, they asked the bishops whether they had not accepted the *Tome*, and they answered in the affirmative. The Commissioners now pointed out that the phrase 'in two natures' was central to that document and that it should be adopted in the statement to be drawn up. The bishops retorted in effect that just as they had accepted the *Tome*, let the bishop of Rome subscribe to their statement and make it possible for a mutual recognition of orthodoxy. In the end the Commissioners achieved the goal by playing Leo and Dioscorus against each other. The condemned Dioscorus, they said, was willing to accept the phrase 'of two natures'; but Archbishop Leo insisted on 'in two natures'; whom did they want to follow? Pressed to that unexpected corner, the bishops answered that they would follow Leo. In that case, demanded the Commissioners, they ought to agree to adopt the phrase 'in two natures' in the definition. The logic of the argument was irresistible and the bishops simply made their submission. The Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith was then drawn up and the Council formally accepted it.

Conclusion.—For any real understanding of the Council of Chalcedon the facts mentioned above are of the utmost significance. The present writer regrets to say that he has not seen any modern work on the Council in which these facts are all at least mentioned. It is not possible in a short paper like this to attempt a reconstruction of the history of the Council of Chalcedon. The following points may simply be noted:

¹⁹ See Mansi, VII, 100–104, for the determined effort of the bishops to have their draft definition adopted by the Council with the phrase 'of two natures' and without 'in two natures'.

²⁰ Mansi, VII, 101.

²¹ Mansi, VII, 105.

1. Granting unhesitatingly that the ideas ascribed to Eutyches are heretical, the fact is that neither at the Home Synod of Constantinople nor at the Council of Chalcedon was it clearly established that he had taught them.

2. Though Dioscorus was accused of many charges at Chalcedon, not even one of them was proved against him. The surprising fact is that the ideas ascribed by many to Dioscorus have really no basis either in his statements made at Chalcedon or in the fragments of his writings that have come down to us.

3. The Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith came to adopt the phrase 'in two natures' very much against the wish of a great bloc of Eastern bishops. This was done, so far as we have evidence, not subsequent to a theological discussion of the issues, but on the logic that the bishop of Rome had to be respected more than a condemned Dioscorus, that the former had employed the phrase in the *Tome*, and that therefore it had to be accepted.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NUMBER

The Rev. Dr. V. C. Samuel is on the staff of the Serampore College.

The Rev. Dr. P. D. Devanandan is Director, Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore.

The Rev. Emmanuel Sadiq is Director, Henry Martyn School, Aligarh.

The Rev. J. Kumaresan is on the staff of the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Madras.