

THE FIRST ENDURING CHRISTIAN DIVISIONS

From Ephesus and Chalcedon to the Second Council of Nicaea, AD 431-787

The Genealogy of Christian Division

A Historical and Biblical Study of Schism, Reformation, and the Making of Modern Christianity

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Abstract

This chapter reconstructs the first enduring divisions of ancient Christianity from the Council of Ephesus in AD 431 to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. It argues that the conventional focus on 1054 obscures older fractures produced by the interaction of Christological controversy, conciliar reception, linguistic translation, patriarchal rivalry, imperial policy, regional identity, and coercive enforcement. The chapter explains the dispute among Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria, and their supporters over the unity of Christ and the title Theotokos; the rival proceedings at Ephesus; the formation and Asian expansion of the East Syriac Church of the East; the crisis from Eutyches and Ephesus 449 to Chalcedon's Definition of one Christ in two natures; and the gradual consolidation of Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, and related non-Chalcedonian traditions now known as Oriental Orthodox. It then traces the Henotikon, the Acacian Schism, Justinian's reunion policies, Constantinople II, the monothelite controversy, Constantinople III, and the Byzantine icon controversy culminating at Nicaea II. Modern ecumenical agreements are used to distinguish historic polemical labels from present official Christological self-understanding. Genealogically, the period produced durable East Syriac, Chalcedonian, and Oriental Orthodox trajectories long before the East-West Schism. A Sola Scriptura assessment affirms the biblical necessity of confessing one Lord Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human, while testing conciliar authority, imperial coercion, Marian terminology, and icon veneration by the apostolic Scriptures.

Keywords: Council of Ephesus; Council of Chalcedon; Church of the East; Oriental Orthodox; Christology; miaphysitism; iconoclasm; Second Council of Nicaea

1. Introduction: Christian Division Did Not Begin in 1054

The year 1054 is often treated in popular church history as though it were the first great fracture of Christianity. That convention obscures a much earlier and more complicated reality. By the middle of the fifth century, Christians who confessed the Nicene faith were already entering divisions that would endure for more than fifteen centuries. These separations did not arise because one side ceased to speak of Jesus Christ, Scripture, the Trinity, baptism, Eucharist, holiness, or apostolic continuity. They arose while rival bishops and churches were trying to explain how the one Lord Jesus Christ could be fully divine and fully human, how conciliar decisions should be received, and who possessed authority to determine the boundaries of orthodox confession. The resulting disputes were theological in substance, but their course was also shaped by language, imperial politics, jurisdictional rivalry, regional identity, social networks, and coercive state power.

The preceding period had produced an imperially recognized conciliar Christianity. Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 had supplied durable language for confessing the Son and the Holy Spirit within the one divine identity, while the legalization and patronage of Christianity had given emperors unprecedented influence over the conditions in which church disputes were convened, judged, and enforced. By 431 the unresolved question had shifted from whether the Son is truly divine to how the divine Word is united to a complete human existence. The issue was not abstract. Christians prayed to Christ, proclaimed that

God had acted in him for salvation, read Gospel narratives in which the same Jesus hungered, suffered, forgave sins, received worship, died, and rose, and confessed that the Word "became flesh". The conceptual challenge was to speak of this unity without either dividing Christ into two acting subjects or confusing divinity and humanity into a hybrid nature.

This chapter follows that controversy from the Council of Ephesus in 431 to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. It gives particular attention to four long-term genealogical outcomes. First, the East Syriac churches of the Sasanian Persian world, already developing ecclesiastical autonomy before Ephesus, increasingly received the Antiochene theological tradition and evolved into the Church of the East, a communion that cannot responsibly be reduced to the polemical label "Nestorian." Second, Chalcedon's Definition of 451 became normative for the imperial churches of Constantinople and Rome and for the traditions that later developed into Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Third, churches that rejected Chalcedon gradually consolidated into the family now called Oriental Orthodox, especially the Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Ethiopian traditions, with later Eritrean and Malankara expressions. Fourth, within the Chalcedonian Byzantine world, the eighth-century conflict over sacred images culminated at Nicaea II in 787, creating another major test of Scripture, tradition, imperial power, and conciliar authority.

The chapter's central argument is that the first enduring divisions of ancient Christianity cannot be explained by a single cause. Christological language mattered deeply, and some formulations did carry genuinely different theological implications. Yet the historical fractures also hardened because councils met under adversarial conditions, theological terms crossed imperfectly between Greek and Syriac conceptual worlds, rival episcopal centers competed for influence, emperors attempted to legislate communion, and communities came to remember one another through inherited anathemas. Modern ecumenical agreements have shown that some fifth-century polemics overstated differences, especially where each side now rejects both a division of Christ and a confusion of his natures. Historical clarification, however, must not erase the real disagreements over councils, authority, terminology, and devotional practice that still distinguish the communions.

The *Sola Scriptura* method used throughout this book therefore requires two disciplined steps. Historical claims must first be established from conciliar acts, letters, theological writings, East and West Syriac sources, imperial legislation, and modern scholarship. Only after those positions have been represented fairly should they be tested by Scripture. A council may formulate a truth that faithfully protects biblical teaching without thereby becoming an independent source of revelation. A later church may preserve an important truth while also carrying inherited practices that Scripture does not command. Conversely, the political misuse of a doctrine does not by itself make the doctrine false. The standard remains the prophetic and apostolic Word, centered on the one Jesus Christ who is truly God and truly man.

2. Sources, Chronology, and Method: Reading a Polemical Age Carefully

The source base for AD 431-787 is extensive but unusually contentious. The Council of Ephesus survives through a large dossier of letters, sermons, petitions, imperial rescripts, and conciliar records preserved in multiple collections. The modern translation by Price, with Graumann's historical introduction, is especially valuable because it presents the proceedings as a political as well as theological crisis and makes clear that Ephesus did not operate as a single harmonious meeting. Cyril's party opened proceedings before the Antiochene delegation arrived; John of Antioch later convened a rival assembly; imperial officials contested procedure; and the emperor initially attempted to discipline leading figures on both sides (Price & Graumann, 2020). The historical Ephesus was therefore messier than later retrospective summaries that simply list its doctrinal decisions.

The documentation for Chalcedon is even richer. The three-volume English translation of the acts by Price and Gaddis records not only theological speeches and the final Definition, but petitions, accusations, procedural conflicts, episcopal rivalries, and the imperial court's effort to create a durable settlement (Price & Gaddis, 2005). These acts allow the historian to distinguish the doctrinal content of Chalcedon from the politics of its reception. The council's famous four adverbs - without confusion, without change, without division, without separation - were intended to exclude both fusion and partition. Yet many opponents interpreted the formula "in two natures" as a retreat from Cyril's insistence on the unity of the incarnate Word. The controversy therefore cannot be reconstructed accurately by reading the Chalcedonian Definition alone.

East Syriac Christianity requires a separate evidentiary discipline. The Church of the East developed largely outside the Roman Empire under Sasanian rule, and its historical memory survives in synodical canons, later chronicles, liturgical texts, scholastic writings, and Syriac theological terminology that does not map neatly onto Greek categories. Modern scholarship has consequently rejected the routine use of "Nestorian Church" as though the communion were founded by Nestorius or simply reproduced a doctrine of two persons in Christ. Brock's influential critique called the label a lamentable misnomer, while subsequent scholarship has shown that the mature East Syriac tradition articulated one Christ and one Son while using its own technical language of nature, *qnoma*, and *parsopa* (Brock, 1996; Baum & Winkler, 2003; Wood, 2013). The label may

still appear in historical sources and older scholarship, but in this chapter it is used only when describing a historical accusation or self-conscious later reception of Nestorius.

The non-Chalcedonian traditions present a similar terminology problem. Older Western and Byzantine literature frequently called them "Monophysite," a term that can suggest that Christ's humanity was swallowed up or dissolved into divinity. That description fits Eutychian or other extreme forms of one-nature language better than it fits the mainstream Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Ethiopian traditions. Many theologians in these churches describe the inherited Christology as miaphysite, using Cyril's language of "one incarnate nature of God the Word" to confess a real union of complete divinity and complete humanity without mixture or separation. Modern official dialogues between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox theologians have explicitly condemned Eutychianism and recognized substantial Christological agreement, while leaving unresolved questions of conciliar reception, anathemas, ecclesiology, and full communion (Joint Commission, 1990).

The later sixth- and seventh-century controversies are documented through the acts of Constantinople II in 553, the Lateran Synod of 649, imperial edicts, writings associated with Maximus the Confessor, and the records of Constantinople III in 680-681. The icon controversy is reconstructed from iconophile writings, especially John of Damascus, hostile and sympathetic chronicles, the surviving fragments of iconoclast theology, and the acts of Nicaea II. Because many iconoclast writings survive only through their opponents, modern historians rightly warn against treating later iconophile narratives as transparent descriptions of the early eighth century (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011; Price, 2018).

Methodologically, four controls are essential. First, doctrinal labels are not allowed to substitute for description. The actual formulations used by Nestorius, Cyril, Chalcedon, Severus, East Syriac theologians, and icon defenders must be explained before labels are applied. Second, theological schools such as "Alexandrian" and "Antiochene" are used as heuristic descriptions of emphases rather than as rigid parties whose members all taught identical systems. Third, institutional genealogy is separated from doctrinal influence. The Church of the East did not suddenly secede from a Roman universal jurisdiction at Ephesus, and the Oriental Orthodox family did not appear as one fully organized transnational communion on the morning after Chalcedon. Fourth, later ecumenical agreements are used to illuminate how traditions now understand their inherited formulas, not to rewrite fifth-century actors into a consensus they did not themselves possess.

Table 1. Selected chronology of the first enduring Christian divisions, AD 424-787

Date / period	Development	Genealogical significance
424	Synod of Dadisho in the Persian church	Strengthens self-government east of the Roman Empire before Ephesus.
428	Nestorius becomes bishop of Constantinople	Theotokos dispute becomes an empire-wide Christological crisis.
431	Council of Ephesus	Cyrrillian assembly condemns Nestorius; rival Antiochene assembly condemns Cyril and Memnon.
433	Formula of Reunion	Cyril and John of Antioch reconcile through a confession of one Christ and union of two natures.
449	Second Council of Ephesus	Eutyches rehabilitated, Flavian deposed; later rejected by Chalcedonian reception.
451	Council of Chalcedon	Confesses one person in two natures; reception divides major eastern churches.
457	Alexandrian crisis after Marcian	Death of Proterius and rise of Timothy Aelurus deepen competing patriarchal lines.
482	Zeno issues the Henotikon	Imperial compromise avoids explicit Chalcedonian language but fails to reunite the churches.
484-519	Acacian Schism	Rome and Constantinople break communion over the Henotikon and related authority claims.
486-489	East Syriac doctrinal consolidation; Edessa school closes	Nisibis becomes a major center of Theodore-oriented East Syriac learning.
518	Justin I restores strict Chalcedonian policy	Non-Chalcedonian bishops and networks face renewed pressure; separate structures harden.
553	Second Council of Constantinople	Three Chapters condemned to interpret Chalcedon in a strongly Cyrillian direction.
c. 542-578	Episcopal ministry of Jacob Baradaeus	Extensive ordinations help sustain a durable Syriac non-Chalcedonian hierarchy.
638	Imperial Ekthesis	Promotes one-will Christology as a reunion strategy.
649	Lateran Synod	Condemns monothelitism and imperial formulas; Martin I and Maximus later suffer imperial punishment.
680-681	Third Council of Constantinople	Affirms two natural wills and operations in the one Christ.

Date / period	Development	Genealogical significance
691-692	Quinisext Council in Trullo	Canonical and liturgical differences further expose Greek-Latin divergence.
754	Council of Hieria	Iconoclast council condemns religious images and claims conciliar authority.
787	Second Council of Nicaea	Rejects iconoclasm and authorizes honorific veneration of icons while reserving latreia for God.

Note. Dates are exact where documented and approximate where a range or conventional turning point is indicated. Source: author synthesis from Price and Graumann (2020), Price and Gaddis (2005), Wood (2013), Menze (2008), Price (2009, 2014, 2018), and related sources cited in the chapter.

THE FIRST ENDURING CHRISTIAN DIVISIONS

Selected milestones, AD 424-787

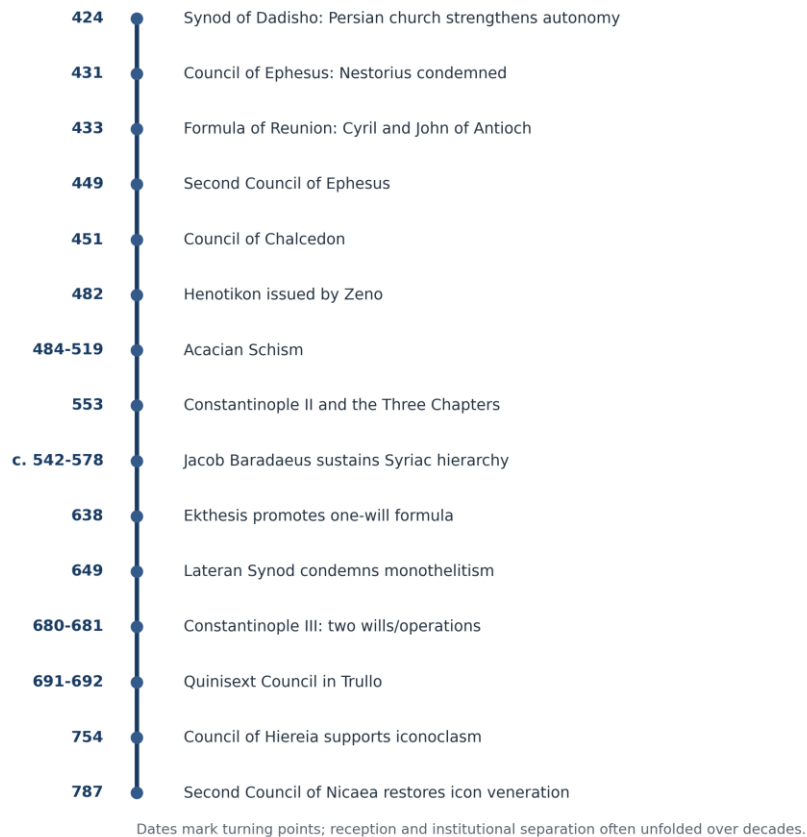


Figure 1. Selected milestones in the first enduring Christian divisions, AD 424-787.

