Distingtion and Unity Between Antiochene and Alexandrian

Historical and Patristic Approaches to Defining Theological Divide

Introduction

As I come to the end of my studies at Holy Cross, I find myself returning to the question that first pulled me towards theology: Who is Christ, really? Not just in academic terms, but in the deep living sense that shaped the early Church and continues to shape us today. Over the past two years, I've encountered a wide range of voices from biblical, patristic, theological, and historical perspectives. I have found much appreciation in these two years, how each voice, with its own accent, sound, tone, and rhythm, contributes to the larger song of the Church's faith. Yet, it is in the conversation between the Antiochene and Alexandrian schools that I've found something both deeply challenging and beautifully unifying, for I believe that unity will come only by studying and communication.

At first, these two schools seem to speak different languages. The Antiochene school, with its sharp focus on Christ's real and full humanity, guards the truth that Jesus walked among us, suffered, prayed, and grew. On the other hand, the Alexandrian tradition defends the powerful mystery that our Lord Jesus, God Himself, became flesh, not just close to us, but truly one with us. Each school holds tightly to what it sees as essential. For a long time, I saw them mainly in tension. Now I've come to believe that this tension is not a problem to be solved, but a gift to be received.

What I hope to explore in this essay is not simply which side was more "right," but how both schools, when read carefully and with charity, draw us toward the same foundation: the mystery of Christ, fully God and fully man. There are, of course, real differences in the use of

terminology. It's true that saying "two natures" the wrong way can lead to division, and saying "one nature" the wrong way can collapse the fullness of Christ's humanity. However, there is also a right way to express both perspectives that honors the fullness of the Incarnation.

In reality, the Christological controversy begins at Nicaea, not Chalcedon, because Nicaea was not merely about the Trinity (i.e., the relationship between the Father and the Son); it also implicitly raised profound questions about Christ's nature. Once the Church declared that the Son is *homoousios* ("of the same essence") with the Father, they opened the door to a more detailed debate about how the divine Son became human. The Nicaea fathers affirm that "we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God…" This started between 325 AD and 431 AD to shape the serious controversies about Christology. The controversy progressed from the question of Christ's divinity (settled at Nicaea) to the question of Christ's identity.

The first controversy arose involving Apollinaris. Epiphanius of Salamis describes the beginning of the Apollinarian controversy, acknowledging that Apollinaris of Laodicea proposed the idea that Christ assumed flesh and soul but not a human spirit. He mentions that initially, when Apollinaris's followers shared this teaching, many were reluctant to believe it, assuming they misunderstood their teacher's intentions.[1] Apollinaris wanted to protect the idea that Jesus was truly divine, so he taught that Jesus didn't have a normal human mind or soul; instead, the divine Word (Logos) replaced it. However, this idea was rejected at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, because it meant Jesus wasn't fully human.

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[1] *History of the Christian Church, Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311-600.*, V, vol. III (CCEL, 2002). Pg. 245

In the 360s-370s, Apollinaris attracted a number of followers who formed their own communities and separated from the orthodox church. His teachings spread across Syria, particularly to the cities of Antioch and Laodicea. Vitalis, a presbyter in Antioch, became one of Apollinaris's most significant followers. Vitalis's followers, later called the Vitalians, formed a distinct sect within the city. This movement was not isolated to Antioch but extended across the Phoenician coast, reaching as far as Constantinople, Asia Minor, and the surrounding regions.

Apollinarianism continued to have pockets of influence in various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. In Palestine, for instance, small groups of Apollinarians were active around 400 AD. In Constantinople, Apollinaris's influence was initially considerable, and his followers, though small in number, tried to assert themselves. For example, Apollinarian sympathizers attempted to install their own candidate as bishop of Constantinople before the Council of 381. Nevertheless, Theodosius's imperial edicts and the efforts of prominent orthodox leaders gradually weakened Apollinarianism's presence in the capital.

Apollinarianism had limited influence in Egypt because the Alexandrian church strongly supported Nicene Orthodoxy. In 362[2], a council in Alexandria, led by Athanasius, rejected Apollinarianism and affirmed that Christ had a rational soul. By the 370s, both Patriarch Peter of Alexandria and Pope Damasus of Rome condemned Apollinaris and his teachings as heretical. Although Apollinaris tried to persuade Egyptian bishops, especially those exiled during Emperor Valens's reign, his efforts failed because these bishops continued to follow Athanasius's orthodox teachings. The Cappadocian Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa, were instrumental in opposing

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[2] *History of the Christian Church, Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311-600.*, V, vol. III (CCEL, 2002). Pg. 422

Apollinarianism. Gregory wrote a treatise, "Against Apollinarius," in the 380s, refuting the heresy. Other church leaders, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, took a stand against Apollinarianism in Constantinople, particularly after Theodosius I's rise to power in 379.

