

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

The Person of Christ The Humanity of Christ...Nestorius

Recently, Kenneth Woodward wrote the following for Newsweek Magazine.

This week a large box shipped from California and addressed to "His Holiness, John Paul II" will arrive at the Vatican. The shipping label lists a dozen countries--from every continent but Antarctica--plus a number 40,383, indicating the quantity of signatures inside. Each signature is attached to a petition asking the pope to exercise the power of papal infallibility to proclaim a new dogma of the Roman Catholic faith: that the Virgin Mary is "Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate for the People of God."

Such a move would elevate Mary's status dramatically beyond what most Christians profess. But in the last four years, the pope has received 4,340,429 signatures from 157 countries--an average of 100,000 a month--supporting the proposed dogma. Among the notable supporters are Mother Teresa of Calcutta, nearly 500 bishops and 42 cardinals, including John O'Connor of New York, Joseph Glemp of Poland and half a dozen cardinals at the Vatican itself. Nothing like this organized petition drive has ever been seen in Rome. But then, it isn't often that Catholics beg a pope to make an infallible pronouncement.

If the drive succeeds, Catholics would be obliged as a matter of faith to accept three extraordinary doctrines: that Mary participates in the redemption achieved by her son, that all graces that flow from the suffering and death of Jesus Christ

are granted only through Mary's intercession with her son, and that all prayers and petitions from the faithful on earth must likewise flow through Mary, who then brings them to the attention of Jesus. This is what theologians call high Mariology, and it seems to contradict the basic New Testament belief that "there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (I Timothy 2:5). In place of the Holy Trinity, it would appear, there would be a kind of Holy Quartet, with Mary playing the multiple roles of daughter of the Father, mother of the Son and spouse of the Holy Spirit.

Now what we've been looking at the last few weeks is the way in which the Church of Christ has sought to hang on to the biblical teaching concerning the person of Christ. In our first few lessons, we were concerned with understanding how the church fought through several of the early heresies regarding the deity of Christ. Today, we want to look at how the church hammered out the question of the humanity of Christ.

You may be asking, **"O.K., I understand that we are working through the history of how the church struggled with the biblical understanding of our Lord's humanity, but what's all the Mary stuff about?"** Well, I'm glad you asked. The story of how the church struggled through the question of Christ's humanity begins really with the story of one word. It seems that with every great theological debate the early church faced there was one word that crystallized the issues for all sides involved. In the fifth century, it was the word **"theotokos"** and that word invariably involved Mary.

The bishop of Antioch, Nestorius by name, objected to Cyril of Alexandria's use of the word **"theotokos"**. He did not mind **"Christotokos"** or **"anthropotokos"** but he hated the idea of **"theotokos"**. **"Theotokos"** you see means "Mother of God". Nestorius would admit that the "logos" came from heaven and indwelt

the man Jesus. But he felt that the idea of two natures in one person was very confusing. Instead, Nestorius really emphasized the separation of the two natures. The two natures were in close moral fellowship with each other. They were in close moral juxtaposition with each other, but the two natures were not just to be distinguished, they were to be separated. There is obviously an important theological difference between distinguishing and separating the two natures of Christ.

Nestorius also argued that to say Mary was **“theotokos”** had enormous implications concerning Mary. He argued that to say that Mary bore God, meant she would be given an elevated place in theology that she did not rightly deserve. The fathers at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) argued in return that to say Mary was not **“theotokos”** had enormous implications concerning the Person of Christ. If Mary was not **“theotokos”** then Christ was not truly man and yet truly God in one person.

Now just as a matter of historical interest how do you think the Reformers handled the idea of Mary as the **“theotokos”**? How would they deal with the phrase “Mary, Mother of God”? By their time an extensive effort was already under way to exalt Mary to a position unknown in the New Testament, so how would they have handled the term? Actually, they affirmed the idea. In doing so they were not affirming any kind of elevated notions about Mary, instead they were trying to affirm deity and humanity of Christ in one person.

Listen to Calvin:

“But what else is this than to contend that Christ is not man because he is God, not God because he is man and neither God nor man because he is both at once. Christ, therefore, as God and man, possessing natures which are united, but not confused, we conclude that he is our Lord and the true Son of God, even according to his humanity, though not by means of his humanity. For we must put far from us the heresy of Nestorius, who, presuming to dissect rather than distinguish between the two natures, devised a double Christ. But we see the Scripture loudly protesting against this, when the name of the Son of God is given to him who is born of a Virgin, and the Virgin herself is called the mother of our Lord, (Luke 1:32, 43.)”

Although Nestorius argued that to use the term **“theotokos”** would mean an elevation of Mary, the real issue for him was the unity of the Person of Christ. For Nestorius, **“nature”** equaled **“person”**, so Nestorius argued that to truly have two natures, there must be two persons. Nestorius did not distinguish the two natures; he separated them into two persons. The charge that Nestorius faced was that by separating the two natures of Christ into two persons, he diminished the deity of the person of Christ.