Note. The timeline marks selected turning points rather than instantaneous changes; reception and institutional separation often unfolded over decades. Source: author synthesis from the chronology and sources cited in Table 1.

3. What Existed Immediately Before Ephesus: One Imperial Church, Several Theological Languages

At the opening of the fifth century, imperial Christianity possessed more institutional unity than it had two centuries earlier, but that unity was neither simple nor uniform. The bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem operated within overlapping structures of prestige, metropolitan authority, imperial law, monastic influence, and regional custom. Constantinople had risen rapidly because it was the imperial capital. Alexandria possessed a powerful episcopal tradition and deep monastic networks. Antioch stood at the intersection of Greek and Syriac Christianity and preserved a strong exegetical tradition associated with figures such as Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Rome possessed ancient prestige, Petrine associations, and increasing appellate claims. The church's language of unity therefore existed within a field of competing centers rather than under one uncontested administrative monarch.

The Trinitarian settlements of the fourth century had sharpened a further problem. Nicaea's confession that the Son is homoousios with the Father excluded the idea that the Son was a creature. Constantinople reinforced the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Apollinarius of Laodicea, however, had attempted to protect Christ's unity by teaching, in effect, that the divine

Word replaced the rational human mind in Jesus. His position was rejected because a humanity lacking a rational human soul or mind would not be complete humanity. Gregory of Nazianzus's famous principle, often paraphrased as "what is not assumed is not healed," expressed the soteriological logic: salvation requires the Word to assume full human nature, not a partial body animated by divine reason alone (Young & Teal, 2010).

This left theologians with a double obligation. They had to maintain the full deity of the eternal Word and the full reality of Christ's humanity while also maintaining that the Gospels speak of one Jesus Christ. Different theological traditions approached that obligation with different habits of speech. Writers associated with Antioch tended to stress the integrity of Christ's humanity, the historical particularity of Jesus, and the need not to attribute passibility or creaturely limitation directly to the divine nature. Writers associated with Alexandria tended to stress the unity of the incarnate subject and the saving fact that the one who was born, suffered in the flesh, and rose is none other than the divine Word. Both concerns could be biblically motivated. The danger at one extreme was division; at the other, confusion or incomplete humanity.

The political map also extended beyond Rome. Christians in the Sasanian Persian Empire had developed their own ecclesiastical structures centered increasingly on Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The Synod of 410 organized metropolitan relations under the *catholicos*, and the Synod of Dadisho in 424 strengthened the eastern church's independence from external appeals. That development had political as well as ecclesial logic. Persian Christians needed to demonstrate that they were not agents of the Roman enemy, especially when Roman emperors claimed Christian identity. By 431, therefore, a major Syriac-speaking Christian world already existed outside the effective jurisdiction of the Roman imperial councils (Wood, 2013; Payne, 2015). This fact is crucial: the later Church of the East trajectory cannot be described as though Nestorius founded a new denomination in Persia after his condemnation.

The stage for Ephesus was thus set by a convergence of problems. The church possessed a shared Nicene framework but lacked a universally settled technical vocabulary for the incarnation. Major sees had institutional interests. Greek terms were semantically flexible. Syriac equivalents carried different conceptual histories. Imperial government had become accustomed to treating episcopal conflict as a public-order problem. Theological debate could therefore move rapidly from a sermon in Constantinople to an empire-wide contest over doctrine, jurisdiction, and legitimacy.

4. Christological Vocabulary Before Ephesus: Why Words Could Heal or Divide

The central vocabulary of the controversy included *logos*, *ousia*, *physis*, *hypostasis*, and *prosopon*. None of these terms had one timeless meaning. *Logos* referred to the divine Word, drawing especially on the Gospel of John. *Ousia* could denote essence or substance. *Physis* usually means nature, but in patristic usage it could refer either to a set of natural properties or more concretely to an existing reality. *Hypostasis*, which fourth-century Trinitarian theology increasingly used for the distinct persons of Father, Son, and Spirit, could mean individual subsistence. *Prosopon* literally meant face or appearance and could function as a term for person, role, or concrete presentation. By the fifth century these terms had acquired technical uses, but they had not become perfectly interchangeable across authors and languages.

The language of "nature" was especially unstable. When a Chalcedonian theologian later said that Christ exists "in two natures," the intended meaning was that the properties of divinity and humanity remain real and unconfused within the one person. When Cyril used the formula "one incarnate nature of God the Word," he did not intend to deny Christ's humanity. He intended to identify the acting subject as the one Word who has truly become human. The formula itself came to Cyril through texts he believed Athanasian but which modern scholarship associates with Apollinarian circles, a fact that illustrates how patristic authority could transmit vocabulary through mistaken attribution (Grillmeier, 1975; McGuckin, 2004).

The Antiochene tradition's distinction between the divine and human realities of Christ was likewise motivated by serious concerns. Scripture can say that Jesus grew in wisdom, became tired, suffered, and died. The divine nature as divine does not grow, become ignorant, or die. If every Gospel predicate is attributed to divinity without distinction, Christian speech risks making God's eternal nature mutable and passible. Antiochene theologians therefore distinguished what belongs to the divine and human realities while seeking to maintain their conjunction in the one Christ. The weakness of some formulations was that the conjunction could sound too external, as though the divine Word and the man Jesus remained parallel subjects linked by honor, indwelling, or agreement.

This is where the *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of properties, became decisive. Christians had long read statements such as [Acts 20:28](#), in which the church is associated with God's blood in a textual tradition, and [1 Corinthians 2:8](#), where "the Lord of glory" is crucified. Such expressions do not mean that the divine nature as such has blood or can be crucified. They mean that the one person who is divine truly experienced suffering and death according to the humanity he

assumed. A mature Christology therefore needs both unity of subject and distinction of natures. The controversy was partly a struggle to find language capable of saying both without contradiction.

Translation magnified the difficulty. Syriac theological terms such as *kyana*, *qnoma*, and *parsopa* developed their own semantic fields. *Qnoma* is particularly difficult: in mature East Syriac usage it does not map mechanically onto the later Western category of a distinct "person," and scholars have described its force in terms of the concrete or individuated reality, or defining characteristic, of a nature. Translating *qnoma* simply as hypostasis or person can therefore make East Syriac Christology appear more divisive than its own theologians intended. Likewise, Greek *physis* could be heard differently by those formed in Cyril's usage and those formed in Chalcedonian usage. The ancient schisms were not merely translation mistakes, but translation problems multiplied genuine theological suspicions (Brock, 2024).

A further complication was that neither "Alexandrian" nor "Antiochene" should be treated as a denominational label. Alexandria itself contained different strands, and theologians associated with Antioch did not all use Theodore of Mopsuestia's categories in the same way. The schools describe recurring emphases rather than sealed confessional parties. Antiochene exegesis often preferred the historical and grammatical sense of biblical passages and guarded the integrity of Christ's humanity. Alexandrian exegesis more readily emphasized the unity of the divine economy and the single identity of the Word who acts through the assumed humanity. When controversy sharpened, each side could read the other's protective distinction as a theological denial. The resulting polarization made formulas carry more weight than their authors sometimes intended.

The term *Theotokos* illustrates this dynamic especially well. Taken literally and without explanation, "Mother of God" can be misunderstood as though Mary generated the divine nature or existed before the eternal Son. Neither Cyril nor the mainstream conciliar tradition meant that. The term was a rule about the identity of the one born from her: the person born according to the flesh is the same eternal Word who is God. Conversely, rejecting the title did not automatically mean denying Christ's deity. Nestorius's fear centered on what predication does to the distinction between divinity and humanity. The conflict became explosive because a technically Christological question was carried by a devotional title already important to ordinary Christians.

Table 2. Key Christological vocabulary and the danger of false equivalence

Term	Basic sense in the controversies	Why translation matters
Logos	The divine Word, especially in Johannine usage.	Identifies the eternal Son as the subject of the incarnation.
Ousia	Essence or substance.	Fourth-century Trinitarian usage does not solve fifth-century questions of person and nature by itself.
Physis	Nature; sometimes the concrete reality possessing natural properties.	Cyril and Chalcedon can use the word with different emphases, making "one" and "two" formulas sound more contradictory than intended.
Hypostasis	Concrete subsistence; increasingly "person" in pro-Nicene theology.	Its semantic history differs from Syriac terms often used to translate it.
Prosopon	Face, presentation, or person.	Can name personal unity, but in some contexts opponents feared it described only an external conjunction.
Theotokos	God-bearer / Mother of God.	A Christological title about the identity of the one born, not a claim that Mary originated the divine nature.
Kyana	East Syriac term normally rendered nature.	Belongs to a Syriac conceptual system rather than a mechanical copy of Greek <i>physis</i> .
Qnoma	A difficult East Syriac term for the concrete or individuated reality, or defining characteristic, of a nature.	It does not map mechanically onto the modern English word "person"; oversimplified translation can falsely imply two personal Christs.
Parsopa	Personal appearance or concrete person in East Syriac usage.	Used to confess the one Christ in whom divine and human realities are united.

Note. Technical terms changed meaning across authors and languages. Definitions identify typical usage in this controversy, not universal lexical equivalence. Source: synthesis from McGuckin (2004), Brock (1996, 2024), and Baum and Winkler (2003).

5. Nestorius, Cyril, and the Theotokos Controversy

Nestorius became bishop of Constantinople in 428 after serving as a monk and preacher in the Antiochene milieu. His appointment placed a theologian shaped by Antiochene concerns in one of the most politically sensitive sees in the empire. Soon after his arrival, a controversy arose over the title *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary. The Greek term literally means "God-bearer" and is conventionally rendered "Mother of God." It had been used before Nestorius and was popular in devotion. For

many Christians, the title protected the conviction that the child born from Mary was not a merely human person later joined to God, but the incarnate Word himself.

Nestorius objected to the title when used without qualification. He preferred *Christotokos*, "Mother of Christ," or language that explicitly distinguished what belongs to Christ's humanity from what belongs to divinity. His concern was not that Jesus Christ lacked divinity. Nor did he straightforwardly teach that Christians worship two sons. He feared language that seemed to imply that the eternal divine nature began to exist, was born, suffered, or died. In his surviving writings, especially the later Bazaar of Heraclides, Nestorius repeatedly insists on one Christ while defending a distinction of divine and human realities. Modern scholarship therefore treats the classic accusation that Nestorius simply taught "two persons" with caution, even while recognizing that some of his formulations left the unity of subject insufficiently clear (Nestorius, 1925; Wessel, 2004; McGuckin, 2004).

Cyril of Alexandria saw the matter differently. For him, salvation depended on the identity of the incarnate subject. The one born from Mary is the eternal Word in the flesh; the one who suffers is the same divine Son suffering according to his humanity. If the humanity belongs to another personal subject alongside the Word, the Gospel is divided. Cyril therefore defended *Theotokos* as a Christological, not merely Marian, title. Mary is not the source of the divine nature and does not precede God. Rather, the person to whom she gave birth according to the flesh is God the Word incarnate. This logic allowed Cyril to say that the impassible Word suffered in the flesh without claiming that divinity itself was damaged or changed.

The controversy soon became larger than the title. Cyril wrote to Nestorius, appealed to Rome, and obtained support from Pope Celestine I. A Roman synod in 430 authorized Cyril to demand Nestorius's recantation. Cyril then issued his famous Twelve Anathemas, which condemned formulations he regarded as dividing Christ. Nestorius and the Antiochene bishops objected that Cyril's language could collapse the distinction between divinity and humanity and revive Apollinarian tendencies. The dispute therefore hardened into reciprocal fear: Alexandria suspected Antioch of dividing the Savior; Antioch suspected Alexandria of confusing the natures.

Personal and institutional factors intensified the crisis. Alexandria and Constantinople were already rivals for influence. Cyril was an experienced and formidable ecclesiastical politician. Nestorius had quickly made enemies in Constantinople through his disciplinary style and interventions in other disputes. Monks, clergy, court figures, and imperial officials became involved. Pulcheria, the emperor's influential sister, appears in later sources as an opponent of Nestorius, though the exact role of court factions must be reconstructed carefully rather than reduced to personality. The theological dispute was real, but it became inseparable from the mechanisms by which late antique bishops mobilized networks and imperial patronage (Wessel, 2004; Price & Graumann, 2020).

The strongest reading of the conflict therefore avoids two caricatures. Nestorius was not merely a rationalist who denied the incarnation, and Cyril was not merely a political operator who invented Marian devotion. Both were trying to preserve aspects of biblical confession. Nestorius rightly insisted that Christ's humanity must be real and that divinity does not change into creaturely passibility. Cyril rightly insisted that the Gospels present one acting subject, the eternal Son incarnate, rather than a partnership of two sons. The failure lay partly in formulas that did not reassure the other side, partly in escalating ecclesiastical politics, and partly in the conciliar process that followed.

Cyril's Second Letter to Nestorius became particularly important because it tied Christological grammar directly to salvation. Cyril did not imagine the Word changing into flesh or ceasing to be what he eternally is. Rather, the Word personally appropriated a complete human existence so that the same Son could be spoken of according to either nature. His Third Letter, accompanied by the Twelve Anathemas, sharpened the conflict by condemning statements that treated Emmanuel as a God-bearing man distinct from the Word or divided Gospel predicates between separate subjects. The anathemas protected the identity of the incarnate Son, but their uncompromising form alarmed many eastern bishops who thought Cyril was suppressing necessary distinctions. The later history of the controversy cannot be understood unless both dimensions are held together: Cyril supplied a powerful account of personal unity, and his polemical instruments also made reconciliation harder (McGuckin, 2004; Price & Graumann, 2020).

