

# The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)

*Two natures, one person: how the church said what Jesus is — and how the Oriental Orthodox walked out over a preposition • AD 428–451*

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 3

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**Where this fits:** Lesson 8 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — Noll’s third turning point. **Nicaea (325)** settled *whether* the Son is God. Chalcedon settles *how* the one who is God is also one of us. This is also the first great break in the undivided church — the Oriental Orthodox split — which happens six centuries before the **Great Schism** between East and West. See the full **Series Timeline**.

## WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

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Between AD 431 and 451, the Christian church tried to say what every Sunday School child can say in a sentence: *Jesus is fully God and fully man*. Getting those words to hold together, in Greek, in a way that could not be twisted into either “Jesus is two persons, a divine and a human” or “Jesus is one person with one blended nature that is neither quite divine nor quite human,” took twenty years, four councils, the deposition of a patriarch, an emperor’s widow, a pope’s intervention, a great deal of violence, and the permanent departure of roughly a third of the world’s Christians.

The document that came out of Chalcedon in October 451 is one of the three or four most important sentences in Christian history. Every orthodox Christology since — Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox — begins there. The Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians, Syriacs, and Indians who did not accept Chalcedon’s language have, for fifteen centuries, been confessing the same reality in different words. This is a lesson about what it means for the church to say, with precision, who Jesus Christ is.

*Greek NT (John 1:14): και ὁ λόγος σα ῥξ ἐγένετο και ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, και ἐθεασάμεθα τη ἴδούσαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρα πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος και ἀληθείας.*

John 1:14 (ESV): “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Everything Chalcedon will say is a commentary on those thirteen Greek words.

## PART 1 — FROM NICAEA TO THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CRISIS

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After Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) had settled that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, a new question came forward: *given that the Son is truly God, what exactly happened when he became flesh?* How is the divine Son related to the human Jesus who ate, wept, slept, and died? Five possible answers were on the table in the fifth century, and four of them were wrong:

- **Apollinarianism** (Apollinaris of Laodicea, c. 360) — the divine Logos replaced Jesus’ human rational soul. Condemned at Constantinople (381). Gregory of Nazianzus’ answer became famous: “*That which he has not assumed he has not healed.*” A Jesus without a fully human mind cannot save a human mind.

- **Nestorianism** (from Nestorius, c. 428) — the divine Son and the human Jesus are *two persons* who cooperate. Condemned at Ephesus (431).

- **Monophysitism / Eutychianism** (from Eutyches, c. 448) — after the incarnation there is only *one nature*, the divine nature having swallowed up the human. Condemned at Chalcedon (451).

- **Docetism** — the human body was an illusion. Already rejected by **Ignatius** in AD 107.

- **The Chalcedonian answer** — one person (*hypostasis*), two natures (*physeis*), fully divine and fully human, united without confusion, change, division, or separation.

## PART 2 — TWO SCHOOLS: ALEXANDRIA AND ANTIOCH

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The argument that produced Chalcedon was largely a collision between two theological traditions that had been growing apart for two centuries.

### ALEXANDRIA — LOGOS & FLESH

The Alexandrian school (**Clement**, **Origen**, Athanasius, Cyril) emphasised the *unity* of Christ. The Word took flesh; the two are one subject. Their favourite formula, later used by Cyril, was *mia physis tou theou logou sesarkomene* — “one nature of the Word of God enfleshed.” Their favorite verse was John 1:14.

Danger: if pressed too hard, this formula could compromise the fullness of Jesus’ humanity (Apollinarius, Eutyches).

### ANTIOCH — TWO NATURES

The Antiochene school (Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, Theodoret of Cyrrhus) emphasised the *distinction* of Christ’s natures. The Son of God and the Son of Mary must both be real and both recognizable within Christ. Their favorite verse was Hebrews 4:15 (tempted in every respect as we are).

Danger: if pressed too hard, this distinction could break Christ into two persons (Nestorius).

Both schools read the same Scriptures. Both accepted Nicaea. Both loved Christ. But their instincts about how to protect his identity were moving in opposite directions. Chalcedon's triumph was to affirm what both schools were trying to protect and to rule out the extremes each produced.

