The Early Christian Church Controversy in the Councils

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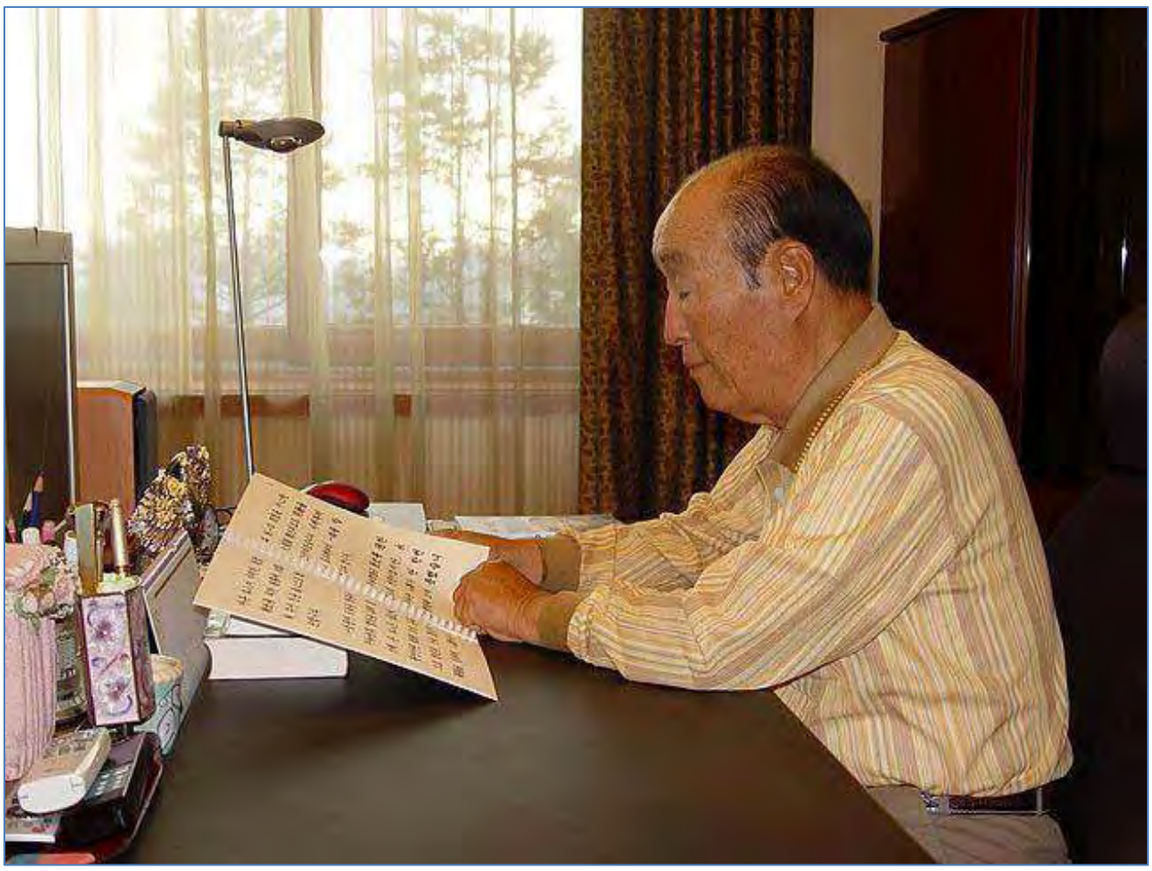

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Western Christians often view the church through the spectacles of Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. But the Eastern tradition inherits a rich past. A further pursuit of church history, although necessarily cursory, shows the developing character of the church.

Although controversy raged in the early centuries of the Christian church, never was a general council of leaders of the entire church called to resolve it. Not until the fourth century, as the first two articles in this series outlined, the controversies in early Christianity centered primarily on the nature of Jesus, and questions of Christology in general. Now in the fourth century we see greater maturation in the separate lines of development between East and West, and also between Alexandria and Antioch in the East.

By the fourth century, it became clear that of the five sees (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch), Alexandria and Antioch were the two axes of theological disputes. Rome acted as a mediator, but was not intimately involved in the controversies of the councils.

Antioch, where the apostle Peter settled before going on to Rome, borders between the two worlds, East and West, was here that the disciples were first called Christians. The "School of Antioch," as it became known, was founded by Lucian, and continued by a variety of thinkers, including Arius. In the Antiochene school, emphasis was placed on the grammatical and historical meaning of the scriptures, and the value of human reason in matters of religion. From the viewpoint of Rome, this resulted in heresies based on an approach of human reason rather than the traditional faith of the church, particularly in emphasizing the humanity of Jesus.