Nestorius's own preaching likewise needs contextual reading. He objected not only to *Theotokos* but also to what he considered careless interchange of predicates. When he spoke of a "conjunction" or used *prosopon* language, he intended to confess the unity in which divine and human realities are worshiped together. His critics believed the logic still left two centers of attribution. The argument was therefore not simply over whether Christ is one, since both sides could say that he is one. It concerned what kind of unity "one Christ" names and whether the human experiences narrated in the Gospels belong personally to the eternal Son. That is why later ecumenical dialogue has been able to discover substantial common ground while historians still acknowledge a real fifth-century dispute.

Rome's intervention added another layer. Celestine I's support for Cyril did not mean that the Roman see managed the controversy as an uncontested universal court. Eastern bishops still acted through imperial and conciliar procedures, and the emperor summoned the council. Yet Rome's judgment supplied Cyril with major ecclesiastical leverage and became part of the later Roman memory of papal authority. Ephesus thus contributed not only to Christology but also to the evolving question of how episcopal sees, emperors, and councils related when the church sought a binding doctrinal decision.

6. The Council of Ephesus, AD 431: A Council That Never Fully Met as One Assembly

Emperor Theodosius II summoned a council to Ephesus for Pentecost 431 in the hope of restoring peace. Ephesus was symbolically potent because of its strong Marian associations in later Christian memory and because it was accessible to the eastern episcopate. Cyril arrived with a large Egyptian delegation. Nestorius was present with supporters. John of Antioch and the Syrian bishops were delayed, probably for logistical reasons that were interpreted suspiciously by their opponents. The imperial representative, Count Candidian, urged delay until the Antiochenes arrived.

Cyril nevertheless opened proceedings on 22 June. Nestorius refused the council's summons, arguing that the full episcopal body had not assembled and that the meeting was procedurally illegitimate. After repeated summonses, the Cyrillian assembly examined earlier correspondence, read the Nicene Creed, heard patristic testimonies, and deposed Nestorius. Crowds in Ephesus reportedly celebrated the decision. When John of Antioch arrived several days later, he convened a counter-council with his supporters, condemned Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus, and accused them of disorder and heresy. The city thus contained rival assemblies, each claiming conciliar legitimacy (Price & Graumann, 2020).

Papal legates arrived after Cyril's assembly had already acted. They supported the condemnation of Nestorius and affirmed the proceedings. Imperial officials, however, were confronted with competing claims and escalating disorder. Theodosius II at one point confirmed the deposition of Nestorius, Cyril, and Memnon, placing the leading antagonists under guard. Political lobbying in Constantinople continued intensely. Eventually Cyril was allowed to return to Alexandria, Nestorius was removed from Constantinople, and the Cyrillian assembly's condemnation became the decision received by the imperial church as the Council of Ephesus.

Ephesus is therefore a crucial case for understanding conciliar authority. Later Christian traditions rightly ask what the council taught, but the historian must also ask how that teaching was reached. The council did not simply gather all sides, hear them in common session, and produce consensus. Its enduring authority emerged through reception after rival proceedings. This does not by itself invalidate its Christological insight, but it demonstrates that conciliar truth claims cannot be reduced to an idealized picture of procedural unanimity. The church received a decision through a process that was politically contested from the beginning.

The council's first session is especially revealing. Cyril's assembly treated Nestorius's repeated failure to appear as contumacy and proceeded by comparing his teaching with the Nicene Creed and with Cyril's correspondence. Candidian protested that the emperor had expected the bishops to deliberate together and attempted to prevent recognition of the session. His protest did not stop the Cyrillian bishops, and the crowd's public celebration after Nestorius's deposition demonstrates that Christological controversy had become a matter of urban religious identity, not merely episcopal technicality. The arrival of John's delegation did not create a second phase of a single council but a competing conciliar claim. John accused Cyril and Memnon of procedural abuse and declared them deposed. For a time the empire therefore possessed two bodies at Ephesus, each invoking Nicene orthodoxy and imperial legitimacy against the other.

Theodosius II's response reveals the ambiguity of imperial supervision. Rather than immediately selecting one party, the court attempted to contain disorder, gather reports, and pressure the protagonists toward settlement. Representatives traveled between Ephesus and Constantinople; court officials, clergy, monks, and aristocratic patrons lobbied intensely. Cyril's eventual release and Nestorius's removal were political decisions intertwined with theological reception. The result that later generations call "the Council of Ephesus" is therefore the received Cyrillian council, not a neutral record of an uncontested assembly. That historical fact should encourage humility when later Christians appeal to councils as though procedure itself guaranteed truth.

The council also mattered for the relation between creed and interpretation. Ephesus defended the Nicene Creed as sufficient and rejected the creation of a rival faith, yet it simultaneously judged competing interpretations of that creed. This is a recurring feature of doctrinal history. A shared text does not eliminate hermeneutical conflict. Christians may repeat the same creed while attaching different meanings to "one Lord," "incarnate," or "became human." Ephesus therefore strengthened both the authority of Nicaea and the practical importance of authoritative interpretation.

Doctrinally, Ephesus protected the unity of Christ and affirmed the legitimacy of calling Mary Theotokos when the title is understood Christologically. It also elevated Cyril's second letter to Nestorius and associated theological materials as authoritative guides. Yet the council did not settle the full vocabulary of the incarnation. The Antiochenes continued to fear that Cyril's Twelve Anathemas endangered the distinction of natures. A reconciliation had to be negotiated after the council.

That reconciliation came in 433 through the Formula of Reunion associated with Cyril and John of Antioch. The formula confessed one Lord Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man, consubstantial with the Father according to divinity and consubstantial with humanity according to humanity. It spoke of a union of two natures and affirmed Theotokos because God the Word became incarnate and united humanity to himself. Cyril accepted this language, showing that his one-nature formula was not intended to abolish the reality of the divinity and humanity from which the union was formed. The Formula of Reunion became one of the most important bridges between Alexandrian and Antiochene concerns and later provided material that Chalcedon would receive (Price & Graumann, 2020).

Nestorius himself did not regain office. He was exiled, eventually to the Great Oasis in Egypt, and became a paradigmatic heretic in Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian memory. Yet later discovery and study of the Bazaar of Heraclides complicated the inherited portrait. Some scholars have argued that Nestorius's mature language lies closer to Chalcedon than his enemies admitted; others emphasize persistent differences in his account of prosopic union. The safest conclusion is that the historical Nestorius cannot be equated without remainder with the later stereotype of "Nestorianism," even though his formulations contributed to a real crisis over the unity of Christ (Nestorius, 1925; Wessel, 2004; Brock, 1996, 2024).

7. East of the Roman Empire: The Church of the East and the Limits of the "Nestorian" Label

7.1 An autonomous Persian church before Ephesus

The Church of the East is one of the clearest examples of why Christian genealogy must distinguish doctrinal influence from institutional descent. Christianity had existed in Mesopotamia and the Persian Empire long before Nestorius became bishop of Constantinople. Christians in this region lived under the Arsacid and then Sasanian empires, used Syriac as a major ecclesiastical language, and developed centers at Edessa, Nisibis, Arbela, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Their political environment differed sharply from that of Roman Christianity. Once Roman emperors became Christian, Persian rulers could suspect Christians of sympathizing with a geopolitical rival, even though the intensity and causes of persecution varied across reigns and regions (Payne, 2015).

The Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, held under Catholicos Isaac, regularized metropolitan organization and acknowledged the leading role of the see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In 424 the Synod of Dadisho declared that the eastern catholicos would not be subject to appeals to western ecclesiastical authorities. The precise interpretation of that act is debated, but institutionally it meant that the Persian church had asserted a high degree of self-government before the controversy over Nestorius erupted in the Roman Empire. Its later non-reception of Ephesus therefore reinforced an existing ecclesiastical trajectory rather than creating independence ex nihilo (Wood, 2013; Baum & Winkler, 2003).

7.2 Theodore of Mopsuestia, Edessa, Nisibis, and East Syriac theological formation

The most influential Antiochene theologian for the Church of the East was not Nestorius but Theodore of Mopsuestia, who died in 428 before Ephesus. Theodore's biblical commentaries and Christological distinctions were translated into Syriac and became central to East Syriac theological education. The School of Edessa served as an important intellectual bridge. After Emperor Zeno closed the pro-Persian or "Persian" school at Edessa in 489, many teachers moved into Sasanian territory, especially to Nisibis, strengthening the East Syriac reception of Theodore's theology.

Synods in the late fifth century increasingly articulated a dyophysite Christology. The Synod of 486 under Catholicos Acacius used language of two natures in Christ while maintaining one object of worship. Later theologians, especially Babai the Great in the early seventh century, developed the classical East Syriac formula of two kyane or natures and two qnome united in one parsopa of Christ. Qnome should not be translated automatically as a separate person; in this technical setting it names a reality of the nature without creating a second personal subject alongside Christ. Parsopa names the one personal manifestation or identity of the incarnate Christ. Babai's theology was designed to maintain both full divinity and full humanity while insisting that there is one Christ and Son (Brock, 1996, 2024; Baum & Winkler, 2003).

This does not mean that all differences with Cyrillian or Chalcedonian traditions were merely verbal. East Syriac authors could speak more cautiously about Theotokos and more strongly about the integrity of the natures than Alexandrian authors preferred. They also received Theodore of Mopsuestia with exceptional authority even after he was condemned at

Constantinople II in 553. Yet the tradition's mature confession is not accurately described as belief in two Christs. Modern dialogue has made that point explicit. The 1994 Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East confessed one Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, whose divinity and humanity are united in one person "without confusion or change, without division or separation," while recognizing the legitimacy of differing Marian expressions (John Paul II & Dinkha IV, 1994).

7.3 Mission across Asia: from Mesopotamia to India and China

The Church of the East's eastward expansion did not begin as a centralized campaign launched after the fifth-century controversies. It grew from older Mesopotamian Christian networks, the mobility of merchants and clergy, monastic foundations, schools, and episcopal structures that could be extended along commercial corridors. The autonomous political setting of the Sasanian church also meant that mission was not tied to Byzantine territorial expansion. This combination of ecclesiastical self-government, Syriac literary culture, and transregional mobility allowed East Syriac Christianity to cross political frontiers with unusual flexibility (Baum & Winkler, 2003; Wood, 2013).

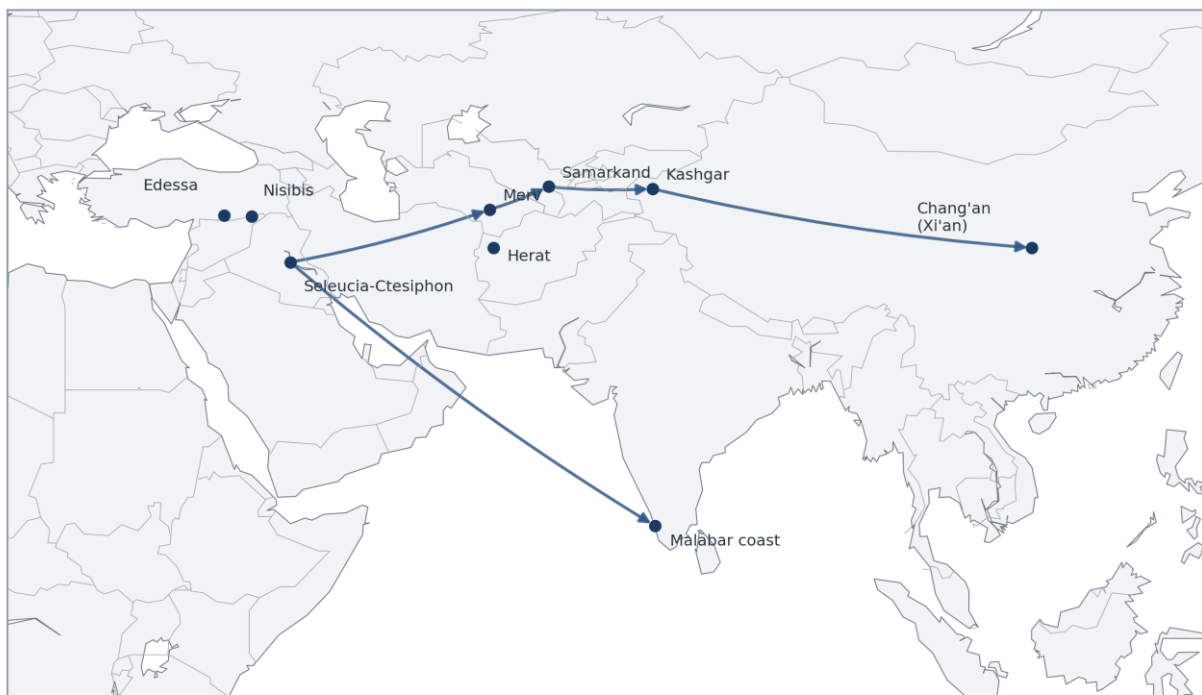
Missionary expansion required translation and cultural adaptation as well as travel. Syriac remained the liturgical and scholarly core, but Christian texts and theological vocabulary moved into Iranian, Sogdian, Turkic, and eventually Chinese environments. Local churches were connected by bishops, monasteries, schools, correspondence, and liturgical books rather than by a single missionary agency. Their relationship to the patriarchal center varied with distance and political circumstance, producing a transregional ecclesial network rather than a modern territorially centralized denomination.

Within this network, East Syriac dioceses and monasteries spread through Iran to Merv, Herat, Transoxiana, and Central Asia, reaching Iranian and Turkic peoples. The East Syriac tradition also maintained long-standing ties with Christians in India. The precise beginnings of Indian Christianity remain historically difficult to reconstruct, and later apostolic traditions cannot by themselves establish a first-century institutional genealogy. By the later first millennium, however, East Syriac bishops and metropolitan structures are securely connected with the Saint Thomas Christian communities of the Malabar coast (Baum & Winkler, 2003).