Let me give you a sample. Nestorius anathematized his arch-enemy Cyril of Alexandria. Listen to his anathema.

“If any one says that the form of a servant should, for its own sake, that is, in reference to its own nature, be revered, and that it is the ruler of all things, and not rather that on account of its connection with the holy and in itself universally-ruling nature of the Only begotten, it is to be revered; let him be anathema.”

Now you can see in that phrase **“for its own sake”** the desire of Nestorius to separate the two natures of Christ, that is, to not attribute to the human nature of Christ the same worship and devotion one would to the divine nature of Christ. You can also see it in the use of the word **“connection”**. Nestorius is arguing that there are two natures and they must be separated. It is a matter of history that

the church understood him as separating them into two persons. Yet, many historians feel that Nestorius was treated unfairly. I think if any one phrase really cooked his goose, it was the one that is reported to have been used by him at the Council of Ephesus. He is credited with saying:

“I can never allow that a child of three months old was God.”

You can see the implications. He was struggling to harmonize humanity and deity in one person. He did not want to give up either so he stressed the separation of the two natures so much so that the logical conclusion to his thought led to the idea of two persons. Now regardless of whether classical Nestorianism represents the view that Nestorius actually held doesn't matter. The church was compelled in the controversy to hammer out the biblical teaching of Christ's two natures and as a result the doctrine of Mary as “**theotokos**” was upheld and both he and his teachings were condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

Now there is a sense in which we can be very sympathetic to Nestorius. He has proved to be right in that Mary has received in Catholicism an exalted role that is certainly different than the one found in the New Testament. Also, there really is a problem of how we are to reconcile New Testament passages where Jesus is attributed with growing in wisdom and knowledge along with the idea that He possessed all the fullness of God's attributes. Put more simply, how could Jesus be omniscient and still learn how to read? How could He be omnipresent and be restricted to a manger? How could He be omnipotent and suffer? For Nestorius, the solution was to separate the natures of Christ, so that Christ learned to read in His human nature, was restricted in time and space in His human nature,

suffered in His human nature. He wound up not distinguishing but separating. As a logical result things and events wound up not effecting the whole Person of Christ, but rather only the human nature of Christ. Nestorius was not guilty of saying too little, he was guilty of saying too much.

Shortly after Nestorius, the pendulum swung the other way. A man by the name of Eutyches came along and stressed the opposite side of Nestorius' logic. Eutyches argued that Christ was a whole person and the implication attached to that idea was that if Christ was a whole person He had to have only one nature. In Nestorius we see two natures meaning two persons. In Eutyches we see one person meaning one nature. Eutyches thought the two natures of Christ were blended together to produce what amounted to a "*tertian quid*", that is a third substance. Eutyches saw the nature of Christ as being something altogether new and different. He understood the nature of Christ to be a new theanthropic mixture. He was accused of diminishing both deity and humanity of Christ.

Listen to Calvin:

"We must beware also of the insane fancy of Eutyches, lest, when we would demonstrate the unity of person, we destroy the two natures. The many passages we have already quoted, in which the divinity is distinguished from the humanity, ... For the present, one passage will suffice — Christ would not have called his body a temple, (John 2:19,) had not the Godhead distinctly dwelt in it. Wherefore, as Nestorius had been justly condemned in the Council of Ephesus, so afterwards was Eutyches in Chalcedon, it being not more lawful to confound the two natures of Christ than to divide them."

At the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) the church faced the heresy of Eutychianism head on. In doing so they looked back on what Ephesus had stated

in dealing with Nestorius and formulated what has come to be considered by all orthodox Christians as the great statement of Christological reflection.

We confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man...consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin; begotten from the Father before the ages as regards His Godhead, and ...because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as regards His manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one prosopon and one hypostasis not parted or divided...

Now, it's easy to see the important issues being settled at Chalcedon. The two natures of Christ are affirmed, "**vera deus**" and "**vera homo**", truly God and truly man. Obviously, the concept of "**theotokos**" is affirmed, not because of Mary but because of Christ. Eutyches and Nestorius are both condemned whether rightly or wrongly based upon what the church understood their positions to be and the historic affirmation that Christ has two natures in one person is clearly spelled out.

Now in order to keep you from feeling that this is an idle attempt at theological speculation. I want to take a minute and show you how the concepts fleshed out at Chalcedon had impact on the later theology of the church and in this regard I am borrowing the following completely from R.C. Sproul. Let me ask you a question. What was the one great misfortune of the Reformation?