## PART 3 — NESTORIUS & THEOTOKOS (AD 428–431)

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### Nestorius (c. AD 386–451)

MONK OF ANTIOCH • PATRIARCH OF CONSTANTINOPLE 428–431 •  
CONDEMNED AT EPHESUS • DIED IN EGYPTIAN EXILE C. 451

Antiochene

Christotokos

Condemned 431

Nestorius was a rising star of the Antiochene school when Emperor Theodosius II appointed him Patriarch of Constantinople in 428. A gifted preacher, ascetic, and energetic heresy-hunter, he arrived in the capital determined to clean up what he saw as Alexandrian sentimentality in popular piety — especially the widespread use of the title *Theotokos* (“God-bearer” / “Mother of God”) for the Virgin Mary.

In a series of sermons that Christmas, Nestorius (or his presbyter Anastasius) argued:

*“Let no one call Mary Theotokos, for Mary was a human, and of a human it is impossible that God should be born.”*

— attributed to Nestorius' presbyter Anastasius, Christmas 428

Nestorius offered an alternative: *Christotokos* (“Christ-bearer”) or *Anthropotokos* (“Man-bearer”). Mary gave birth to the human Jesus; the divine Son was not born. The two were conjoined in one *prosôpon* (external appearance), but they remained distinguishable.

**Why this was not just about Mary.** The Theotokos title had been in use for about two centuries. It was not primarily a claim about Mary; it was a claim about Jesus. If the baby Mary carried in her womb was *one person, and that person was God the Son*, then Mary carried God — not a man in whom God happened to dwell. Remove

*Theotokos*, and you signal (at best) that the divine and human in Jesus are cooperating partners rather than one person.

**Scripture stacked against the move.** The Gospels speak of Jesus as one subject. The Son of God is said to have been hungry, to have slept, to have died; the Son of Mary is said to have forgiven sins and raised the dead. This grammatical unity — later called the *communicatio idiomatum*, the “communication of properties” — presupposes that divine and human *attributes* can be ascribed to the one person of Christ. Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary already puts it plainly:

*Greek NT (Luke 1:43): και ` πόθεν μοι τοῦτο ἵνα ἔλθῃ ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου πρὸς ἐμέ;*

Luke 1:43 (ESV): “And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

The logic was simple: if Mary is the *mother of my Lord* (Elizabeth says so), and if *Kyrios* means God (as every Greek-speaking Christian knew), then in the normal use of words Mary is the mother of God. Nestorius’ refusal to say so raised alarms from Egypt to Rome within weeks.

## PART 4 — THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS (AD 431)

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### Cyril of Alexandria (c. AD 376–444)

PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA • SUCCESSOR TO THE ALEXANDRIAN TRADITION FROM ATHANASIUS • AUTHOR OF THE TWELVE ANATHEMAS

Alexandrian

Theotokos defender

Council of Ephesus

Cyril of Alexandria was the most formidable theologian of the century — rigorous, combative, politically shrewd, and a brilliant exegete. When Nestorius’ sermons reached Egypt, Cyril wrote him courteously (his *First Letter to Nestorius*), then more firmly (his *Second Letter*, AD 430). When Nestorius refused to retract, Cyril composed

his *Third Letter to Nestorius*, with **Twelve Anathemas** attached, each ruling out a different Nestorian proposition. Anathema 1 set the tone:

*“If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy Virgin is Theotokos (for she bore in fleshly manner the Word of God become flesh) — let him be anathema.”*

— **Cyril of Alexandria, Third Letter to Nestorius, Anathema 1 (AD 430)**

Cyril’s most important phrase — quoted and re-quoted for a thousand years — was *henosis kath’ hypostasin*, the “hypostatic union.” The divine Word and the human nature are joined not in appearance (*kata prosopon*) but in the actual person (*hypostasis*) of the Son. There is one “I” in Jesus, and that “I” is God the Son.

**The Council.** Under pressure from Cyril and Pope Celestine of Rome, Emperor Theodosius II summoned a general council to Ephesus for Pentecost 431. The meeting was a diplomatic catastrophe: Cyril’s Alexandrian party arrived first, refused to wait for the Antiochene delegation, and on 22 June 431 met in the church of the Theotokos in Ephesus (already a Marian shrine). They read Nestorius’ teachings aloud and condemned him the same day. When John of Antioch and his Eastern bishops arrived four days later, they held a counter-council that deposed Cyril. For weeks the two councils sat in the same city excommunicating each other.

Theodosius eventually sided with Cyril. Nestorius was deposed, exiled first to a monastery near Antioch, then to the Great Oasis in Upper Egypt. He died there around 451, probably on the very eve of Chalcedon.