The missionary network was sustained by bishops, monks, merchants, schools, and liturgical books moving through an interconnected Persian and Central Asian world. Merv became an important metropolitan center; Christian communities appeared in Sogdiana and among Turkic peoples; Syriac texts were translated or adapted into local languages; and monasteries functioned as nodes of worship, education, hospitality, and cultural exchange. The church's expansion did not occur under one centralized missionary board. It spread through overlapping ecclesiastical and commercial networks, often under non-Christian rulers, and it learned to express Christian teaching in culturally diverse settings while preserving East Syriac liturgy.

The most famous evidence for the church's presence in China is the Xi'an Stele, erected in 781. It commemorates the arrival of a monk usually rendered Alopen in the Tang capital Chang'an in 635 and describes imperial recognition, translation activity, monasteries, and the "Luminous Religion" in China. The stele does not prove that Alopen was the first Christian ever to enter China, but it provides secure evidence for an organized East Syriac mission in the seventh and eighth centuries. The church's Asian reach is therefore not a later romantic legend. It was a historically substantial missionary expansion that stretched Christian networks far beyond the Mediterranean world.

CHURCH OF THE EAST: SELECTED CENTERS AND EASTWARD ROUTES



Schematic educational map. Routes indicate broad missionary and ecclesiastical movement, not a single journey or one-date boundary.

Figure 2. Church of the East: selected centers and eastward missionary routes.

Note. The map is schematic and shows selected centers and broad directions of movement rather than simultaneous jurisdictional boundaries. Modern geographic outlines are used only for orientation. Source: author synthesis from Baum and Winkler (2003), Wood (2013), and Brock (2024).

7.4 Later descendants of the East Syriac tradition

The medieval Church of the East later experienced severe demographic contraction and institutional fragmentation through warfare, political upheaval, changing patronage, and the disruption of older Christian centers. In the sixteenth century, disputed patriarchal succession contributed to Catholic and non-Catholic lines and to the eventual consolidation of the Chaldean Catholic Church. The East Syriac inheritance of Indian Christianity survives prominently in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, while the Assyrian Church of the East also maintains an Indian jurisdiction. In the twentieth century, the division that began in 1964 produced the Ancient Church of the East as a separate non-Catholic body. Recent scholarship accordingly identifies several modern ecclesial continuations of the East Syriac heritage rather than one institution that can simply be equated with the whole premodern Church of the East (Brock, 2024).

These later branches should not be projected backward into 431. The fifth-century church in Persia was not yet the Assyrian Church of the East in its modern institutional form, nor was it a Protestant-like denomination created by rejecting a Roman pope. It was an ancient Syriac Christian network living in a different empire, already developing autonomous structures, and later consolidating a distinctive Christological and liturgical tradition. Its story demonstrates that the genealogy of Christian division is not a single tree with Rome as the necessary trunk of every branch.

8. From Ephesus to Chalcedon, AD 433-451: A Reconciliation That Did Not Remove Suspicion

The Formula of Reunion in 433 restored communion between Cyril and John of Antioch, but it did not eliminate deeper tensions. Cyril's authority remained enormous in Alexandria and among theologians who emphasized the unity of the incarnate Word. Antiochene theologians continued to defend the legitimacy of distinguishing the divine and human realities. After Cyril's death in 444, the personal relationship that had sustained the reunion disappeared. A new controversy soon revealed how differently each side interpreted the boundaries of acceptable language.

Eutyches, an elderly and influential archimandrite in Constantinople, became the immediate catalyst. In 448 a local synod under Flavian of Constantinople examined his teaching. Eutyches insisted strongly on the unity of Christ after the incarnation

and was reluctant to confess that Christ is consubstantial with humanity in the same sense that he is consubstantial with the Father. The exact content of his position is difficult to reconstruct because it is preserved largely through hostile proceedings, but his language raised the suspicion that Christ's humanity had been absorbed, altered, or rendered less than fully consubstantial with ours. Flavian's synod condemned and deposed him (Price & Gaddis, 2005).

Eutyches appealed beyond Constantinople and found support from Dioscorus, Cyril's successor as bishop of Alexandria. The controversy drew in Leo I of Rome, who wrote his *Tome* to Flavian. Leo's letter confessed one person of Christ in two forms or natures, each acting according to what is proper to it in communion with the other. The *Tome*'s logic strongly protected both unity of person and integrity of natures, but Alexandrian opponents could hear its distribution of actions as dangerously close to Antiochene division.

Emperor Theodosius II summoned another council at Ephesus in 449. Dioscorus presided. The proceedings rehabilitated Eutyches, deposed Flavian and other opponents, and did not allow Leo's *Tome* the hearing its supporters expected. Flavian was physically mistreated amid the tumult and died shortly afterward, though sources differ on the direct relationship between the violence and his death. Leo denounced the council as a *latrocinium*, a "robber" council, a polemical name that permanently shaped its reputation in Chalcedonian traditions.

The controversy also sharpened the role of Leo of Rome. The *Tome* was not a stand-alone new creed. It interpreted the incarnation by stressing that the one person of Christ acts according to the properties of each nature: the Word does what belongs to the Word and the flesh what belongs to the flesh, without dividing the person. This formulation would later be acclaimed at Chalcedon as consonant with Cyril, but that reception itself required argument. The famous acclamation "Peter has spoken through Leo" belongs to the council's reception of the *Tome* and should not be lifted from its context as though every eastern bishop thereby accepted later maximal claims of papal jurisdiction.

The events of 449 also reveal how violence and procedural control could damage theological credibility. Imperial officers, monks, bishops, and rival delegations operated under intense pressure. The failure to give Leo's *Tome* the expected reading, the rapid rehabilitation of Eutyches, and the humiliation of Flavian allowed Chalcedonian memory to portray the gathering as the antithesis of proper conciliar deliberation. Anti-Chalcedonian traditions, however, did not simply accept Eutyches as their theological standard. Later miaphysite theologians explicitly rejected the idea that Christ's humanity was absorbed or unreal. The genealogical line from Dioscorus to later Oriental Orthodoxy must therefore not be collapsed into Eutychianism.

The political situation changed abruptly in 450 when Theodosius II died. His sister Pulcheria returned to prominence and married Marcian, who became emperor. The new regime reversed the previous court's support for Dioscorus and authorized a fresh council. The result was Chalcedon, convened in 451 across the Bosphorus from Constantinople. The move from Ephesus 449 to Chalcedon 451 illustrates a recurring pattern of imperial Christianity: doctrinal reception could turn dramatically with a change of emperor, court coalition, and episcopal alignment. That fact did not make the theological issues unreal, but it made institutional settlement inseparable from political power.

9. The Council of Chalcedon, AD 451: One Christ "in Two Natures"

Chalcedon was among the largest episcopal gatherings of antiquity, with attendance dominated by eastern bishops and imperial officials exercising strong procedural influence. The council reviewed the events of 449, rehabilitated Flavian's memory, deposed Dioscorus, and examined the doctrinal writings of Cyril and Leo. Contrary to later simplifications, Dioscorus was not deposed merely because he repeated Cyril's one-nature formula. Procedural accusations, his refusal to appear when summoned, his role at Ephesus 449, and wider ecclesiastical conflicts all contributed. The doctrinal reception of his legacy nevertheless became inseparable from the later anti-Chalcedonian movement (Price & Gaddis, 2005).

The council initially hesitated over composing a new doctrinal definition, in part because Ephesus had prohibited rival creeds and because many bishops believed the Nicene faith and authoritative letters already sufficed. Imperial commissioners pressed for a formula capable of resolving the controversy. The resulting Definition received the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople, Cyril's letters, and Leo's *Tome* as consonant witnesses. Its most famous passage confesses "one and the same Son, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity," consubstantial with the Father according to divinity and consubstantial with us according to humanity, "acknowledged in two natures" without confusion, change, division, or separation, the distinction of natures not abolished by the union but their properties preserved in one person and one hypostasis (Price & Gaddis, 2005).

The four negative adverbs were the theological center of the settlement. "Without confusion" and "without change" rejected any fusion in which humanity ceases to be fully human or divinity changes into creaturely existence. "Without division" and "without separation" rejected a partnership of independent subjects. The language therefore sought to preserve the strongest

concerns of both Alexandrian and Antiochene traditions. Chalcedon's one person or hypostasis is the eternal Son; the two natures are not two sons, but the complete divine and human realities united in him.

The formula "in two natures" nevertheless became the point of greatest resistance. Many Egyptian and Syrian Christians believed that after the union, speaking of Christ *in* two natures implied a conceptual separation that Cyril had rejected. They preferred "from two natures" and the Cyrillian phrase "one incarnate nature of God the Word." Chalcedon's defenders argued that "in two natures" was necessary precisely to protect continuing full humanity and full divinity after the union. Opponents feared a Nestorianizing division; defenders feared an Eutychian confusion. Both claimed Cyril, but they interpreted the boundaries of Cyrillian language differently.

The council's sessions also demonstrate how theological judgment was embedded in a legal-administrative environment. Imperial commissioners controlled much of the order of business, insisted on hearings, and pressed the bishops toward a definition acceptable to the new regime. The council did not simply rubber-stamp the court, since bishops protested and negotiated, but the emperor's representatives possessed a procedural authority unimaginable at Nicaea's pre-imperial antecedents. The boundaries between ecclesial deliberation and imperial administration had become structurally intertwined.

Chalcedon's treatment of Eutyches, Dioscorus, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Ibas of Edessa reveals the difficulty of converting theological coalitions into a single formula. Theodoret, long opposed to Cyril, was required to anathematize Nestorius before full rehabilitation. Ibas's case likewise showed how personal orthodoxy, contested letters, and episcopal politics overlapped. These cases later became central to the Three Chapters controversy because anti-Chalcedonians argued that Chalcedon had effectively vindicated Nestorianizing figures. Defenders replied that Chalcedon had required acceptance of the one-person Christology and had not canonized every earlier opinion of those bishops.

Chalcedon also made major institutional decisions. Canon 28 granted Constantinople equal privileges with Old Rome while assigning it second place, grounding those privileges in Constantinople's status as New Rome and imperial capital. Roman legates protested, and Leo rejected the canon even while accepting the council's Christological Definition. This dispute is highly significant for the genealogy of later East-West separation. It shows that before 1054, Rome and Constantinople were already operating with different principles for ecclesiastical precedence. Rome increasingly appealed to Petrine authority; Constantinople's rise was defended in part through imperial geography. Chapter 5 will follow that conflict further (Price & Gaddis, 2005).

Table 3. Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451): questions, decisions, and consequences

Dimension	Ephesus, AD 431	Chalcedon, AD 451
Immediate trigger	Conflict over Nestorius, Cyril, Theotokos, and the unity of the incarnate Son.	Reaction to Eutyches, Dioscorus, Ephesus 449, and dispute over Leo's Tome.
Central question	Is the one born from Mary the divine Word himself incarnate, or is the union described in a way that risks two subjects?	How can the one Christ remain fully divine and fully human after the union without fusion or division?
Decisive doctrinal accent	Unity of the incarnate subject; Theotokos accepted as a Christological safeguard.	One and the same Son acknowledged in two natures, without confusion/change/division/separation.
Procedural problem	Cyril opens before John of Antioch arrives; rival council follows; imperial court initially disciplines leaders on both sides.	Imperial commissioners strongly manage proceedings; prior council of 449 is reviewed and reversed.
Institutional effect	Nestorius deposed; Antiochene-Cyrrillian reconciliation required in 433; East Syriac trajectory later diverges further.	Durable divide between Chalcedonian churches and non-Chalcedonian trajectories in Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia and elsewhere.
Later reception	Third ecumenical council for Chalcedonian and Oriental Orthodox traditions; not received in the same way by the Church of the East.	Fourth ecumenical council for Chalcedonian traditions; rejected by Oriental Orthodox communions.

Note. Both councils were followed by complex reception. The table distinguishes doctrinal content from procedural and genealogical consequences. Source: synthesis from Price and Graumann (2020) and Price and Gaddis (2005).

GENEALOGY OF THE FIRST ENDURING DIVISIONS

Institutional descent, reception, and later communion are not identical categories.

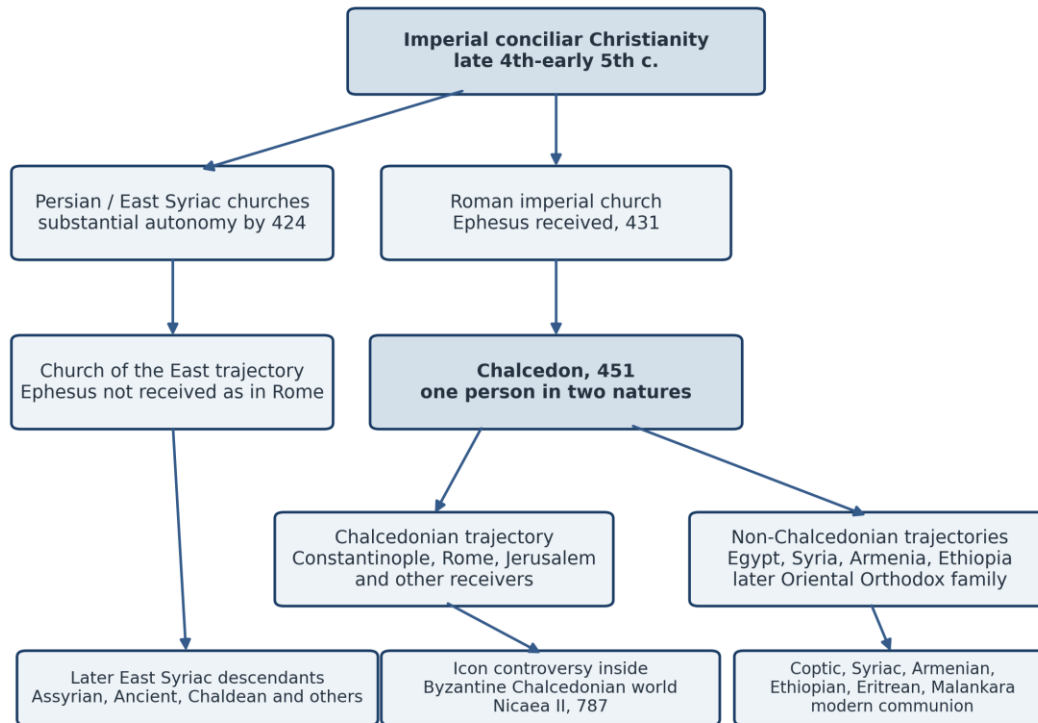


Figure 3. Genealogy of the first enduring Christian divisions.