Most scholars agree that the one great misfortune of the Reformation was that the Reformed church of Calvin and Knox and others could not unite with the Lutheran church. Had they united, they would have formed an enormous, monolithic assault on Catholicism. But why could they not unite? It is an interesting question, is it not? We might be led to think it was because of Calvin's doctrine of election, but as R.C. Sproul points out Calvin was a pussycat compared to Luther on the doctrine of election. Any disagreement that appeared between Lutherans and Calvinists came later as a dispute of lesser men. Actually, the reason they could not come to an agreement was because they disagreed about the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

Catholics had long taught that the elements transubstantiate into the body and blood of Christ. Of course, they argued that the elements still looked like bread and wine and tasted like bread and wine but that underneath the appearance, the elements were transformed into the flesh and blood. Luther denied this idea, but he did argue that the presence of Christ's body was communicated in, with and through the elements. Calvin inquired, "How can that be?"

If Christ is in heaven in a physical body, how can the materiality of His body be in the communion at Geneva and Strasbourg at the same time?

Luther argued that the attributes of Christ's divine nature have been communicated to His human nature so that His human nature now has the ability of omnipresence. Luther used the word "ubiquity" to describe this idea. For Luther, ubiquity meant "**everywhereness**". Calvin, thinking back to Chalcedon promptly charged the Lutherans with being guilty of Eutychianism.

Lutherans were guilty of confusing the two natures, in fact, they combined the two natures.

The Lutherans promptly fired back the charge of Nestorianism against the Calvinists. It is a charge they make to this day. By denying the omnipresence of the person of Christ, Calvinists were guilty they charged of dividing the person of Christ into two persons, one human and physical and one spiritual and divine, one bound to heaven and one free to be omnipresent. They argued that the communication of attributes is clearly taught in the New Testament. You have, for instance, Jesus slipping through the hands of angry mobs and even passing through walls into the presence of the disciples.

NIV Luke 24:36...While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." ⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.

Later, hundreds of years later, other discussions arose about the peccability of Christ. The issue in that discussion was whether Christ could have sinned. Reformed theology said no, Christ could not have sinned. They argued that if you take a divine nature that is incapable of sin and combine it with a human nature that might or might not sin, you produced a person that could not sin. They were, of course, accused labeled as being guilty of Eutychianism straight-away.

Some of the early charismatics argued that Christ could have sinned otherwise He faced no actual temptations. He had a human nature just like us. Calvinists countered back that they were failing to apprehend the oneness of Christ's person and charged them with being guilty of Nestorianism.

So what are we to think? Can these issues ever be resolved? Many scholars say no. What the church accomplished at Chalcedon was mind-boggling and cannot be improved upon. There is, in effect, a curtain that has been drawn and as such we are trying to peer into the imponderables of God. Yet, modern men and modern women do not accept such imponderables; after all we have microchips and Pentium processors and cable TV. Yet, there really is a sense in which we hardly ever take the time to reflect deeply upon the things of God.

My purpose in setting this material before you is to show you that there is room for deep theological reflection, there is room to contemplate the Lord Christ. Mostly, we are unaware in our narcissism that others have done so and as a result we live puny Christian lives neither drinking at the well of others or even drinking at our own wells. The greatest thoughts that have ever been thought are the thoughts that have been thought concerning Christ and I am imploring you to take the time to consider Who He is so that we will be rightly equipped to consider what He has done. It is the contemplation of the person of Christ and the work of Christ that we find ultimate practicality. For all of us the issue of ultimate practicality is only one missed heartbeat away.

For those of you, who still struggle to see how any of this might have devotional meaning, allow to me to quote Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers concerning the God-man Christ.

“The sacred books acknowledge with regard to Christ, that as He is the Son of man, so is the same Being not a [mere] man; and as He is flesh, so is He also spirit, and the Word of God, and God. And as He was born of Mary in the last times, so did He also proceed from God as the First-begotten of every creature; and as He hungered, so did He satisfy [others]; and as He thirsted, so did He of old cause the Jews to drink, for the “Rock was Christ” Himself: thus does Jesus now give to His believing people power to drink spiritual waters, which spring up to life eternal. And as He was the son of David, so was He also the Lord of David. And as He was from Abraham, so did He also exist before Abraham. And as He was the servant of God, so is He the Son of God, and Lord of the universe. And as He was spit upon ignominiously, so also did He breathe the Holy Spirit into His disciples. And as He was saddened, so also did He give joy to His people. And as He was capable of being handled and touched, so again did He, in a non-apprehensible form, pass through the midst of those who sought to injure Him, and entered without impediment through closed doors. And as He slept, so did He also rule the sea, the winds, and the storms. And as He suffered, so also is He alive, and life-giving, and healing all our infirmity. And as He died, so is He also the Resurrection of the dead. He suffered shame on earth, while He is higher than all glory and praise in heaven; who, “though He was crucified through weakness, yet He liveth by divine power;” who “descended into the lower parts of the earth,” and who “ascended up above the heavens;” for whom a manger sufficed, yet who filled all things; who was dead, yet who liveth forever and ever. Amen.”