Alexandria, the historic port city of Egypt and home of a large Jewish population, concerned itself with combining Jewish culture and Greek philosophy (especially Platonic). It was here that the Old Testament was translated into '.reek. The "School of Alexandria" as such was founded by Origen in the third century; later spokesmen included Alexander and Athanasius.

Here Christians approached their faith in a philosophical or mystical manner. Concerned less with the historical and literal meaning of the texts, they looked for images and allegory, similar in method to the Rabbinical schools in Palestine. They faced the danger of wandering off from the reality of daily life, but were nonetheless strong defenders of a transcendent God and the divinity of the three persons of the Trinity.

The pendulum of early church thought swung back and forth between these two poles.

Arianism

In Antioch Lucian taught that there was no divine Trinity. Rather, the Logos (which he interpreted to mean the power of God) dwelt in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. A Libyan priest Arius evidently studied under Lucian, and spread his ideas throughout Alexandria, where he gained a large popular following among certain segments of society.

It is a curiosity that Arianism became a movement of great popularity among the masses, since few people outside of scholarly establishments generally became greatly excited over intricate theological distinctions. The cause seems to have been the dynamism of Arius himself, a preacher of considerable appeal. Even popular songs and hymns were written to promote his key ideas. As a man, Arius was an excellent example, and attracted people who longed to lead a more penitential form of life.

However, the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, declared Arius' teachings to be contrary to the faith of the apostles and excommunicated him in either 319 or 320.

Arians were accused of denying the divinity of Christ. Arius believed that the Logos (the "Word" in John 1: 1-3) was not God, but a creature ~ f a special and unique type, created by God out of nothing.

Arius based his view on such scriptures as Col. 1: 15: "He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature, for in him were created all things in the heavens and on earth.... " According to Arius, since the Logos was not God, he did not possess the very nature or substance ("ousia" in Greek) of God. Rather, he believed that the Logos was of similar substance (homoi-ousia) as God. But Alexander and many other church leaders believed that the Logos was the same substance (homo-ousia) with God.

Council of Nicea

At Arius' excommunication, the controversy might have ended. However, both Arius and Alexander began a massive letter-writing campaign to gain support from church leaders around the empire. The newly-converted Emperor Constantine tried to mediate the dispute through an emissary, but to little avail. Gradually he realized that this was a matter of concern to all Christians and therefore called an all-church council to convene at Nicea in 325, presided over by the emperor himself. Probably about 250 bishops attended, mostly from the Eastern part of the Empire. The subjects discussed included Arianism, the date of the observation of Easter, and the schism of Meletius in Egypt.

At the council, Arius stated his position, but was rejected by all but his staunchest supporters. The bishops decided to stand for tradition and eventually a statement was drawn up which reflected the general consensus of the council:

> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father; God from God, light from light, true God from true God; begotten not created consubstantial (homo-ousion) with the Father....

"Son of God" replaced Logos to avoid any confusion on that point. The words "only-begotten" explained that the Word possessed the very nature and substance of the Father. "Consubstantial with the Father," made it clear that the Word is God in the fullest sense of the term. This statement, in its finalized form, is still recited in Christian liturgy as the Nicene Creed.

In an age of slogans, "homoousion" became the by-word of the council of Nicea, and all expected the matter to end there. However, doctrinal disputes often being decided by political rather than religious considerations, political winds changed.

I Constantinople

Constantine, susceptible to his own whims and the influence of his advisors, later changed his mind and became the defender of the Arians, permitting Arius and his defender Eusebius to return from exile. In addition, some of the bishops who had signed the creed had done so from political pressure, and many sincere Christians had grave doubts about making theological decisions framed in nonbiblical terminology (homo-ousion never once appears in the Bible, and is a translation of a Latin term). Also the predominantly Eastern Nicean Council was not overly pleased by the forcible use of a Latinism.

Even more confusing, a third century Antiochene teacher, Paul of Samatosa, had used homo-ousion to mean something entirely different that the Father and Son are identical and not distinct persons at all. In

268 a local synod condemned Paul of heresy, yet the council of Nicea, barely 50 years later, declared the same word to be the official church dogma.

The second general council, I Constantinople, was convened by the emperor in 38 l without the consent of the Roman pope although he later gave his approval. It reaffirmed the Nicene statement, and added to it a statement that the Holy Spirit "proceeded from the Father," and declared that the bishop of Constantinople shall have first rank, after the bishop of Rome. The latter decision, arising from the location of the emperor-in Constantinople, was to bear fruit in the l lth century in the split of the Eastern churches from Rome.