Note. Institutional autonomy, doctrinal influence, conciliar reception, and later denominational forms are not treated as identical genealogical categories. Source: author synthesis from Wood (2013), Baum and Winkler (2003), Menze (2008), and Brock (2024).

10. Why Chalcedon Produced an Enduring Fracture

Chalcedon did not create a single, instantly organized anti-Chalcedonian denomination. Its rejection unfolded differently across regions. In Egypt, the Alexandrian church was deeply attached to Cyril's theological legacy and suspicious of any formula that seemed to rehabilitate Antiochene language. The deposition of Dioscorus became a symbol of imperial and Constantinopolitan interference. In Syria, monastic networks and theologians such as Severus of Antioch later articulated sophisticated non-Chalcedonian theology. Armenia confronted the controversy through its own Persian-Roman political pressures and did not participate directly in Chalcedon; its formal rejection matured in sixth-century councils. Ethiopia remained ecclesiastically linked to Alexandria and came to share the anti-Chalcedonian orientation of the Coptic church. None of these trajectories can be reduced to one cause.

10.1 Doctrine: real disagreement, overlapping intentions

The theological disagreement was genuine. Chalcedonians insisted that the distinction of divine and human natures remains after the incarnation. Non-Chalcedonians feared that this language made the union conceptual rather than real. Yet both mainstream traditions rejected two opposite errors: neither wanted two Sons, and neither wanted Christ's humanity dissolved into divinity. Severus of Antioch, one of the most important later non-Chalcedonian theologians, explicitly rejected Eutyches and affirmed complete humanity. The term "monophysite" therefore misleads when it is used as though all opponents of Chalcedon believed in one simple divine-human nature produced by absorption.

Modern dialogues have confirmed this overlap. The 1990 Second Agreed Statement between representatives of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox families jointly condemned Eutychianism and Nestorianism, confessed Christ as perfect God and perfect man, and acknowledged that the two families use different traditional formulas while intending to protect the same mystery of union (Joint Commission, 1990). This does not prove that the fifth-century dispute was only semantic. Historical actors attached different implications to formulas, and the reception of councils remains an ecclesiological issue. It does show that later polemical labels often exaggerate the distance between the mature doctrinal self-understandings of the two families.

10.2 Language and conceptual translation

Greek terminology created one set of problems; translation into Syriac, Armenian, and other languages created more. A term like *physis* could carry Cyrillian or Chalcedonian senses depending on context. Syriac translators had to decide how to render hypostasis, nature, and person using terms with their own histories. The same formula could therefore sound orthodox in one conceptual system and dangerously divisive or confused in another. Language did not generate the whole schism, but it made mutual reassurance far more difficult.

These translation problems mattered because conciliar formulas and polemical dossiers moved between languages after they had already acquired juridical and devotional weight. A Greek phrase received in Syriac or Armenian was therefore not merely a dictionary problem; it arrived embedded in memories of condemned bishops, rival councils, and disputed saints. The historian must distinguish semantic non-equivalence from substantive doctrinal disagreement. Where communities clearly rejected both division and confusion, lexical difference can explain part of the conflict; where they disagreed over councils, anathemas, or the continuing distinction of natures, translation alone cannot explain the rupture (Brock, 2024; Grillmeier & Hainthaler, 1996).

10.3 Jurisdiction and the rivalry of sees

Chalcedon also redistributed ecclesiastical honor. Alexandria lost the extraordinary influence it had exercised under Cyril and Dioscorus, while Constantinople's status rose. To Egyptian opponents, doctrinal defeat and institutional displacement occurred together. Yet it would be too simple to say that Egypt rejected Chalcedon merely out of national resentment against Greeks. Greek-speaking Egyptians themselves were divided, and anti-Chalcedonian conviction was deeply theological. The best explanation treats jurisdictional rivalry as a force that intensified and institutionalized doctrinal disagreement rather than replacing it (Frend, 1972; Grillmeier & Hainthaler, 1996).

Canon 28 made the jurisdictional dimension unusually explicit by grounding Constantinople's privileges in its status as New Rome. Rome's legates opposed the canon and Leo refused to confirm it, while eastern reception preserved Constantinople's elevated rank. The dispute did not yet divide communion, but it established a durable pattern: doctrinal councils could also alter institutional precedence, and different churches could receive the same council selectively. That unresolved difference would become increasingly consequential in the centuries leading to the conventional schism of 1054 (Price & Gaddis, 2005; Meyendorff, 1989).

10.4 Imperial coercion and the hardening of memory

Imperial enforcement transformed theological disagreement into lived institutional separation. Bishops could be deposed or exiled; church buildings could change hands; rival patriarchs could be installed; liturgical commemoration became a test of loyalty. In Alexandria, conflict surrounding the Chalcedonian bishop Proterius ended in his violent death in 457 and the ascendancy of anti-Chalcedonian Timothy Aelurus. Over time, parallel hierarchies became more durable. Once Christians received sacraments from different bishops, commemorated different saints, remembered different martyrs, and taught children opposing narratives of the councils, reunion became far more difficult than revising one disputed term.

The use of civil force also damaged the church's capacity to distinguish persuasion from compulsion. Emperors sought religious unity partly because they regarded ecclesial division as a threat to public order and divine favor. But coercion could convert theological dissent into communal resistance. The more the state identified one formula with imperial loyalty, the easier it became for dissenting communities to experience their ecclesial identity as defense against political domination.

11. The Oriental Orthodox Traditions: A Family Formed Gradually, Not in One Day

The name Oriental Orthodox refers today to a family of churches that receive Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus but do not receive Chalcedon as an ecumenical council. The family includes the Coptic Orthodox Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, along with related jurisdictions and communities. Their modern communion is real, but their historical paths into that family differ. It is therefore anachronistic to imagine a single Oriental Orthodox institution founded in 451 (World Council of Churches, n.d.-a).

11.1 Egypt and the Coptic trajectory

The immediate post-Chalcedonian crisis in Alexandria shows how quickly doctrine, episcopal legitimacy, and urban politics became inseparable. Proterius, recognized by the imperial government as bishop after Dioscorus, faced determined opposition from those who regarded Dioscorus as the lawful patriarch and Chalcedon as a betrayal of Cyril. After the death of Emperor

Marcian in 457, violence erupted and Proterius was killed. Timothy Aelurus emerged as the leading anti-Chalcedonian claimant. The brutality of these events should not be romanticized as righteous resistance, but neither should they be reduced to mob irrationality. They occurred within a contest over who possessed the right to ordain, teach, occupy churches, and define the memory of Alexandria.

Under later emperors, rival patriarchal lines and alternating policies reinforced separation. Peter Mongus, an anti-Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria, accepted Zeno's Henotikon, while stricter opponents rejected the compromise. This produced internal divisions even among anti-Chalcedonians. The eventual Coptic trajectory therefore emerged through several stages of conflict, compromise, and renewed boundary-making rather than through one unanimous Egyptian decision in 451.

Over generations, the Alexandrian dispute produced parallel episcopal successions: a Chalcedonian patriarchal line supported at different times by imperial authority and a non-Chalcedonian line whose communities eventually formed the Coptic Orthodox Church. Chalcedonian Christians in the eastern provinces were often called Melkites, from a term associated with the emperor or king, but the label should not be treated as a simple synonym for Greek ethnicity. The Coptic trajectory likewise emerged not from one ethnic uprising but from the accumulated reception of Cyril, the contested memory of Dioscorus, monastic resistance, and competing claims to episcopal legitimacy (Freund, 1972; Grillmeier & Hainthaler, 1996).

The adjective Coptic derives ultimately from a term for Egypt and should not be treated as though it always designated an ethnically pure anti-Greek party. Egypt was linguistically and socially diverse. Greek remained important in administration and theology, while Coptic Christian literature expanded. The long-term separation was theological and institutional, not a simple national liberation movement. At the same time, the ability of Egyptian Christianity to express itself increasingly in Coptic strengthened a church culture less dependent on Constantinopolitan institutions.

11.2 Syria and the formation of a durable non-Chalcedonian hierarchy

Syrian anti-Chalcedonianism likewise contained internal diversity. Philoxenus of Mabbug, Severus of Antioch, and other leaders refined a Christology that explicitly rejected both Nestorian division and Eutychian confusion. Severus in particular argued that the one incarnate nature is composite, not simple, and that the natural properties of divinity and humanity remain recognizable within the union. His theology is essential for understanding why modern Oriental Orthodox churches reject the label "Monophysite." The issue was not whether Christ remained human, but how the post-union reality should be named without turning analytical distinction into personal division.

Imperial enforcement after 518 drove many bishops and clergy into exile or clandestine ministry. The consequence was institutional as well as theological. Communities that had once contested appointments within a common imperial church increasingly required their own ordination networks to survive. Once rival lines of bishops existed across the same territories, reunion was no longer a matter of signing one formula. It would require resolving mutually exclusive claims to sees, church properties, sacramental legitimacy, and the commemoration of condemned leaders.

After Justin I restored strict Chalcedonian policy in 518, Severus of Antioch and many other non-Chalcedonian bishops or clergy were exiled, displaced, or forced into less visible networks. The immediate problem became sacramental and institutional continuity: communities without recognized bishops could not reliably ordain clergy or sustain an alternative succession. Monasteries, aristocratic patrons, itinerant clergy, and protected networks associated with Empress Theodora therefore became channels through which texts, clergy, and candidates for ordination moved. This survival infrastructure prepared the setting in which Jacob Baradaeus would become decisive (Menze, 2008).

A decisive figure was Jacob Baradaeus, consecrated bishop in the sixth century with the support of non-Chalcedonian networks associated with Empress Theodora. Jacob traveled widely, ordaining bishops, priests, and deacons and thereby ensuring the survival of a parallel hierarchy. The label "Jacobite" was later applied to Syriac Orthodox Christians, but the church does not understand Jacob as its founder. He preserved and reorganized a movement that already existed. Menze's study of this period shows that the Syrian Orthodox Church became institutionally distinct through the interaction of imperial pressure, alternative ordination networks, monastic organization, liturgical separation, and collective memory, especially in the first half of the sixth century (Menze, 2008).

11.3 Armenia: delayed reception and a distinct political setting

Armenia's relation to Chalcedon cannot be described as immediate rejection in 451. Armenian bishops were preoccupied with conflict in the Sasanian sphere and were not major participants at the council. Over the following decades, Armenian theologians encountered competing interpretations of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Councils at Dvin in the sixth century helped crystallize the Armenian church's anti-Chalcedonian position. The exact dating and scope of individual decisions are debated,

but by the middle of the sixth century rejection of Chalcedon had become a defining feature of Armenian ecclesial identity (Encyclopaedia Iranica, 1995; Meyendorff, 1989).

Armenian Christianity also illustrates why ethnicity and doctrine should not be separated too sharply. The church was embedded in a society divided between Roman and Persian political influence, with its own language, nobility, and ecclesiastical traditions. Christological alignment therefore had political consequences. Yet Armenian rejection of Chalcedon was not merely nationalism in theological dress. Armenian authors understood themselves as defending the Cyrillian faith of Ephesus against what they regarded as unacceptable dyophysite formulations.

11.4 Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Alexandrian connection

The Ethiopian church had received Christianity centuries before Chalcedon and remained canonically linked to the patriarchate of Alexandria, from which its metropolitan bishops were traditionally sent. Because the Alexandrian non-Chalcedonian line became dominant in the Coptic church, Ethiopian Christianity entered the same broad Christological family. The chronology of the transition is not perfectly documented, but by the sixth century Ethiopian Christianity clearly stood within the non-Chalcedonian Alexandrian orbit (Grillmeier & Hainthaler, 1996).

This connection makes Africa central rather than peripheral to the history of ancient Christian division. Egypt was one of the principal theological centers of the controversy, Ethiopia received the resulting ecclesial orientation, and sixth-century missions carried forms of Christianity into Nubia south of Egypt. Sources describe rival Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian missionary initiatives during the reign of Justinian and Theodora, though their precise relationship and success require caution (Zacharopoulou, 2017; Tsakos, 2021). The later Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the modern Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church belong to the Oriental Orthodox family, but Eritrean autocephaly is a modern institutional development and must not be projected into late antiquity.

11.5 India and the later Malankara Oriental Orthodox trajectory

The inclusion of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in the modern Oriental Orthodox family requires an especially careful genealogy. Christianity in India possessed ancient East Syriac connections and was not a direct fifth-century offshoot of anti-Chalcedonian Syria. The decisive West Syriac and Syriac Orthodox influence in parts of the Saint Thomas Christian community developed much later, especially after the early modern Portuguese period and subsequent ecclesiastical realignments. The modern Malankara Oriental Orthodox traditions therefore belong to the family through later communion and West Syriac inheritance, not because an Indian church delegation rejected Chalcedon in 451.

This distinction matters because genealogical precision is one of the central goals of this book. Shared present-day communion does not always imply identical historical origin. The Oriental Orthodox family is a communion of ancient churches whose anti-Chalcedonian identities emerged through different regional histories and later converged into a recognized ecclesial family.

12. Imperial Reunion Strategies, AD 482-553: When Compromise Became Another Source of Division

12.1 Zeno's Henotikon and the Acacian Schism

By the late fifth century, imperial authorities understood that Chalcedon had failed to produce stable unity in the eastern provinces. Emperor Zeno issued the Henotikon in 482 as an attempt to create a formula broad enough for Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians. The document affirmed Nicaea and Constantinople, received Ephesus, condemned Nestorius and Eutyches, honored Cyril's Twelve Chapters, and avoided a direct positive restatement of Chalcedon's disputed "in two natures" language. Acacius of Constantinople accepted the policy. (Meyendorff, 1989; Menze, 2008)

The compromise satisfied neither extreme. Many anti-Chalcedonians considered it too ambiguous or insufficiently Cyrillian, while Rome regarded the marginalization of Chalcedon as unacceptable. Pope Felix III excommunicated Acacius in 484, and Constantinople removed Felix's name from the diptychs. The resulting Acacian Schism between Rome and Constantinople lasted until 519. This episode is a major genealogical warning: an imperial policy designed to heal one eastern division produced a new rupture between two Chalcedonian centers.

