

The Nature of Christ

Historical Theology

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INTRODUCTION:

Doctrine is important. In latter years, the study of theology and the debating of doctrine has gained a bad reputation. This has come about because of the seemingly endless debates among professing Christians over words and ideas that seem unclear. We have seen tempers flare and churches split over what appears to be silly things and difference in theology is usually cited as the reason for the split.

I imagine wrangling over words has long been a reality. However, it took a remarkable turn in the fifth century church over the question of the nature of Christ.

In studying the major theological conflict of the 5th Century, I benefited less from studying the theological issue itself and more from trying to make sense of exactly why everyone was so worked up about it. To me, it was less about a significant theological issue and more about how men in their pride use a theological disagreement to gain power. In many ways, it was a debate that continued because of overcorrection.

Characters and Background of the Conflict

Apollinaris

Apollinaris was a staunch anti-Arian. However, he was so opposed to the idea that Christ was merely human that he advocated for a divinity that stole his humanity. He overcorrected. His teachings stirred the controversy of the 5th century church even though he died in 382.

It was less a theological consideration because the Bible doesn't really speak to it and more a corporeal concern.

? How can one person be both God and Man? Can two natures fit into one body?

Apollinaris concluded that it was like God wove a human suit to wear while he was among us.

If Arius said that flesh earned deity, Apollinaris said that the divine deified flesh.

? What might be the problem with this?

Theodoret of Antioch accused Apollinarists of confusing the human and divine nature of Christ.

Nestorius

Nestorius received his training in Antioch, lived for a time as a monk. Because of his proficiency in preaching, Emperor Theodosius II backed his appointment to the Bishopric of Constantinople.

When he arrived in Constantinople, there was a controversy over the title of Mary. Some held to the title *theotokos* (mother of God) emphasizing the divinity of Christ in the man Jesus. Others rejected the title because they couldn't see how Mary could give birth to an eternal being.

Nestorius suggested common ground in the term *Christokos*. Jesus emphasized his humanity. Son of God emphasized His deity. Christ represented both coming together in one man.

Furthermore, being from Antioch, he was anti-Apollinarism. He was concerned that in striving for the unity of the person of Christ, the distinction of the two natures would be lost.

He wasn't necessarily opposed to the unity of the natures of Christ, but wanted to emphasize their distinctions.

Cyril

Cyril was the Bishop of Alexandria, the successor to a pugnacious Bishop, his uncle Theophilus. Like his uncle, Cyril used his power as Bishop to deal harshly with his opponents within the church and without.

There had been a long running feud between Antioch and Alexandria and Alexandria and Constantinople. When Cyril heard of a controversial teaching coming out of Constantinople by a follower of Nestorius, he sprung at the opportunity to gain prominence. His teaching emphasized the unity of the person of Christ.

Celestine

Celestine was the Bishop of Rome, who though not attending the councils nor meeting Nestorius nor Cyril passed judgment on Nestorius.

Dioscorus

Dioscorus was the successor of Cyril in Alexandria, who took what Cyril in opposition to heresy too far the other way and became a heretic himself.

Leo I

The Bishop of Rome who, though not attending the councils, wrote a work that was the deciding factor and provided language to the final creed.

Eutyches

Eutyches was a popular monk that erred by focusing on the unity of Christ's person to the eradication of his human nature.

I. THE DEBATE

A. THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS, AD 431

This council was called at Nestorius' request to prove his orthodoxy in the question of the title of Mary. Should she be called *christokos* (Christ-bearer) or *theotokos*? Behind the debate was the theology of Apollinaris. Cyril claimed that Nestorius overcorrected Apollinaris. Nestorius naively thought that it was a simple misunderstanding that could be corrected by direct conversation.

Both Nestorius and Cyril had written to Celestine, the Bishop of Rome, regarding the issues pertaining to Christ's nature. Nestorius wrote to inform Celestine of the happenings in Constantinople regarding the title of Mary. Cyril wrote to condemn Nestorius of heresy and urged Celestine to pass sentence on him, which Celestine was willing to do in a letter.

Bishops arrived at Ephesus over a period of several weeks. The council finally convened on June 22 with about 250 in attendance. This was two weeks after the scheduled commencement. It was a long and difficult journey so that by start time, many representatives were still not present, including John of Antioch and the delegation from Syria (some 42 members).

Cyril took charge though Nestorius refused to acknowledge his chairmanship. Through some political maneuvering, Cyril opened the proceedings. The first order of business was to condemn Nestorius' teaching, which was done by electing to accept Celestine's judgment against him.

By the time the Antiochians arrived and saw what happened, they held their own council in which

they condemned the actions of Cyril. Initially, the emperor approved of the Syrian Council, but later withdrew his support. The Bishops of the East eventually fell into line under Cyril and wrote to the Emperor that the Bishops of the East and West agree that Nestorius should be condemned.