**The Formula of Reunion (AD 433).** Two years of diplomacy between Cyril and John of Antioch produced a compromise document that both sides could sign. It affirmed *Theotokos*; it affirmed the distinction of natures in Christ; it was one of the earliest attempts at what Chalcedon would later finalize. Ephesus was now the **Third Ecumenical Council**.

Cyril died in 444. His successor at Alexandria, **Dioscorus**, was a less subtle theologian and a more aggressive politician. In Constantinople an elderly archimandrite named **Eutyches** — a favorite of the imperial court — began to teach a position even more extreme than Cyril’s:

**Eutyches’ formula (c. 447):** “*Two natures before the union, one nature after.*” After the Incarnation, Eutyches said, Jesus has *only one nature* — the divine nature, into which the human nature has been absorbed “like a drop of wine in the sea.” This is the position that will earn the label **monophysitism** (*mono-* “one,” *physis* “nature”). It went well beyond anything Cyril had said, and it compromised the reality of Christ’s humanity in a way Cyril would have rejected.

**The Robber Council (Latrocinium) of Ephesus, August 449.** Emperor Theodosius II, manipulated by the eunuch Chrysaphius and by Dioscorus, called another general council at Ephesus to try Eutyches. Dioscorus presided and ran it with brutality: he excluded Flavian of Constantinople (the orthodox patriarch), refused to read Pope Leo’s representative’s letter, and had soldiers physically assault bishops who resisted. Flavian was beaten so badly he died of his injuries days later.

Pope Leo I in Rome, when he heard the news, coined the phrase the church has used ever since: “*latrocinium*” — “a robber-meeting,” not a council. Leo refused to accept its decisions. A standoff now lay between Rome and Alexandria.

**The accident that saved the church.** On 28 July 450, Theodosius II fell from his horse while hunting and died. His pious sister **Pulcheria** — who had never accepted Eutyches’ teaching — married the general **Marcian** and put him on the throne. Pulcheria and Marcian summoned a new council to settle the matter properly. It would meet at Chalcedon, directly across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, in October 451.

## **PART 6 — LEO’S TOME & THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (OCT AD 451)**

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**Leo’s Tome.** Before the council met, Pope Leo I sent a dogmatic letter to Flavian (originally written for the 449 council but never read there). This *Tome of Leo* is one of the greatest

documents of Western theology, and the first major voice of the Latin church in a Greek Christological controversy. Leo wrote, without hedging:

*“The proper character of each nature, then, being preserved and joined in one Person, lowliness was assumed by Majesty, weakness by Power, mortality by Eternity... For each of the two natures performs its proper functions in communion with the other; the Word doing what belongs to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what belongs to the flesh. The one glitters with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries.”*

— **Pope Leo I, Tome to Flavian, 13 June 449 (Letter 28.3)**

**The council.** Chalcedon opened on 8 October 451 in the basilica of St. Euphemia, across the Bosphorus from the imperial palace. It is the largest council of Christian antiquity — approximately **520–600 bishops**, overwhelmingly from the East, along with papal legates from Rome. Emperor Marcian and Empress Pulcheria attended in person. The council sat for sixteen sessions over three weeks.

#### **Key actions:**

- **Dioscorus of Alexandria was deposed** for the violence of 449 and for refusing to appear.

- **Eutyches’ monophysitism was explicitly condemned.**

- **Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431) were confirmed** as binding.

- **Cyril’s Second Letter to Nestorius and the Tome of Leo were formally received** as authoritative expressions of the faith. The famous cry went up: *“Peter has spoken through Leo! This is the faith of the Fathers!”*

- **The Chalcedonian Definition was drafted and approved** in the fifth session (22 October 451). It is the document every Christian tradition after it has either accepted or, very self-consciously, rejected.

- **Canon 28** granted the See of Constantinople honour equal to Rome — a canon the Roman legates protested on the spot and Pope Leo would never accept. (See [Lesson 2 Part 1](#) for its long shadow.)