The schism ended under Emperor Justin I through the Formula of Hormisdas, which required eastern acceptance of Chalcedon and a Roman interpretation of disputed events. The settlement restored communion between Rome and Constantinople but sharpened the exclusion of non-Chalcedonian bishops. Menze argues that the early sixth century, especially the enforcement

policies after 518, was crucial in transforming a fluid field of anti-Chalcedonian resistance into more clearly distinct ecclesial structures (Menze, 2008).

12.2 Justinian, Theodora, and competing strategies of unity

Under Justinian I (r. 527-565), the religious geography of the empire made the reunion problem urgent. Egypt supplied grain and tax revenue; Syria and Palestine were strategically exposed; and Constantinople governed bishops whose communities no longer shared one conciliar memory. Justinian's building program, legal codification, and theological activity all expressed a vision of a Christian Roman order. Yet the breadth of that vision made persistent ecclesial division appear not only pastorally painful but politically destabilizing.

Justinian initially pursued direct theological negotiation as well as legislation. A conference in Constantinople in 532 brought Chalcedonian bishops and Severian non-Chalcedonians into sustained discussion. The talks revealed more common ground than later polemics might suggest, but disagreements over the reception of Chalcedon, Leo's Tome, and the cases of Theodoret and Ibas remained. The episode is important because it shows that imperial policy was not only coercive: Justinian also sought formulas capable of persuading opponents, even though subsequent pressure repeatedly undermined the trust required for reunion (Menze, 2008; Price, 2009).

Theodora pursued a different but overlapping strategy of protection and access. She sheltered non-Chalcedonian clergy and enabled displaced leaders, including Severus of Antioch and Theodosius of Alexandria, to maintain networks close to the imperial capital. Historians disagree over whether the imperial couple deliberately coordinated contrasting policies, whether they genuinely differed, or whether pragmatic patronage explains the pattern. The evidence nevertheless resists a simplistic story in which one spouse secretly reversed the other's policy: the court could simultaneously enforce Chalcedonian orthodoxy and provide space in which non-Chalcedonian ecclesiastical organization survived (Menze, 2008).

Justinian also attempted to interpret Chalcedon in a strongly Cyrillian direction. Modern scholarship often describes this as a neo-Chalcedonian strategy: the one person of Christ is the divine Word, the Theopaschite claim that one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh is orthodox when properly qualified, and Chalcedon's two-nature language must be read through Cyril rather than through a two-subject Christology. The aim was intelligible: if anti-Chalcedonians feared that Chalcedon rehabilitated Nestorian tendencies, imperial theologians would demonstrate that Chalcedon itself excluded them (Meyendorff, 1989; Price, 2009).

12.3 The Three Chapters controversy and Constantinople II, AD 553

A further complication was the status of earlier authorities. Theodoret and Ibas had been restored at Chalcedon under conditions, while Theodore of Mopsuestia had died in communion decades earlier. Condemning their persons or writings raised a difficult question: could an ecumenical council later anathematize a dead theologian or writings associated with bishops whom a prior council had received? For Justinian, the answer was necessary to demonstrate that Chalcedon could not be interpreted in a Nestorian direction. For many western bishops, retrospective condemnation threatened the reliability of Chalcedon's own settlement.

The most controversial expression of this strategy concerned the "Three Chapters": the person and writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, certain anti-Cyrillian writings of Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and the letter of Ibas of Edessa to Maris. Justinian promoted their condemnation in the hope of proving that Chalcedonian orthodoxy had no sympathy for Nestorianizing theology. The policy created a dilemma in the West, where many bishops feared that condemning figures or writings associated with the Chalcedonian settlement would undermine the council's authority.

Pope Vigilius resisted, negotiated, changed positions, and came under intense imperial pressure. The Second Council of Constantinople in 553 condemned the Three Chapters and interpreted Chalcedon through a Cyrillian lens. Its acts anathematized Theodore and rejected interpretations that divided Christ. The council's reception was troubled in parts of the Latin West, especially northern Italy, where schisms over the Three Chapters lasted for generations. Meanwhile, the policy failed to restore communion with the major non-Chalcedonian churches (Price, 2009).

Constantinople II demonstrates both the strength and weakness of imperial conciliar theology. Theologically, it clarified that Chalcedon's two natures must not be read as two personal subjects and that Cyril remained a normative interpreter of the incarnation. Institutionally, however, the attempt to repair the memory of Chalcedon through another imperially dominated council generated new disputes over whether a later council could condemn persons associated with an earlier settlement. Conciliar authority increasingly depended not only on doctrinal content but on a contested hierarchy of councils and their reception.

13. The Seventh-Century Christological Crisis: One or Two Wills in Christ?

The sixth-century disputes did not end the problem of explaining how Christ's complete divinity and humanity operate within one person. In the early seventh century, the Byzantine Empire faced catastrophic war with Sasanian Persia, followed by the rapid Arab-Muslim conquests. Imperial leaders again sought formulas that might reconcile Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians in strategically important provinces such as Egypt and Syria. The resulting controversies over one or two operations and one or two wills became the final major stage of the ancient Christological debates within the Chalcedonian imperial church.

Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople and Emperor Heraclius promoted forms of monoenergism, the idea that Christ has one operation or energy, as a possible reunion formula. Critics argued that if Christ possesses complete divine and human natures, each nature must retain its natural mode of acting. The debate shifted toward will. The imperial *Ekthesis* of 638 supported one will in Christ, producing the doctrine commonly called monothelitism. The later *Typos* of Constans II attempted to suppress discussion of either one or two wills, illustrating again the imperial temptation to solve theological conflict by administrative prohibition (Allen & Neil, 2002).

Sophronius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor, and later Pope Martin I became major defenders of two natural wills and operations in the one Christ. Their argument was not that Christ contains two rival personal centers. Rather, complete humanity includes a human will. If the Word assumes human nature without a human capacity for willing and acting, the humanity is incomplete. Maximus interpreted Christ's prayer in Gethsemane - "not my will, but yours, be done" - as evidence of a genuinely human will freely aligned with the divine will, not abolished by it ([Luke 22:42](#)). The Lateran Synod of 649 condemned monothelitism and the imperial formulas, after which Martin and Maximus suffered arrest, exile, and punishment under imperial authority (Price, 2014).

The Third Council of Constantinople in 680-681, later counted as the Sixth Ecumenical Council by Chalcedonian traditions, condemned monothelitism and confessed two natural wills and two natural operations in Christ, united without opposition because the human will belongs to the one divine person and freely follows the divine will. The council also condemned earlier advocates, including Pope Honorius I for his role in the controversy, a fact that later became important in debates over papal teaching authority.

The controversy also exposed the limits of papal and imperial authority in ways that later centuries would repeatedly revisit. Pope Honorius I had earlier discouraged renewed controversy and used language that the sixth ecumenical council judged to have supported one-will error. Constantinople III's condemnation of Honorius did not settle later Catholic debates about the exact nature and scope of papal teaching authority, but historically it demonstrates that an ecumenical council received in both East and West could censure a bishop of Rome for doctrinal failure. At the same time, the punishment of Martin I and Maximus under imperial authority shows that resistance to the emperor could demand extraordinary personal cost even within the Chalcedonian communion.

The two-wills settlement also deepened Christological soteriology. A human will is not itself sinful. Sin is the disordering of creaturely will against God. Christ's obedient human willing therefore does not compete with his divine identity. It manifests healed and perfect humanity. [Hebrews 5:7-9](#) presents the Son learning obedience through what he suffered, while [John 6:38](#) and [Luke 22:42](#) distinguish the incarnate mission and human obedience without dividing Christ into persons. The council's dyothelite conclusion can thus be understood as a logical consequence of the earlier insistence that what the Word assumes is complete humanity.

This settlement strengthened the internal logic of Chalcedonian Christology. If two complete natures remain real, then the natural faculties of each remain real. Yet the settlement did not reunite the Oriental Orthodox churches. By the late seventh century, the old fractures had become embodied in separate episcopal successions, liturgies, monastic networks, languages, and collective memories. Theological refinement within one communion could not automatically reverse two centuries of institutional separation.

The Quinisext Council in Trullo in 691-692, regarded in Eastern Orthodoxy as completing disciplinary canons for the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils, further illustrated emerging differences between Greek East and Latin West over clerical marriage, fasting, liturgical customs, and canonical practice. Rome did not simply receive all its canons. Although Trullo did not create the East-West Schism, it belongs to the cumulative prehistory of the estrangement examined in the next chapter.

14. Conquest, Language, and Survival After the Loss of Imperial Unity

The Arab-Muslim conquests of the seventh century transformed the political environment in which the ancient Christian communions lived. Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and eventually other regions passed out of Byzantine imperial control. This did not cause the Christological schisms, which were already well established. It did end Constantinople's capacity to enforce Chalcedonian reunion across much of the eastern Mediterranean while replacing Byzantine rule with new political, fiscal, and legal structures under Muslim governments. The change therefore altered the conditions of Christian survival without automatically turning conquest into religious liberation (Hoyland, 2015; Griffith, 2008).

Older historiography sometimes suggested that Copts and Syrians welcomed Arab conquest simply because they hated Byzantine Chalcedonian rule. The evidence is too complex for such a generalization. Local responses varied, and warfare, taxation, military occupation, elite accommodation, and administrative change affected communities differently. Religious grievances could shape perceptions, but there was no single non-Chalcedonian alliance with the conquerors. What can be said with confidence is that the collapse of Byzantine authority in Egypt and Syria ended the empire's ability to impose reunion there by force, while the conquered churches now had to negotiate status under new rulers (Hoyland, 2015).

Under Islamic rule, Christian communities developed new legal, social, intellectual, and linguistic strategies. The Church of the East flourished especially in the early Abbasid centuries and became deeply involved in translation, medicine, philosophy, and diplomacy, while Syriac Orthodox and Coptic communities preserved distinctive liturgical and monastic traditions under changing regimes. Christian theological writing increasingly appeared in Arabic alongside Syriac, Coptic, Greek, Armenian, and other languages. The center of Christian political power shifted, but the fifth-century divisions endured, demonstrating again that the history of ancient Christianity cannot be narrated solely through European institutions (Griffith, 2008).

The loss of eastern provinces also changed Byzantium itself. The empire became more geographically concentrated and increasingly Greek-speaking. Theological controversies persisted, but the social world of Byzantine Christianity was no longer the same Mediterranean-wide Roman Christian order that had convened Chalcedon. By the eighth century, the most explosive internal Byzantine dispute concerned not the number of Christ's natures or wills, but whether sacred images could be made, displayed, and venerated.

15. Icons Before Iconoclasm: From Christian Art to Cultic Veneration

Christians used visual symbols and images long before the eighth century. Catacomb paintings, biblical scenes, crosses, portraits, decorated churches, and images associated with saints demonstrate that early Christianity was not uniformly aniconic. Yet the presence of Christian art does not automatically establish the later theology and devotional practice of icons. A painted biblical scene used for commemoration, instruction, or symbolic representation is not identical to an image honored with incense, lights, kissing, processions, or appeals for intercession. The historical development from image-making to formalized veneration must therefore be demonstrated rather than assumed (Jensen, 2023; Brubaker & Haldon, 2011).

By the sixth and seventh centuries, sacred images had acquired an increasingly prominent role in Byzantine devotion. Stories circulated about miracle-working icons and *acheiropoietia*, images "not made by human hands." Images of Christ, Mary, angels, and saints were placed in churches and homes. Theological reflection on representation developed alongside these practices. The growth of icon devotion was not one simple linear process, and local practice varied, but by the early eighth century images had become sufficiently important that attempts to restrict or destroy them generated an empire-wide crisis (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011).

The biblical background contained both prohibition and permitted imagery. The Decalogue forbids making carved images in the context of bowing down to and serving them ([Exodus 20:4-5](#); [Deuteronomy 5:8-9](#)). Yet the tabernacle and temple included divinely commanded cherubim and other artistic representations ([Exodus 25:18-22](#); [1 Kings 6:23-29](#)). The Old Testament therefore does not support a simplistic claim that every religious image is inherently sinful. It does, however, establish an exceptionally strong prohibition against treating created representations as objects of religious service. The later Christian controversy turned on whether honor shown to an icon is directed to the material image, passes to the person represented, or constitutes a form of devotion Scripture reserves for God.

16. Byzantine Iconoclasm: Emperors, Images, and a Contested Historical Record

16.1 Leo III and the uncertain beginnings of official iconoclasm

Traditional narratives date the beginning of imperial iconoclasm to Emperor Leo III in the 720s, often associating a first public action with 726 and a formal prohibition around 730. Modern scholarship is cautious because many detailed stories come from

later iconophile sources written after iconoclasm had been defeated. The famous account of Leo ordering removal of an image of Christ above the Chalke Gate, for example, cannot simply be treated as unproblematic contemporary reportage. Brubaker and Haldon argue that the development of iconoclast policy was more gradual and that older narratives over-systematized Leo's program (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011).

The causes are likewise debated. Military crisis, imperial ideology, biblical concern about idolatry, the changing religious environment of the eastern Mediterranean, and social conflict have all been proposed. Influence from Islam or Judaism may have formed part of the wider environment in which Christians reconsidered images, but no single external-causation theory is sufficient. Iconoclasm was fundamentally a Christian dispute conducted through Christian Scripture, Christology, tradition, and claims about worship.