Simultaneously, a distinct theological approach was developing in Antioch. Diodore of Tarsus (died c. 390) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428) developed a clear distinction between Jesus' divine and human natures. Theodore, who became very influential, said that the divine and human were joined in appearance (a "prosopic union"), but not deeply united in one person. He wanted to avoid mixing the two, but his explanation made it sound like Jesus was two separate persons. This way of thinking later influenced his student, Nestorius, and even Leo the Great[3], who became involved in another major controversy.

Theodore's teachings began in Antioch, where he was an important figure in the theological community. The Antiochene school, known for its literal interpretation of the Bible, provided the foundation for Theodore's Christological views. After becoming Bishop of Mopsuestia in 392, Theodore's theological influence expanded. He wrote numerous biblical commentaries, which were widely circulated within the Roman Empire, particularly in Greek. His works began to be translated into Syriac and other languages, reaching regions far beyond Antioch.

Edessa, a city on the border between the Roman and Persian Empires, became an important center for spreading Theodore of Mopsuestia's teachings. The Antiochene tradition had shaped the School of Edessa for a long time, and by the early 400s, it strongly followed Theodore's Christology. Leaders like Ibas of Edessa were key in translating Theodore's writings

[3] Fairbairn, Donald. *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

into Syriac, making his theology a main part of biblical education in the region. But Edessa soon became a place of theological conflict. Bishop Rabbula, who at first supported Theodore's ideas, changed his position after the Council of Ephesus in 431 and began supporting the Alexandrian view. In 432, he publicly condemned Theodore's works and ordered them to be burned. This caused a division in the community, as Ibas and other supporters of Theodore continued to defend his teachings. In 433, Ibas even wrote a letter to Mari the Persian, saying Theodore's Christology was in line with true faith. Although Rabbula tried hard to stop Theodore's influence, the pro-Theodore group stayed strong in Edessa, and after Rabbula died in 436, Ibas became bishop, briefly bringing Theodore's theology back into the spotlight.

In the Persian Empire, Theodore's teachings found a more receptive environment. The Church of the East, centered in Persia, had long been influenced by the Antiochene school, and by the early 5th century, it was increasingly aligned with Theodore's dyophysite Christology. The Persian Church had developed its own structures of governance, independent of the Roman Church, partly due to political tensions between the Sasanian Empire and the Roman Empire. This autonomy allowed the Church of the East to adopt Theodore's teachings without interference from the councils of the Roman Empire.

By the 430s, many bishops of the Church of the East, particularly those trained in the School of Edessa, embraced Theodore's theology. When the Nestorian controversy erupted in the Roman Empire, the Church of the East remained relatively unaffected, largely due to its political and theological independence. Theodore's followers in Persia, such as Barsauma and Narsai, helped to establish the School of Nisibis, which became the new center for Theodore's teachings. The school emphasized literal exegesis and the dual nature of Christ, and by the late 5th century, the Council of 486 in Seleucia, the Church of the East officially adopted Theodore's Christology

in its synods, as the Persian Church sought to distinguish itself from Roman theological influence. Theodore's influence in the Persian Empire grew, and his writings became a central part of the theological curriculum in the region[4].

The Arabian Peninsula, though more peripheral, was not entirely untouched by Theodore's teachings. Christianity had been spreading in parts of Arabia through trade routes, particularly through the Church of the East. East Syriac Christian communities in regions like Bahrain and Oman were likely exposed to Theodore's theology through the influence of the Persian Church. The Christian community in Al-Ḥīra, a significant Arab center, was also tied to the Persian Church and may have adopted Theodore's Christology.

While the Arabian Peninsula was more divided, with some regions leaning toward Miaphysitism due to the influence of Abyssinia, the spread of Theodore's teachings in the East helped shape the theological landscape. The Persian Church's missionary activities in the Gulf and its proximity to the Arabian Peninsula meant that Theodore's theology reached even these remote regions.

