

Suicide by Edict: The Legacy of Chalcedon

Mark A. Noll, in *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (2000),¹ declared the Council of Chalcedon, 451 CE, a “threefold triumph.” I have argued in “Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies and the Faith Choice” (Connelly 2024) that it was only the Roman Catholic Church that triumphed at Chalcedon—that its mandate was a purely political victory, one that “crushed” the tangential, mystical, essentially Eastern approach to the apprehension of faith mysteries advocated by the Alexandrians.² I continue that argument here and explore Chalcedon’s long-term effects on the reach, power, and authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

The politicization of theology by the Catholic Church begotten at Chalcedon grew through the Middle Ages along with the Church’s political power, leading to the Great Schism of 1054 CE when the Church lost many of its Eastern European adherents.³ Politics continued to define the Catholic Church’s canon through the Reformation, despite Martin Luther’s putting the Church on notice with his ninety-five theses posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517 CE. The Church ignored Luther’s warning and, consequently, lost “significant portions” of the population in Northern Europe, particularly in Germany, Switzerland, and parts of Scandinavia, to Protestantism.⁴

Today, the Catholic Church’s “flock” continues to decline, with more and more adherents rejecting the Church’s ill-obtained ‘authority’ to arbitrate spiritual truth first usurped at Chalcedon. The Catholic Church will likely bleed out because this self-inflicted wound is fatal and irreversible. Once it has spoken *ex-cathedra*, the Church can’t change its mind. God doesn’t change His mind.

First, it’s worth noting that the practical political effect of Chalcedon was the deposition and excommunication of the Catholic patriarch of Alexandria, Dioscorus, for upholding his predecessor, St. Cyril’s *miaphysitism*, the Christological perspective that both the human and the divine natures of Jesus Christ are equally present in his person—in one single nature—through the mystery of the Incarnation (the heresy was called *monophysitism* and its adherents known as

¹ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, Baker Academic, 2000.

² Thomas P. Connelly, Jr., “Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies and the Faith Choice,” Google Docs, last modified November 6, 2024, accessed November 8, 2024.

³ “East-West Schism | Summary, History, & Effects,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 20, 1998, accessed November 8, 2024.

⁴ “Reformation | Causes & Effects | Britannica,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified 2024, accessed November 8, 2024.

Monophysites). Chalcedon decreed that Christ had two “perfect” natures, which I have argued was without rational basis.⁵ Either way, philosophically split hairs shouldn’t warrant excommunication, which makes the Church’s true motive at Chalcedon crystal clear: consolidation of political power. The fact that the council additionally issued *twenty-seven* “disciplinary” canons governing church authority and administration⁶ removes all doubt.

With the *Henotikon*, Byzantine Emperor Zeno, in 482 CE, attempted to reconcile the Chalcedonian Christians with the Monophysites by omitting any explicit reference to Christ's two distinct natures, which then led to the "Acacian Schism" wherein Pope Felix III excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople, Acacius, sparking the ultimate split between the Eastern and Western churches.⁷

By the (middle) Middle Ages, the Catholic Church, having excommunicated everyone who disagreed with it, had become the ultimate authority in people’s lives, defining culture, law, and morality across Europe, irrespective of secular political authority.⁸ But the Eastern churches, whose perspective was silenced at Chalcedon, never stopped believing in the *mystery* of Christ’s nature. Thus, Chalcedon hilariously led to The Pope of Rome (West) and the Patriarch of Constantinople (East) *excommunicating each other* in 1054. This (not so) “great schism” created the distinction between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches that remains today.⁹

The Roman Catholic Church is still in decline. Since 1970, weekly church attendance among Catholics has dropped from 55% to 20%, the number of priests declined from 59,000 to 35,000, and the number of people who left Catholicism increased from under 2 million in 1975 to over 30 million in 2018.¹⁰ When theology is dictated solely by self-interested politics, those seeking inspiration, enlightenment, and spiritual satisfaction from religion are turned off and turned away. That is the true “lesson” of Chalcedon, and the Catholic Church was too self-important to realize it. Now, it is paying the price.

⁵ Thomas P. Connelly, Jr., “Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies and the Faith Choice,” Google Docs, last modified November 6, 2024, accessed November 8, 2024.

⁶ “The Council of Chalcedon 451 A.D.,” PapalEncyclicals.net, accessed November 8, 2024.

⁷ Michael Goodyear, “Emperor Zeno,” World History Encyclopedia, last modified June 18, 2018, accessed November 8, 2024.

⁸ Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Lawrence Cunningham, “Roman Catholicism | Definition, Religion, Beliefs, History, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 26, 1999, accessed November 8, 2024.

⁹ “The Split of 1054 between the Orthodox and Catholics,” CatholicBridge.com, last modified 2024, accessed November 8, 2024.

¹⁰ “Phenomenon of Decreasing Christian Affiliation in the Western World,” Wikipedia.org (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., July 30, 2018), last modified July 30, 2018, accessed November 8, 2024.