

Lecture 5. Christology of the Early Church: Part II

This lecture picks up where the previous lecture left off; in it we will continue to look at the Christology present in the first seven centuries of the Church. This was a period of intense reflection on the identity of Christ, with theologians and ordinary believers reflecting on the New Testament witness to Christ and responding to a number of theological controversies that arose in the Church. The often rancorous debates occasioned by these controversies led the Church to formulate some important dogmatic statements about the identity of Christ.

I. The Council of Nicea (325 CE): The famous Council of Nicea was fomented by a controversy that sprung up around the writings and theology of Arius (for whom the Arian Heresy is named). In 318-319 - commenting on Proverbs - Arius argued for a radical difference between the unbegotten Father and the only begotten Son. The Son/Word is the highest creature, "There was when [the Son] was not." The Son/Word took the place of the human soul in Jesus - so Jesus is neither truly divine nor truly human.

Arian teachings: The absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God. That divinity cannot be shared. The Son does not have communion with or direct knowledge of the Father. Attempts to craft a rational theology of the cross: a "lesser" God (the Son/Word) experienced suffering for the transcendent God.

Constantine calls the Council of Nicea, and the bishops take up an existing baptismal creed and modify it in light of the dispute - the first installment of the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople. The Son is "only begotten," "begotten not made," and "light from light, true God from true God." The Son is "consubstantial" ("one in being"; homoousios) with the Father—there has been much debate over the use of this term.

Athanasius - defends the teaching of Nicea - salvation is communion with God, thus, the Son must be truly divine if in Christ we experience salvation.

Apollinarius argued that Jesus lacked a complete human soul, a human center of life and consciousness. This was then addressed in Constantinople.

Constantinople I (381 CE) modified and added to a version of the Nicene Creed. Expanded the section on the Holy Spirit. Rejected the teaching of Apollinarius about the humanity of Jesus. "What is not assumed is not saved" (Gregory of Nazianzus and others).

II The Council of Ephesus (431 CE): Tension between two strains of Christology associated with two geographic centers functioned as the catalyst for the Council of Ephesus. Alexandrian Christology: emphasized the unity of Christ and the full divinity of Christ. Antiochene Christology: emphasized the distinction of the human and divine natures and the genuine humanity of Christ.

In 428 CE, Nestorius challenges the title for Mary of Theotokos ("God-bearer"; "Mother of God").

Cyril of Alexandria opposed Nestorius - because of the unity of Christ's Person, Mary can be called the Mother of God - Mary gave birth to the Son of God incarnate.

The Council of Ephesus: Rejects the teaching of Nestorius. Affirms the title Theotokos. Confirms the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople. The Virgin in Prayer by Sassoferrato, 1640-50 Accepts one of the letters that Cyril wrote to Nestorius as an authoritative interpretation of the Creed.

III. The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) After Cyril's death the Alexandrians become more extreme—Eutyches: Christ had only one nature (monophysitism). Leo I writes his "Tome" to Flavian. The Emperor Marcian convokes the Council of Chalcedon and the Council composes a Christological statement. The unity of Christ: "one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ" The distinction of natures: "complete in his divinity and complete in his humanity" - "in two natures" Homoousios with the Father as to his divinity, homoousios with us as to his humanity.

Reaffirmation of Theotokos - one Person, one hypostasis Four adverbs: "Without confusion and without change" (against monophysitism; affirms the completeness of each nature) "Without division and without separation" (against Nestorianism; affirms the unity of Christ)

Chalcedon's teaching is not accepted by all - non-Chalcedonian churches continue today: Monophysite Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia. Nestorian Christians in India and Iraq. Even so, significant ecumenical agreement on Christology has been reached. The meaning of terms changes through the centuries (e.g., speaking of Christ as "one divine Person" - this is "person" in the ontological sense, not in the psychological sense - in Christ there is a fully human consciousness and human freedom).

The natures of Christ are of fundamental importance to our relationship with God. If Jesus is not 'true God of true God,' then we do not know God in human terms. God thus would remain distant and elusive, transcendent beyond human comprehension. We can know God in a personal way and know what God is like only if Jesus is truly God. We can see that God's love for us is genuinely self-giving only if Jesus is truly God.

If Jesus is not truly human, then we cannot fathom the depths of God's love. Only in Jesus' full humanity, with the limitations thereof, can we grasp that God loved us to the point of self-subjection to our fragility and infirmity. Only if Jesus experienced the same fear, dread, and hope brought on by unknowing that we do, could phrases such as "Not my will but yours be done," and "No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for those he loves," meaningfully speak to us.

Only through Jesus' divinity can we know God in a way relevant to our finite, human minds. Only through Jesus' humanity can we know God as "God with us" and "God for us." - Raymond Brown, Introduction to New Testament Christology, 150-151.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you react to these Christological debates and decisions in the early Church?
2. Do you think that ordinary believers understand what they are saying when they profess the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople at liturgy? If not, how can it be made more understandable for them?
3. Do Brown's comments about this Christological development resonate with you? When all is said and done, is it really about the love of God?