This was a bit of an overstatement as many Nestorians remained and in spite of their condemnation, continued to thrive as a movement. After almost 6 weeks of meetings, Nestorius was excommunicated by the Council of Ephesus.

Not helping Nestorius' cause was the fact that people who truly did hold to a wrong view of Christ's nature now saw Nestorius as a hero. Sometimes we attribute a man's name to a system that the man himself would have been appalled to consider his own.

B. THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON, AD 451

Due to the highly politicized nature of the Council of Ephesus, another council was called twenty years later. This council was convened to reaffirm the condemnation of Nestorius (because his teachings persisted) and to condemn Eutyches who had become so anti-Nestorian that he drifted even past Apollinarism to say that Christ had no humanity.

Cyril had died by this time and his successor, Dioscorus, sided with Eutyches. Pope Leo I succeeded Celestine. Nestorius had died the year prior. With less politics at play, Chalcedon was what Ephesus should have been. The council did affirm the council of Ephesus. It did condemn Eutyches and Dioscorus.

Normally, the losers at a council would take time, rethink their positions, come back and try to

persuade people. This time, the immediate result was the Nestorians leaving to form the Syrian church and the Egyptians separating to form the Coptic Church. That being said, the Church was able to come together in agreement about the nature of Christ based on the wisdom of Leo, about which those present acclaimed, "The voice of Peter!"

II. THE RESOLUTION

The key to this controversy was not to specify exactly what Christ was, but to specify the parameters by which we must think of the issue. The council basically said, "Whatever we decide, Christ must be fully human and fully divine without diminishing either or forming a third entity."

In essence, Christ is 1 person having 2 natures.

Chalcedonian Creed

We, then, following the holy fathers, all with one consent teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and body; coessential with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us.

CONCLUSION

The problem was that this was a question left largely unanswered by Scripture.

1. We don't know how natures work.
2. Christ is a great term for a profound mystery.

In the end, what settled the politics was Leo's use of Scripture

Two things are forgotten about theology by the critics and those who would be persuaded by them:

1. Theology is an exact study.

Just as science uses principles and rules to extract the meaning of known data. Theology uses principles and rules (hermeneutics) to extract truth from known data (the Bible). Theology then is more profound (we are not merely searching for facts, but understanding truth, what's the difference?). Theology is also more contained. We only look for it in the Bible.

2. A majority of Christians agree on a majority of doctrine.

The parts that we disagree about are really pretty technical. That doesn't mean that they are unimportant nor that they aren't reasons to worship separately, but in the end we call each other brother and wait for more clarity.

3. Deuteronomy 29:29

Many will say that theology is futile because God is too vast to understand. They might even quote Deuteronomy 29:29a, but God also included Deuteronomy 29:29b.

Appendix

3rd Letter from Nestorius to Celestine

To Celestine the Pope, from Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople.

I have learned that Cyril, the most distinguished bishop of the city of Alexandria, has become worried about reports against him that we received, and is now hunting for subterfuges to avoid a holy synod taking place due to these reports. In the meantime he is devising some other disturbances over terms and has chosen [as a point of controversy] the term *Theotokos* and *Christotokos*: the first he allows, but as for *Christotokos*, sometimes he removes it from the gospels, and sometimes he allows it, on the basis of what I believe is a kind of excessive prudence. In the case of the term *Theotokos*, I am not opposed to those who want to say it, unless it should advance to the confusion of natures in the manner of the madness of Apollinaris or Arius. Nonetheless, I have no doubt that the term *Theotokos* is inferior to the term *Christotokos*, as the latter is mentioned by the angels and the gospels. And if I were not speaking to Your Worship who is already so knowledgeable, I would need to give a very long discourse on this topic. But even without a discourse, it is known in every way to Your Beatitude, that if we should think that there are two groups opposed to each other, the one using only the term *Theotokos*, the other only *Anthropotokos*, and each group draws [others] to what it confesses or, if they have not accomplished this, puts [others] in danger of falling from the church, it would be necessary to assign someone to such an affair if it arises who exercises concern for both groups and heals the danger of both parties by means of the term taken from the gospels that signifies both natures. For as I said, the term *Christotokos* keeps the assertion of both parties to the proper limits, because it both removes the blasphemy of Paul of Samosata, who claimed that Christ the Lord of all was simply a human being, and also flees the wickedness of Arius and Apollinaris. Now I have written these very things to the most distinguished bishop of Alexandria, as Your Beatitude can tell from the copies I have attached to this letter of mine, as well as from the copies of what he wrote to us. Moreover, with God's help it has also been agreed to announce a world-wide synod in order to inquire into the other ecclesiastical matters. For I do not think it will be difficult to investigate an uncertainty over words, and it is not a hindrance for a discussion of the divinity of Christ the Lord.