16.2 Constantine V and the Council of Hieria, 754

Under Constantine V, iconoclasm acquired a more systematic theological defense. The large council convened at Hieria in 754 condemned religious images and claimed ecumenical standing, although neither Rome nor the eastern patriarchates participated in a manner later iconophile tradition regarded as ecumenically valid. The emperor and supporting bishops argued that a true image should share the essence of what it images. On this logic, painted depictions of Christ risked either separating his humanity from divinity or confusing the natures by claiming to circumscribe the divine person. Iconoclast theology therefore drew on the same Christological vocabulary that earlier councils had used, but applied it to visual representation. The Eucharist and the moral imitation of saints could be presented as more legitimate forms of Christian representation than painted panels (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011; Price, 2018).

This reasoning deserves more than dismissal as philistinism. Iconoclasts were responding to a real biblical and theological question: how can the uncircumscribable God be depicted without turning matter into an object of religious reverence? Their weakness lay in assumptions about representation that iconophiles contested and in the coercive destruction associated with imperial policy. The historical record also warns against later claims that every iconoclast emperor pursued one uniform campaign of persecution. Policies varied over time, and the surviving evidence has been heavily filtered through victorious iconophile memory. (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011)

16.3 John of Damascus and the incarnation argument for images

John of Damascus offered the most influential early iconophile response while living under Muslim rule, beyond the Byzantine emperor's direct control. He began with the biblical prohibition of idolatry but argued that the incarnation changes the question of visible representation. The invisible God cannot be imaged according to an uncircumscribed divine essence. Yet the Son truly became visible flesh. To depict Christ's human appearance is therefore, in John's argument, to confess rather than deny the incarnation. Matter can serve divine purposes because God created it and used material realities in salvation. (John of Damascus, 2003)

John also distinguished the worship owed to God from relative honor offered to images, saints, rulers, sacred objects, and other realities according to their relation to God. The honor shown to an image, he argued, passes to the person represented. This "prototype" logic became central at Nicaea II. Its strength was that it explicitly denied worship of wood and pigment as deities and located the image within a theology of incarnation. Its vulnerability, from a *Sola Scriptura* perspective, is that the New Testament does not itself derive from the incarnation a positive obligation or devotional pattern of kissing, bowing before, incensing, or praying in relation to images. (John of Damascus, 2003; Price, 2018)

16.4 Irene and the Second Council of Nicaea, 787

The political reversal after the death of Leo IV allowed Empress Irene, acting as regent for Constantine VI, to pursue restoration of icons. An attempted council in Constantinople in 786 was disrupted by iconoclast soldiers, demonstrating that the controversy involved military and institutional constituencies as well as theology. The council was reconvened at Nicaea in 787 under conditions the government could better control. Papal representatives attended, eastern patriarchates under Muslim rule were represented indirectly, and the bishops reviewed biblical, patristic, and hagiographical evidence in favor of images. (Price, 2018)

Nicaea II authorized images of Christ, Mary, angels, and saints in churches, homes, vessels, vestments, and public spaces. It approved greeting, kissing, lights, and incense as forms of honor, while reserving the adoration or service designated *latreia* for God alone. The council's theological logic linked images to the incarnation and to the distinction between the material object and its prototype. In its own self-understanding, it did not sanction idolatry but regulated an existing devotional practice through a theological distinction. (Price, 2018)

Reception in the Latin West was complicated. A poor Latin translation contributed to the Frankish court's misunderstanding of the council as requiring the worship of images. The Libri Carolini criticized both iconoclasm and what the Franks believed to be excessive eastern claims, and the Council of Frankfurt in 794 rejected positions attributed to Nicaea II. Rome's position was closer to Nicaea than the Carolingian critique, but the episode widened cultural and theological distance between Byzantine Greeks and the emerging Frankish West. Icon theology therefore belongs not only to the history of Byzantine worship but also to the prehistory of the later East-West estrangement. (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011; Price, 2018)

THE BYZANTINE ICON CONTROVERSY: BEFORE, CHANGE, RESULT

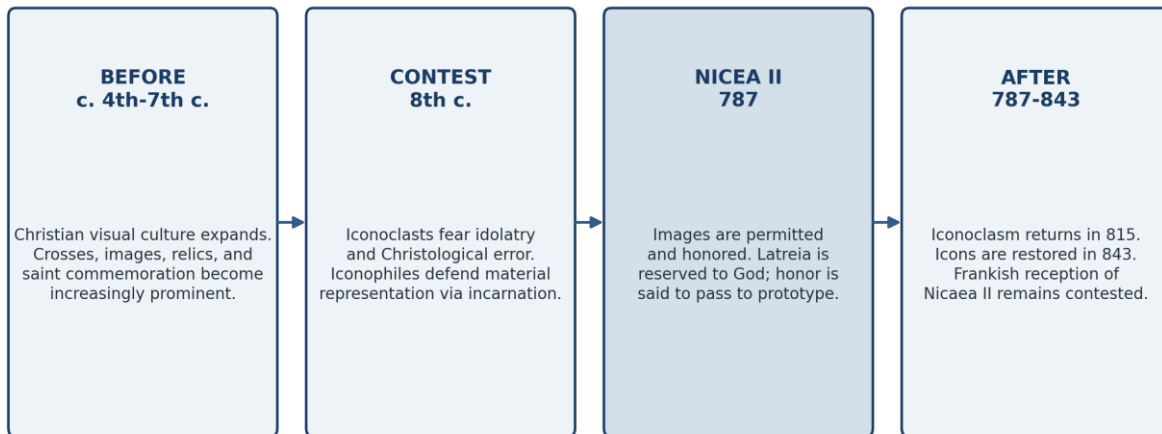


Figure 4. The Byzantine icon controversy: before, contest, Nicaea II, and aftermath.

Note. Nicaea II ended the first iconoclast phase doctrinally; Byzantine iconoclasm returned in 815 and ended finally in 843. Source: author synthesis from Brubaker and Haldon (2011) and Price (2018).

Table 4. The icon controversy: strongest claims and the biblical question

Issue	Iconoclast concern	Iconophile / Nicaea II response	Sola Scriptura question
Images of Christ	The divine person cannot be circumscribed; depiction risks Christological error.	The Word truly became visible flesh, so Christ can be depicted according to his humanity.	Does the incarnation establish permission for representation, devotional veneration, or both?
Idolatry	Bowing, kissing, lamps, and incense toward images risk forbidden religious service.	Honor is relative, not divine worship; it passes from image to prototype.	The New Testament forbids idolatry but gives no apostolic command to venerate Christian images.
Tradition	Later image devotion may represent innovation.	Patristic memories, church practice, and sacred art witness received tradition.	Can ecclesial tradition authorize devotional acts not prescribed in apostolic Scripture?
Coercion	Iconophile practice may be restrained by imperial authority.	Iconoclast destruction and persecution are themselves abuses of power.	Neither side receives New Testament authority to enforce religious devotion or its rejection through state violence.

Note. The table represents the strongest historical logic of both sides before applying the chapter's Sola Scriptura assessment. Source: synthesis from Brubaker and Haldon (2011), John of Damascus (2003), and Price (2018).

17. What the First Enduring Divisions Reveal About the Causes of Schism

The period from 431 to 787 reveals that enduring schism rarely has one cause. The first layer was doctrinal. The church was trying to confess biblical truths that genuinely had to be held together: one divine Son, complete deity, complete humanity, real suffering in the flesh, real human willing and action, and unconfused union. Some formulas failed to express one or more of these truths adequately, and councils had legitimate reasons to reject them. Christology was not a pretext for politics.

A second layer was linguistic. Theological terms acquire meaning within traditions of usage. Physis did not always mean precisely what later textbook definitions assume. Qnoma cannot simply be translated as "person." Miaphysite and dyophysite

formulas could be heard as mutually exclusive even when both sides rejected the same extreme errors. Translation did not erase substantive difference, but it often turned difference into caricature.

A third layer was ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Rome did not debate from a position of institutional equality without interests. The rise of Constantinople, the prestige of Alexandria, Rome's developing claims, and the independent political setting of the Persian church shaped how councils were received. Canon 28 of Chalcedon demonstrates that doctrinal and jurisdictional questions could be decided at the same council and could receive different levels of acceptance.

A fourth layer was imperial intervention. Emperors summoned councils, transported bishops, enforced exile, transferred churches, issued doctrinal laws, and sought compromise formulas. Imperial power sometimes created the conditions for broad deliberation, but it also encouraged parties to seek political victory and made doctrinal dissent carry civil consequences. Henotikon, the Three Chapters policy, monothelitism, iconoclasm, and Nicaea II all show that the state repeatedly attempted to manage theological unity.

A fifth layer was social memory. Once communities developed separate calendars of saints and heretics, remembered different martyrs, educated clergy in different schools, and received sacraments from rival hierarchies, theological reconciliation became structurally difficult. Anathemas are not only sentences on paper. They shape identity. Later ecumenical statements could clarify that two churches now confess the same Christological substance, but they could not instantly dissolve centuries of separate institutional life.

Finally, ethnicity and culture mattered, but usually as amplifiers rather than self-sufficient explanations. Egyptian, Syriac, Armenian, Persian, Greek, Latin, Ethiopian, and other Christian identities developed in different political environments. Vernacular liturgies and local memories strengthened ecclesial durability. Yet to explain Oriental Orthodoxy as mere ethnic resistance or the Church of the East as Persian nationalism would ignore the theological seriousness of the communities themselves.

18. Comparative Christology After the Councils

Table 5. Comparative Christological formulations in the enduring ancient communions

Tradition / family	Characteristic mature formulation	What it explicitly protects	Historical caution
Chalcedonian	One person / hypostasis in two natures, without confusion, change, division, or separation.	Full deity, full humanity, one personal subject, continuing distinction of natural properties.	Do not treat “two natures” as two persons or assume every receiver used identical philosophical categories.
Oriental Orthodox / miaphysite	One incarnate nature of God the Word, understood as a real union of complete divinity and complete humanity.	Personal unity and rejection of both Nestorian division and Eutychian absorption.	“Monophysite” is misleading when it implies denial or absorption of Christ’s humanity.
Church of the East / East Syriac	Mature language of two kyane and two qnome united in one parsopa / Christ.	Reality of divinity and humanity and one worshiped Christ and Son.	Qnoma is not mechanically equivalent to the modern English word “person”; “Nestorian” is an inadequate blanket label.
Modern ecumenical convergence	Common declarations often confess one Lord, perfect God and perfect man, without confusion or division.	Substantial common Christological substance across older polemical boundaries.	Agreement does not erase different councils, anathemas, authority structures, or ecclesial genealogies.

Note. These are mature representative formulations, not claims that every historical author within a tradition used identical terminology. Source: synthesis from Joint Commission (1990), John Paul II and Dinkha IV (1994), and Brock (2024).

The table should not be read as though the traditions are interchangeable. The Church of the East historically revered Theodore of Mopsuestia and developed an East Syriac technical system distinct from both Chalcedonian and miaphysite language. Oriental Orthodox churches do not receive Chalcedon as ecumenical and continue to formulate Christology through Cyril's one-incarnate-nature language. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions receive Chalcedon and the later councils. Nevertheless, modern agreements demonstrate that the mature traditions can often confess the same central biblical affirmations: Christ is one Lord and Son, fully divine and fully human, without confusion and without division.

That convergence is historically important because it exposes the limitations of inherited polemics. It does not justify saying that ancient councils were meaningless or that every difference was a misunderstanding. It does justify retiring simplistic formulas such as “the Nestorians believe in two Christs” or “the Monophysites deny Christ’s humanity” when describing the

official teaching of present-day communions. Fair critique begins by testing what a tradition actually teaches, not what its opponents once alleged.

19. Biblical-Theological Assessment: Testing Christological and Devotional Developments by Scripture

19.1 The biblical center: one Lord, fully divine and fully human

The New Testament provides the controlling theological data before later terminology is considered. The Word who "was God" and was with God becomes flesh ([John 1:1-14](#)). Christ exists in the form of God yet takes the form of a servant and is found in human likeness ([Philippians 2:5-11](#)). The Son is the radiance of God's glory and exact expression of his nature, yet he shares in flesh and blood and becomes like his brothers and sisters in every way necessary for his saving priesthood ([Hebrews 1:1-4](#); [Hebrews 2:14-18](#)). In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily ([Colossians 2:9](#)). These passages require full deity, real humanity, and one personal subject.

Scripture also distinguishes what belongs to Christ's human experience without dividing him into two sons. Jesus grows in wisdom ([Luke 2:52](#)), experiences hunger and fatigue, prays, suffers, and dies. At the same time, the same Jesus exercises divine prerogatives, receives worship, forgives sins, and is confessed as Lord. The subject is one; the modes of predication differ according to the reality being described. The later Chalcedonian insistence on one person in two complete natures is therefore a defensible theological summary of biblical data, provided it remains a servant of Scripture rather than a replacement for it.

The East Syriac insistence on full humanity also protects a biblical truth. Christ does not merely wear a human body as a garment. He possesses a rational human life. Likewise, the Oriental Orthodox insistence on the unity of the incarnate Word protects the equally biblical truth that salvation is not accomplished by a human partner alongside the Son. Any Christology that results in two personal sons, a confused hybrid nature, or incomplete humanity fails the total witness of Scripture.

19.2 Theotokos: a legitimate Christological safeguard with limits

The title Theotokos can be biblically acceptable when its meaning is carefully defined. [Luke 1:43](#) records Elizabeth asking why "the mother of my Lord" has come to her, and the child Mary bears is identified as the Son of God ([Luke 1:35](#)). The person born from Mary is therefore not a mere human person separate from the eternal Son. In that Christological sense, saying that Mary is "Mother of God" can protect the identity of Jesus Christ as God the Son incarnate.

The title must not be allowed to imply that Mary is the source of the divine nature, existed before God, or mediates divine life as a quasi-divine being. Scripture identifies her as a favored servant who rejoices in "God my Savior" ([Luke 1:46-49](#)). The New Testament does not make Marian titles an independent source of doctrine, nor does the Christological legitimacy of Theotokos establish later devotional claims about Mary's mediation, immaculate conception, assumption, or invocation. Those questions must be tested separately by Scripture rather than inferred from Ephesus.