## PART 7 — THE CHALCEDONIAN DEFINITION

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The text adopted on 22 October 451 is not, strictly, a creed; Chalcedon appended it to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as a *definition* (*horos*) of how the creed's Christology should be read. The key paragraph:

### THE CHALCEDONIAN DEFINITION (22 OCTOBER 451)

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess **one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ**, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; **truly God and truly man**, of a reasonable soul and body;

consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin;

begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the **Theotokos**, according to the manhood;

one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, to be acknowledged **in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably**; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one Subsistence (*hypostasis*), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only-begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**The four adverbs.** The heart of the Definition is four Greek adverbs stating what the union of the two natures is and is not. They function as four fences around the mystery:

**ἀσυχύτως**

*asunchytôs*  
without confusion  
against Eutyches

**ἀτρέπτως**

*atreptôs*  
without change  
against Eutyches

**ἀδιαιρέτως**

*adiairetôs*  
indivisibly  
against Nestorius

**ἀχωρίστως**

*achôristôs*  
inseparably  
against Nestorius

The first two adverbs rule out monophysitism: the natures do not blend or change; the humanity remains fully human, the divinity fully divine. The last two adverbs rule out Nestorianism: the natures are not separable; there is one Jesus, not a divine-and-human pair. Between these four fences, the mystery is left to mystery.

**The Chalcedonian grammar in one sentence:** Jesus Christ is *one person* (*hypostasis*) subsisting in *two natures* (*physeis*), fully divine and fully human, united without confusion and without separation. The Son you worship is the same Son who slept in Mary’s arms; the man who died on the cross is the same one through whom the stars were made.

*Greek NT (Col 2:9): ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς.*

Colossians 2:9 (ESV): “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

## PART 8 — THE BREAK: THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX

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Not everyone accepted Chalcedon. Large swaths of Eastern Christianity — especially in Egypt, the Syriac-speaking lands, Armenia, and Ethiopia — rejected the new Definition. Their argument was not that they held Eutyches’ position; they explicitly condemned it. Their argument was that Chalcedon’s language of “in two natures” sounded too Nestorian to them. They preferred Cyril’s formula: “one nature of the Word enfleshed” (*mia physis*). They are now called the **Oriental Orthodox churches**, and they are *not* monophysite in the Eutychian sense. The modern scholarly term for their view is **miaphysite** — emphasising that “one

nature” here does not mean a blended or reduced Christ, but the one incarnate nature of the divine Logos.

**The historic Oriental Orthodox communion (non-Chalcedonian):**

- **Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria** — the largest; c. 10–20 million today; the See of St. Mark.
- **Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church** — c. 40–50 million; the largest Oriental Orthodox body numerically.
- **Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church** — autocephalous since 1993.
- **Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch** (historically called “Jacobite” after Jacob Baradaeus, their sixth-century organizer).
- **Armenian Apostolic Church** — the world’s oldest national church; Armenia became officially Christian in AD 301.
- **Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church** (India) — the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala.

These are not small communions. Together they represent roughly 60–80 million Christians today. They trace their episcopates back to the Apostles through the same early centuries as the Chalcedonian churches. They use essentially the Nicene Creed, the Eucharist, the sacraments, and the liturgical calendar that all classical Christians do. They simply do not say “in two natures” about Christ. They say, with Cyril, “one incarnate nature of the Word of God.”

**A fifteen-century misunderstanding?** Since the 1960s, a remarkable series of official theological dialogues — between the Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, and other Oriental Orthodox churches and the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches — has concluded that both sides have been teaching the same Christology in different technical vocabularies, and that the 451 schism was to a large extent a collision of languages. Modern agreed statements (the Pro Oriente dialogues 1971–present; the Anba Bishoy dialogue 1989 and 1990; Pope Shenouda III and Pope John Paul II, 1973) have formally acknowledged that each side’s formula faithfully expresses the mystery of the Incarnation. The schism has not been healed institutionally, but the theological gulf is significantly narrower than centuries of polemic suggested.

## PART 9 — WHY NOLL CALLS THIS A TURNING POINT

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Noll's chapter on Chalcedon is titled *Doctrine, Politics, and Life in the Word*. He argues that Chalcedon is a turning point on three distinct levels:

- **Doctrinally.** Chalcedon produces the single most refined Christological statement in Christian history. It shapes every later orthodox theology — Byzantine, Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, evangelical. It also shapes what Christians mean by being “orthodox” at all.

- **Politically.** Chalcedon was summoned, funded, and enforced by an emperor. Its canons (especially canon 28) involved church politics Rome never accepted. The council is the first clear case of what happens when imperial preferences and conciliar theology diverge: Rome sides with its own legates, Constantinople sides with the emperor, and Alexandria walks out. The geography of later divisions is being drawn.

- **Ecclesially.** Chalcedon produces the first permanent, large-scale rupture in the visible church. Unlike the Nestorian Church of the East (which had separated after Ephesus 431), the Oriental Orthodox churches are substantial, rooted, ancient Christian bodies that continue alongside the Chalcedonian family to this day. The assumption that “the church” is a single visible unity has to be revised after 451.