Ephesus

In the fifth century -- once the relation of the Word to the Father was generally agreed upon -- disputes centered around the relation of the Word to the man Jesus of Nazareth. The Romans declared that Christ was fully God and fully man. But the Arians had declared that he was neither God nor man, but a super-angelic being created before all other creatures. Extreme reactions to Arianism arose.

One violent anti-Arian to emerge was Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea in Syria. Apollinaris accepted the divinity of Christ, but not his full humanity. A Neo-Platonist, he held to the three-fold division of man, into spirit, soul, and body. The "soul" is what gives a body (animal or human) life. The "spirit" is the element in man that makes it possible for him to think and act as a rational human being. Christ had a human body and soul, according to Apollinaris, but not a human spirit.

Rather, the Logos took over the role of a human spirit and was the source of his thought and will. Four more general councils were called to solve this and related disputes in the following centuries.

Apollinaris met immediate opposition in Diodore of Tarsus and later Nestorius. The latter two men so emphasized the two natures in Christ that they made him almost entirely two distinct persons. The most tangible point in this controversy-and the one which aroused the most public furor-was the position of Mary. Was she the "mother of God" or the "mother of Christ"? If Jesus was God, then it follows that his mother must have preceded God, and given birth to God. This idea, though alien to the Jewish origins of Christianity, was common to some Eastern religions. Probably the great longing and love for a mother figure drew such great support for Mary as "mother of God."

Nestorius, as the prestigious bishop of Constantinople, however, taught that Mary brought forth only Jesus, not the Logos (which began to dwell in Jesus only some time after he was born). He taught that a new "person" resulted from the union of the divine and human, but that the human person was somehow subordinate to the divine person. It follows from this view that Mary is only the "mother of Christ."

The Roman tradition, however, held that the second Person of the Trinity possessed divine nature from the beginning, and that at the incarnation assumed also a human nature, fashioned in the body of Mary. These divine and human natures are completely and perfectly united in the divine Word. If this is true, then Mary is the Mother of God (that is, the mother of God in His human nature).

The Pope asked Cyril (patriarch of Alexandria) to examine Nestorius' view. When he studied Cyril's report, he declared that Nestorius' views were heretical and asked Cyril to excommunicate him. Cyril called a council of bishops to draw up a statement condemning errors about Christ, and asked Nestorius to sign it.

Nestorius, quite predictably, rejected the demands and called for a general council. The Roman Pope sent three delegates to the council, held in Ephesus in 431. He instructed his representatives to act as judges and uphold Cyril's position. (Regarding ecclesiastical authority, the bishop of Rome, as the Pope, was gaining the acknowledged supremacy, although imperial authority shifted to the East.) Transportation difficulties, however, complicated the conference proceedings. Before the papal legates arrived, one group condemned Nestorianism and another group condemned Cyril. When the papal legates arrived they concurred with the first group. Two other decrees concerned the Pelagian controversy in the West and declared that no one could add anything to the Nicean Creed. So Nestorianism was condemned, (although Assyrians in Syria, Iraq, Iran, India, and the U. S. have still retained the Nestorian tradition).

Chalcedon

However, the terminology of Cyril's theological statement was open to much misunderstanding. The concepts of "nature" and "person" were expressed by varying Latin and Greek words, and sometimes the same word meant both concepts. After Ephesus, some who were upset by the Nestorian teachings, declared that there was not only one person in Christ, but also one nature (physis in Greek). Known as the monophysite heresy, it had two variations: the human nature of Jesus was totally absorbed in the divine nature, or the divine nature was totally absorbed in the human. Both views, however, were monophysite, for they taught only one nature. Eutyches, the abbot of a monastery near Constantinople; was the chief

spokesman.

Eutyches had the support of the patriarch of Alexandria, Dioscoros, and Emperor Theodosius II. Among Eutyches' opponents was Eusebius, bishop of Dorylaeum and Flavian, bishop of Constantinople. Flavian summoned a council of bishops which deposed and excommunicated Eutyches. Whereupon Eutyches and his supporters appealed to Pope Leo for another general council.

Pope Leo considered the reports which were submitted to him and agreed to call a council at Ephesus. He sent an official letter outlining the view of the church. However, the Ephesus gathering ignored Leo and supported the monophysites. After Theodosius' death the following year, the very devout new Emperor set about correcting evils.

Eutyches was banished and the decisions of the Ephesus gathering were rejected. In 451 a general council opened at Chalcedon, attended by a record number of bishops-about 600. Its greatest work was considered to be the approval of Leo's doctrinal letter-a summary of all that had been clarified concerning Christ and the Trinity during the first centuries. Affirming the supremacy of the papacy, the council exiled Eutyches and reaffirmed the position of Constantinople as second only to Rome in ecclesiastical matters.