The Alexandrian Church, especially through the teachings of St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria, was never part of the heresies that came out of the Antiochian school, like Nestorianism or Apollinarianism. Although St. Athanasius and Apollinaris of Laodicea were once allies against Arianism, Athanasius never accepted Apollinaris's later teaching that Christ did not have a human mind. In fact, Athanasius clearly affirmed in the Synod of Alexandria (362 AD) that Christ had a full human nature, body, soul, and mind. This shows that even from the

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[4] Baum, Wilhelm, and Dietmar W. Winkler. *The Church of the East: A Concise History*. Routledge, 2003.

early stages, the Alexandrian tradition rejected any attempt to limit Christ's humanity. Athanasius stayed faithful to Nicene Orthodoxy, and there is no evidence that he supported Apollinarianism in any form.

St. Cyril of Alexandria became involved in the Nestorian controversy when serious concerns reached him from the Church in Constantinople. In 428 AD, Nestorius, a monk from the Antiochian school, became the Patriarch of Constantinople. Soon after, he began publicly teaching that the Virgin Mary should not be called Theotokos (God-bearer), but instead Christotokos (Christ-bearer), claiming she gave birth only to the human Jesus, not to the divine Word. This caused great alarm, especially in Alexandria, where the title Theotokos was seen as essential to the Christian faith, affirming the full unity of the divinity, humanity in our Lord Jesus Christ. Cyril didn't act on hearsay, he received direct letters and messages from bishops, monks, and laypeople in Constantinople who were troubled by Nestorius's sermons. In response, Cyril began writing letters to explain the correct faith. In his famous Letter to the Monks of Egypt, he stated that separating Christ into two natures, one divine and one human, was a curse upon the faith. At first, Cyril didn't name Nestorius directly, but the concern was real and growing. His tone was pastoral, not aggressive. He was trying to guard the faith, not start a fight.

As Nestorius refused to back down, Cyril moved to confront the issue more directly. He wrote three letters to Nestorius, trying to correct his teaching. The third letter included the well-known Twelve Anathemas, which outlined clear boundaries of true Christology, defending the truth that Jesus Christ is one person, fully God and fully man, born of the Virgin Mary, who is rightly called Theotokos. At the same time, St. Cyril reached out to Pope Celestine I in Rome, sharing the issue and asking for support. The pope responded by authorizing Cyril to take action on behalf of the Western Church, even permitting him to excommunicate Nestorius if he did not

repent. Nestorius refused to change, so in 431 AD, with imperial permission, Cyril presided over the Council of Ephesus. There, after serious deliberation and in the presence of bishops from across the empire, Nestorius was officially condemned and deposed for denying the unity of Christ. Cyril read his Twelve Anathemas, and the council affirmed them as Orthodox. Cyril's involvement wasn't personal or political, it was driven by a deep concern to defend the truth of the Incarnation.

St. Cyril of Alexandria was not influenced by Apollinarianism, although he used terms like the phrase "one nature of the Word of God incarnate." (μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη) Some have misunderstood this to mean Cyril held the same views as Apollinaris, but Cyril redefined such terms in a fully orthodox way. He strongly affirmed that Christ had both a human soul and a human mind, and he rejected both Nestorius's idea of separating Christ into two persons and Apollinaris's denial of full humanity. Cyril taught that the divine and human natures were truly united in one person without confusion or division. Historically and theologically, the Alexandrian Church was never part of these heresies and actually stood at the front lines in defending the true faith.

The theological debate between the Antiochene and Alexandrian schools reached a critical point at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. While traditionally it's seen as a compromise between the two sides, a closer look at historical texts and scholars shows Chalcedon largely favored Antiochene ideas, especially those of Theodoret and his colleagues. This tilt influenced Christian theology significantly, both in Western Christianity and, surprisingly, in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Bethune-Baker summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the Antiochene position clearly. He says that "Nestorianism lay in the clear perception of the reality of the human nature

of the Lord.[5]" Antiochene Fathers like Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius rightly insisted that Jesus was genuinely human, fully experiencing human life. This emphasis was important because, at the time, many theologians overly stressed Jesus's divinity, often downplaying the fact that he was truly human, which risked weakening the meaning of the incarnation itself.