Noll also notes, with some tenderness, that Chalcedon is the first council we can see *both* as the triumph of the church's deepest instincts and as the cost of its willingness to be precise. Precision unites some and divides others. That is the permanent condition of Christian theology after 451.

## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

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• **The gospel depends on the grammar.** If the one who suffered on the cross is *not* the eternal Son, we have been worshipping a creature. If the one who suffered on the cross is *not* really human, the cross does not touch our condition. Chalcedon’s hedges are not technical trivia; they are the fences that keep the cross itself intact.

• **Mary’s title is really about Jesus.** Whatever your tradition’s view of Mary’s later role in devotion, the title *Theotokos* began as a Christological confession: *the one born of Mary is God the Son*. Rejecting it does not lower Mary; it lowers Christ.

• **A theology that cannot say no is not orthodox.** Chalcedon works because it rules out four positions (Nestorian, Eutychian, Apollinarian, Docetic) with four adverbs. A faith that will not say which doctrines are outside its fence will eventually discover that nothing is inside it either.

• **Our separated brethren are older than we think.** Evangelical Protestants often forget that the Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, and Syriac churches exist — and that they confess, worship, and suffer for the same Jesus, in many cases with a more ancient continuous tradition than our own. Chalcedon reminds us that “the church” is bigger than our denominational vocabulary.

*Greek NT (Heb 4:15): οὐ γὰρ ἔχομεν ἀρχιερέα μὴ δυνάμενον συμπαθεῖσαι ταῖς ἀσθενείαις ἡμῶν, πεπειρασμένον δὲ κατὰ πάντα καθ’ ὁμοιότητα χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας.*

Hebrews 4:15 (ESV): “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Nestorius thought the title *Theotokos* honored Mary too much. Cyril argued it really honored Christ. Where does your tradition land — and why?

2. Gregory of Nazianzus: “What he has not assumed he has not healed.” Work that through: what would salvation look like if Jesus did not assume a human mind? A human body? A human will?

3. The Alexandrians emphasized Christ’s unity; the Antiochenes emphasized his distinctions. Most of us instinctively favor one instinct over the other. Which do you favor, and where does the other instinct correct you?

4. The four adverbs — without confusion, without change, without division, without separation — are fences around a mystery. Which of the four is most likely to be breached by casual Christian talk today?

5. Modern dialogues suggest that the 451 schism with the Oriental Orthodox was to a large extent a collision of technical vocabularies. What does that tell us about the cost of theological precision? About the cost of theological imprecision?

6. Pope Leo wrote: “The one glitters with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries.” Which Gospel moment most captures that double reality for you?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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Lord Jesus Christ, one and the same, perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man: we thank you for Chalcedon. Thank you for Cyril’s precision and Leo’s clarity and Pulcheria’s courage. Thank you for the four adverbs that guard your

one person. Thank you for Mary, the bearer of God, who carried you for our sake. Thank you for the Copts, the Ethiopians, the Armenians, the Syriacs, the Indians — our brothers and sisters who have held to you through fifteen centuries of misunderstanding, poverty, and persecution. Heal the wounds we have inflicted on your body in the name of defending you. Keep us from saying too much and too little. Let our confession be simple enough for a child and precise enough for an emperor. Through your one holy Person, two perfect natures, Amen.

## FURTHER READING

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### Primary sources:

- The Chalcedonian Definition (22 October 451); the 30 canons of Chalcedon.
- Cyril of Alexandria, *Second and Third Letters to Nestorius*; the *Twelve Anathemas*; *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters*; *On the Unity of Christ*.
- Pope Leo I, *Tome to Flavian* (Letter 28), AD 449.
- Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides* (his self-defense, written in Syriac exile, preserved in one copy).
- The Acts of the Council of Ephesus (431), the “Robber Council” of Ephesus (449), and the Council of Chalcedon (451).
- Modern agreed statements between the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Catholic churches — Pro Oriente 1971–present; Anba Bishoy 1989, 1990.

### Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll**, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 3: “Doctrine, Politics, and Life in the Word: The Council of Chalcedon (451).”
- Richard Price and Michael Gaddis (ed./trans.), *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, 3 vols. (2005) — definitive modern translation.
- John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (2004).

- Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2 vols. in 5 (1965–1996) — the definitive reference.
- Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (2008) — on the eastern Christian worlds of Oriental Orthodox and Church of the East.
- Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy* (2004).

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