Continuing controversy

However, the monophysites returned to power under successive emperors. In 527, for instance, Justinian came to the throne and his wife brought the monophysites back to power. These disputes continued through successive church councils in debates too depressing to recount in detail. The monophysite view was later refined to a monothelite view (that within Jesus was not only one nature, but also one will [thelos), either divine or human). Further disputes concerned the iconoclasts whether it is idolatry proper to revere an object that represents Christ or one of the saints-and the origin of the Holy Spirit-whether from the Father only, or from the Father and the Son.

Up to the point of the council of Chalcedon, the entire church "'Ventually acceded to what the councils declared to be official church dogma. However, after Chalcedon, a rift began which led the East and the West down their separate paths. Churches which did not accept the council of Chalcedon include the Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, and Ethiopian.

Contrasts between East and West

As the churches in the East and West moved further apart, their differences were emphasized. The West concerned itself with legal matters. A practical and down-to-earth church, it typified the better qualities of the Roman Empire. But as the barbarians invaded, it became more and more cut off from the cultural life of the Empire. The barbarians destroyed the educational institutions and thus the intellectual life of the laity. So the church became more and more separated from the people, preserving the Latin language of the educated minority and concentrating all church affairs in the clergy.

The East viewed these developments with dismay and considered themselves to be the true heirs of original Christianity. In 1857 Dean Stanley expressed the Greek view in his well-known lectures on the history of the Eastern Church. The earliest popes were Greek, not Roman, the early church fathers all wrote in Greek, not Latin. The Eastern church boasts that they read the whole scriptures in the language spoken by the apostles, which the Pope and the Cardinals read only in an "imperfect and barbarous translation."

Although the Greek culture is due in large part to Alexander's conquest of the East and the subsequent spread of Hellenic culture, the Byzantine church claims to be the mother, and Rome the daughter. The Greeks recognized the Pope as a spiritual leader, but it was hard for them to believe that the truest expression of Christ's will came from an area attacked and harried by barbarian invaders.

Nevertheless, the world-changing influence of Christianity in the past came from the Western church rather than the Eastern. The West carried on the prophetic mission of the church and was far less inclined to be controlled by political rulers (especially since the fall of Rome there was little effective civil authority in the West to control the church). The great Christian writer Augustine, who wanted to see the City of God, came from Hippo in the Western part of North Africa. And it was the Western ruler Charlemagne in the eighth and ninth century who wanted to actualize this ideal.

Another asset of the Western church was the continuation of a strongly centralized church authority, which helped form a strong tradition and a practical application of Christian principles. Although sullied by legalism and corruption, it gradually responded to reformers of various ages.

The problems of the Eastern church which we can see developing in the course of conciliar disputes included control by the emperor, jockeying for position by the various geographical regions, such as Antioch and Alexandria (although the Western church was plagued by French-Italian power struggles),

and a concern with philosophical speculation rather than practical matters.

In the Eastern tradition, each nationality or ethnic group has its own church, loyal to the patriarch of Constantinople, Syria, or Alexandria. In many countries there are churches loyal to Rome, made up of converts from Eastern rite churches. All this is a tragic witness to the failure of early Christians to unite in faith and action. Some historians speculate that Mohammed, who surely must have been exposed to Christianity, would have been converted were it not for the bitter quarrels between the monophysites and the Nestorians.

Another way of explaining the disputes between East and West is their broader view of God and church authority. The Roman church claimed that the only rightful church is the one established on the apostle Peter, whereas the Eastern church thought that each bishop has authority to the extent that he stems from the apostolic succession.

Western Christians believed that a "church" meant a place where an authorized leader gave the sacraments. Eastern Christians believed that a "church" did not depend on a leader, but on properly administered sacraments. Jesus said that "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The priest is then but the visible representation of Christ. The Romans thought of the church as the "mystical body of Christ," while the Eastern church viewed the church as a sacramental organization. The Romans tended to view God as the absolute One, countering widespread pagan influence.

They were not as concerned with the fine distinctions between the persons of the Trinity. The Greeks, on the other hand, influenced by the Arians and monophysites, made more distinctions among the Trinity.

Philip Sherrard, in *The Greek East and the Latin West* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), lists the advantages of the church councils as giving stability to the Christian faith when all values were breaking up. But he considered disadvantages to include focusing discussion on only a very small aspect of Christian doctrine and locking Christian discussion into these very narrow concepts of God and man.

In our day, some of the barriers are breaking down, with the Archbishop of Canterbury visiting the Patriarch of Constantinople, and some of the churches that had been divided for centuries over the monophysite heresy, joining together because the former cause of division is now irrelevant.