However, Bethune-Baker also points out a critical flaw in the Antiochene view: they didn't fully grasp the deep unity of Jesus's divinity and humanity. He notes, "They failed to realize the idea of God becoming man—one who was eternally God entering upon the sphere of human life.[6]" Instead of a true unity of God and humanity in Jesus, Antioch saw the incarnation more like a partnership (synapheia) of two distinct beings closely connected rather than truly united. St. Cyril of Alexandria strongly criticized this, arguing it didn't capture the profound truth of God genuinely becoming part of human history and experience. McGuckin describes Cyril's criticism by noting, "Antiochene theology typically stopped short of the radical truth of God personally entering human existence.[7]"

Donald Fairbairn gives a helpful explanation of Cyril's view, emphasizing that, for Cyril, "grace is primarily God's giving himself to humanity.[8]". For Cyril, Christ was personally the presence of God among humanity, creating a deep, transforming unity, not merely a moral or external assistance. Antiochene theologians like Theodore and Nestorius, however, saw grace differently, mainly as divine help or support rather than God's actual presence. Fairbairn

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[5] Bethune-Baker, James Franklin. An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine: To the Time of the Council of Chalcedon, 1962. Pg. 274
[6] Bethune-Baker, James Franklin. An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine: To the Time of the Council of Chalcedon, 1962. Pg. 275
[7] McGuckin, John A. St. Cyril Of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts, 1994, p. 208
[8] Fairbairn, Donald. Grace and Christology in the Early Church. Oxford University Press, 2006, p.64

explains, "They emphasized grace as divine assistance, not God personally dwelling among humanity.[9]".

From this viewpoint, Chalcedon's outcome becomes problematic. The council did use Cyril's terms superficially, saying Jesus is "one hypostasis" and "one person." But importantly, it adopted Antiochene ideas by clearly stating Jesus exists "in two natures," distinct and not mixed. This formulation protected against confusion (as feared in Eutychianism), but strongly reinforced Antiochene logic. It sharply separated Jesus's human and divine sides, creating potential dualism.

McGuckin clarifies this problem, observing, "Chalcedon did not produce a true synthesis between Cyril's Christology and Antiochene theology but effectively prioritized Antiochene terminology and concepts.[10]" Instead of unifying the two theological views, Chalcedon leaned heavily toward Antioch's clarity and distinctions. This shift meant moving away from Cyril's deeper concept of real unity and transformative grace, unintentionally institutionalizing Antiochene dualism.

At first glance, these two ways of thinking seem very different, and it may even be impossible to reconcile. But when we look closely, we realize each perspective is trying to protect something very precious. Cyril wanted to make sure we see Jesus as one real person, God Himself, who truly entered our human life. He wasn't just watching from above or guiding a man named Jesus; He became fully human Himself. On the other hand, the Antiochene view wanted to ensure we don't forget how real and full Jesus' humanity was, that He got tired, hungry, and

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[9] Fairbairn, Donald. Grace and Christology in the Early Church. Oxford University Press, 2006, p.69

[10] McGuckin, John A. St. Cyril Of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts, 1994, p. 238

felt everything we do. Both the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, as well as the Western Church, have clearly condemned the teachings of figures like Apollinaris, Nestorius, Diodore of Tarsus, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. And all three major apostolic traditions venerate both St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria as saints and fathers of the Church. Maybe the day will come when we stop trying to relate everything back to Chalcedon, when the Church no longer feels stuck between Chalcedon.

Let us all speak with the language of St. Cyril of Alexandria, who taught that the Logos took humanity and made it one with His divinity without mingling, confusion, or alteration. This is not a blending of nature, but a true and living union in the one person of the Word. And let us also remember the words of St. Athanasius, who described the union of divinity and humanity in Christ as like the unity between the Father and the Son, not by mixture, but by true and personal oneness. He used the word ἴδιος (idios)[11], meaning "His own," to show that the humanity of Christ is not something foreign or added, but truly the humanity of the Son Himself. In this way, we affirm: the one Lord Jesus Christ is God the Word, who became fully human, making our humanity His own, to restore and glorify it in Himself, simultaneously in Athanasius understanding and language we can say, Christ has two natures, divinity and humanity, that are fully united without mingling, confusion, or alteration. Being the Logos Himself, became man.

Christ is not a debate or a formula; He is not a theory to be solved. He is the living God who became human. And truly, who among us can fully understand the depth of the incarnation? Who can grasp how the eternal Word entered time, took on flesh, and shared in our human

[11] Fairbairn, Donald. Grace and Christology in the Early Church. Oxford University Press, 2006, p.85

weakness without losing His divinity? These are not things to argue over but to stand in awe of. The mystery of Christ is greater than any council's wording or theological school. It is a mystery to be lived, loved, and worshipped.

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