19.3 Councils and creeds: ministerial authority, not new revelation

Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II, Constantinople III, and Nicaea II show that councils can preserve truth, clarify language, and also operate through imperfect procedures. Scripture itself records a corporate apostolic deliberation in Acts 15, but the authority of that decision rests on apostolic teaching, the work of the Spirit, and fidelity to God's revealed purpose, not on a doctrine that every later episcopal assembly is incapable of error. The Bereans are commended for testing even apostolic preaching by the Scriptures they possessed ([Acts 17:11](#)), and Paul subjects every claimed message to the already received gospel ([Galatians 1:8-9](#)).

A Sola Scriptura approach can therefore receive the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations where they faithfully summarize Scripture without granting councils a coordinate source of revelation. Their authority is derivative and ministerial. The history of rival councils makes this especially clear. Ephesus 449 claimed conciliar legitimacy and was later repudiated. Hiereia 754 claimed ecumenical status and was rejected at Nicaea II. Numerical episcopal support, imperial sponsorship, or institutional continuity cannot by themselves prove truth.

19.4 Two wills and the completeness of Christ's humanity

The two-wills settlement of Constantinople III also corresponds well to Scripture. Jesus possesses a genuinely human will, most vividly displayed in Gethsemane: "not my will, but yours, be done" ([Luke 22:42](#)). The verse does not teach two personal Christs in conflict. It reveals a true human willing that is perfectly obedient to the Father's saving purpose. [Hebrews 5:7-9](#)

likewise presents the Son's real human obedience through suffering. If Christ's humanity lacks a human will, the human nature is incomplete. If the human will rebels against the divine, Christ is sinful. The biblical pattern is complete humanity in perfect personal unity and obedience.

19.5 Images: art, representation, veneration, and the second commandment

The biblical assessment of icons requires more precision than either "all images are idols" or "the incarnation automatically authorizes veneration." Scripture itself authorizes visual craftsmanship in sacred contexts. Cherubim were made for the ark, and the temple included carved forms. Christian art, historical illustration, and visual teaching are therefore not inherently prohibited. The incarnation also means that Jesus Christ truly became visible and can be represented as a historical human being without implying that paint captures the divine essence.

The decisive question is devotional action. The second commandment does not merely forbid believing that wood is literally a god; it forbids making images as objects before which worshipers bow down and render religious service ([Exodus 20:4-5](#)). The New Testament repeatedly directs prayer, worship, trust, and mediation to God through Christ, the one mediator ([Matthew 4:10](#); [John 4:23-24](#); [1 Timothy 2:5](#); [Hebrews 4:14-16](#)). No apostolic text instructs Christians to kiss, incense, bow before, or direct honor through images of Christ, Mary, angels, or departed saints.

Nicaea II carefully distinguished *latreia* from honorific veneration and denied that icons are worshiped as gods. That distinction should be represented fairly. Yet the biblical problem remains that the council positively authorized religious acts toward images for which the New Testament provides no command or apostolic example. The claim that honor "passes to the prototype" is a theological inference, not an apostolic ordinance. From a Sola Scriptura perspective, images may serve historical, artistic, or instructional purposes, but devotional veneration of images lacks sufficient biblical warrant and risks crossing the scriptural boundary between representation and religious service.

Iconoclast coercion must be rejected at the same time. If a practice is judged unbiblical, the church's weapons are truth, teaching, discipline, and persuasion, not state-sponsored destruction or punishment ([2 Corinthians 10:3-5](#); [2 Timothy 2:24-26](#)). The biblical critique of icon veneration therefore does not vindicate imperial iconoclasm as a method.

19.6 Imperial power and forced unity

The New Testament grants civil government a real but limited vocation to restrain wrongdoing and order public life ([Romans 13:1-7](#); [1 Peter 2:13-17](#)). It does not commission emperors to create faith through exile, confiscation, torture, or doctrinal compulsion. Jesus distinguishes his kingdom from the coercive mechanisms by which worldly kingdoms defend themselves ([John 18:36](#)). Apostolic ministry relies on proclamation, correction, discipline, and suffering witness rather than force.

The repeated use of imperial coercion from Ephesus through iconoclasm therefore represents a major departure from apostolic method, even when emperors supported doctrinally defensible conclusions. Truth does not become false because a ruler enforces it, but enforcement can obscure the difference between conviction and conformity. Christian unity is a spiritual and doctrinal reality grounded in Christ and truth, not a civil uniformity produced by decree.

20. Contemporary Significance: Ancient Schisms That Still Structure Global Christianity

The divisions of this period remain visible in the twenty-first-century Christian map. The Assyrian Church of the East continues the East Syriac tradition, alongside the Ancient Church of the East and Catholic churches that share important East Syriac ancestry. The Oriental Orthodox family remains a distinct communion comprising Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Indian churches, with large historic populations in Africa, the Middle East, Armenia, India, and global diasporas. The Chalcedonian tradition continued through Byzantine and Latin Christianity and later developed into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions whose estrangement is the subject of the next chapter (World Council of Churches, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Modern dialogue has substantially changed how informed Christians should describe the ancient controversies. In 1973 Pope Paul VI and Coptic Pope Shenouda III issued a common declaration confessing Christ as perfect God and perfect man, united without mingling, confusion, alteration, division, or separation. In 1984 Pope John Paul II and Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I stated that later divisions over the incarnation arose substantially from differences of terminology and culture rather than a different faith in Christ. In 1990 Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox representatives issued a second agreed statement recognizing common Christological faith while acknowledging different inherited formulas. In 1994 the Catholic Church and Assyrian Church of the East likewise confessed one Christ and recognized the legitimacy of differing Marian terminology (Paul VI & Shenouda III, 1973; John Paul II & Ignatius Zakka I, 1984; Joint Commission, 1990; John Paul II & Dinkha IV, 1994).

These agreements do not mean that full communion has been restored. They do, however, force a major historiographical correction. It is no longer responsible to define the Assyrian Church of the East simply as “the church that teaches two persons in Christ” or the Oriental Orthodox churches simply as “those who deny Christ’s two natures.” Their own authoritative modern statements reject those caricatures. The remaining disagreements concern the reception and authority of councils, the interpretation of historical anathemas, ecclesiology, liturgical and canonical inheritance, and the exact theological adequacy of inherited technical vocabularies.

The dialogues also illuminate a distinction between doctrinal identity and historical genealogy. A modern common declaration can show that two communions now confess substantially compatible Christology without erasing how their separate institutions came to exist. Ecclesiastical memories, jurisdictions, saints, calendars, canon law, and sacramental communion are historical realities in their own right. Agreement about Christology can remove one obstacle to reunion while leaving the inherited structures of separation intact.

Ecumenical work has continued beyond the late twentieth-century declarations. Eastern and Oriental Orthodox representatives met again at St. Bishoy Monastery in Egypt in September 2024 and revisited the official dialogue and its agreed statements. Catholic-Assyrian dialogue also continued in 2024, when the joint commission marked the thirtieth anniversary of the 1994 Christological declaration while pursuing questions of ecclesiology and liturgy. In May 2026, the executive committee of the Catholic-Oriental Orthodox commission met in Rome to evaluate two decades of dialogue and prepare its next phase. These developments confirm substantial theological convergence while also confirming that full ecclesial communion has not yet been restored (Coptic Orthodox Church, 2024; Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, 2024, 2026).

For African Christianity, the period is especially important. Egypt and Ethiopia are not marginal appendices to a European story. Alexandria was one of the principal engines of patristic theology, Coptic Christianity became a major non-Chalcedonian communion, Ethiopian Christianity entered the same family through its Alexandrian relationship, and Nubian kingdoms became Christian in the post-Chalcedonian world. The genealogy of Christianity is therefore Mediterranean, African, Middle Eastern, Asian, and European from antiquity onward.

For biblical discernment, the period also provides a recurring lesson about authority. Ancient pedigree is not self-validating. Neither acceptance nor rejection of a council proves fidelity by itself. A tradition may preserve the biblical deity and humanity of Christ while also developing practices that require further scriptural testing. Modern Christians should therefore neither romanticize antiquity nor dismiss it. The fathers and councils are indispensable historical witnesses, but they remain witnesses under the Word of God.

21. Genealogical Summary

Table 6. Genealogical summary of Chapter 4

Field	Synthesis
Parent historical environment	Imperially recognized Nicene and conciliar Christianity in the Roman world, alongside an increasingly autonomous East Syriac church in the Sasanian Persian world.
Approximate emergence	Church of the East trajectory consolidates across the fifth-sixth centuries; Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian trajectories become durable after 451; iconophile Byzantine settlement is defined at Nicaea II in 787 but iconoclasm returns until 843.
Principal geographical centers	Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, Jerusalem, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Edessa/Nisibis, Armenia, Ethiopia, Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and later China and India.
Principal actors	Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Antioch, Theodosius II, Leo I, Flavian, Eutyches, Dioscorus, Marcian, Pulcheria, Severus of Antioch, Justinian I, Theodora, Jacob Baradaeus, Sergius of Constantinople, Maximus the Confessor, Martin I, Leo III, Constantine V, John of Damascus, Irene, and the councils treated in the chapter.
Immediate triggers	Theotokos controversy; rival Christological formulations; Eutyches and Ephesus 449; reception of Chalcedon; failed imperial reunion policies; one-will controversy; expansion and veneration of sacred images.
Deeper causes	Unsettled technical vocabulary; Greek-Syriac translation; rival major sees; Roman-Persian geopolitics; regional and linguistic identity; imperial management of church unity; competing theories of tradition and conciliar authority.
Authority structures	Bishops, patriarchal and metropolitan systems, synods and ecumenical councils, imperial legislation, monastic networks, and regionally distinct canonical traditions, all claiming continuity with Scripture and apostolic faith.
Principal doctrinal distinctives	One Christ and the relation of divinity/humanity; Theotokos; one/two nature terminology; one/two wills and operations; authority and reception of councils; legitimacy and veneration of icons.
Immediate enduring branches	East Syriac Church of the East trajectory; Chalcedonian imperial Christianity; non-Chalcedonian trajectories that later comprise the Oriental Orthodox family.

Field	Synthesis
Later descendants	Assyrian Church of the East, Ancient Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic and other East Syriac descendants; Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions from the Chalcedonian stream; Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Malankara Oriental Orthodox churches through distinct historical paths.
Present-day presence	Ancient communions remain active across the Middle East, Africa, Armenia, India, Europe, the Americas, Oceania, and global diasporas; modern dialogues have clarified substantial Christological overlap without restoring universal communion.
Major biblical questions raised	How should Scripture confess one person who is fully God and fully human? What does Theotokos legitimately affirm? What authority belongs to councils? Can civil rulers enforce doctrine? Does the incarnation warrant religious veneration of images? How should tradition remain ministerial to the apostolic Word?

Note. The period generated multiple intersecting genealogies; direct descent, conciliar reception, doctrinal influence, and later communion are distinguished. Source: author synthesis of the historical evidence presented in this chapter.

The genealogy is deliberately non-linear. The Church of the East had already achieved substantial institutional autonomy in the Persian world before Ephesus, so its later Christological distinctiveness should be described as consolidation within an existing eastern trajectory rather than a simple secession in 431. The Oriental Orthodox communions emerged at different rates after Chalcedon and only later functioned as a clearly recognized family. The Chalcedonian imperial church remained internally united at the level of communion through 787, but tensions between Rome and Constantinople over jurisdiction, language, liturgy, and canon law were accumulating. Iconoclasm intensified those differences without producing a permanent separate communion in the eighth century.

22. Conclusion and Transition: From the First Ancient Schisms to the Estrangement of Rome and Constantinople

Between 431 and 787, Christianity ceased to be describable, even institutionally, as one imperial communion temporarily disturbed by local disputes. The Council of Ephesus resolved a real question about the unity of Christ but did so through rival proceedings whose memory remained contested. The Church of the East, already rooted beyond Roman frontiers and increasingly independent in Persia, consolidated an East Syriac theological tradition that did not receive Ephesus as the Roman church received it. Chalcedon attempted a balanced confession of one person in two natures, yet its reception fractured Egypt, Syria, Armenia, and related churches from the Chalcedonian imperial establishment. Later emperors tried compromise, reinterpretation, condemnation, coercion, and new councils, but the fractures became embodied in durable hierarchies.

The theological history cannot be reduced to a parade of heresies defeated by ever clearer councils. The councils did clarify central biblical truths: the one Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human; his natures are neither confused nor divided; his humanity includes a genuine human will. Yet conciliar processes also reveal the limitations of ecclesiastical institutions. Rival assemblies claimed authority. Imperial regimes changed doctrinal policy. Bishops were exiled and restored. Councils later judged earlier councils. Christian communities learned to associate orthodoxy not only with Scripture and confession but with particular patriarchs, imperial settlements, liturgies, and inherited enemies.

The period also demonstrates that reforming one error does not prevent the development of another. Christological precision could coexist with increasing confidence in imperial coercion. Defense of the incarnation could be extended into a theology of devotional images that went beyond explicit apostolic practice. The distinction between veneration and worship was carefully articulated, yet the positive authorization of kissing, incensing, and bowing before icons requires biblical scrutiny. *Sola Scriptura* therefore receives historical theological insight gratefully while refusing to make antiquity or ecumenical reception an independent norm.

By 787 the Christian world already contained several enduring ancient communions. The Church of the East stretched deep into Asia. Oriental Orthodox churches were rooted across Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia, and beyond. The Chalcedonian world remained divided culturally between Greek East and Latin West even while still sharing communion. Nicaea II restored icons within Byzantium but also exposed differences with the Frankish West. Canon 28 of Chalcedon, the Acacian Schism, the Quinisext canons, competing approaches to papal authority, and distinct liturgical cultures had all left unresolved questions.

The next major fracture would therefore not arise from nowhere in 1054. It would emerge from centuries of accumulated estrangement between Rome and Constantinople: disputes over the scope of Roman primacy, the political meaning of "New Rome," the Filioque, liturgical customs, missionary jurisdiction, rival empires, and mutual suspicion. Chapter 5 follows that slower road from the post-iconoclast world to the conventional date of the Great Schism, showing why 1054 was an important milestone but not a single-day separation.

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