

CPC Church History I
March 15, 2009
Apollinarianism and Nestorianism

Trinitarian Wrap-up

2nd Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 381, revised and finalized the Nicene Creed, incorporating Athanasius reflections on the Holy Spirit, and marking the last ecumenical word on the doctrine of the Trinity. Trinitarian reflection would continue, but it would turn to varying ways of understanding the doctrine accepted by Constantinople I and formalized in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Christology

At this point in our journey, we turn from a primary focus on the Trinity to a primary focus on the person of Christ.

- Christ is fully God, as has been the point of the Trinitarian discussions to this point.
- Christ is also human.
- How are these two claims to fit together?
- One of the central questions was concerning Christ's cognitive faculties. (Almost) everyone acknowledged that he had a human body, but did he also have a human mind? Or did the Word supply his mind? The question ultimately becomes whether there are one or two minds in Christ (for it cannot be denied that the intellect of the Logos is there).

Apollinarius

The heretic Apollinarius found every suggestion that there were two minds in Christ to imply that there were in fact two different individuals, the one the Son of God and the other the son of Mary. His contention was that there must be a single Son, and therefore one single mind.

- Thus, he argues that there is no human mind in Christ.
- He teaches that the flesh of Christ and his divinity become one nature. Christ is not one person existing in two natures, but one person in one nature, which comes from two natures.
- Further, Christ's body is divinized by its union with the Word, and is therefore unlike ours.

Problems

- Ultimately, it seemed to the Church that a Jesus who had only a body, and a body completely unlike ours, was not really human, but only seemed to be human.
- In fact, since the most characteristic thing about humans is not our bodies (dogs, cats, goats all have these) but our rational souls, if Christ doesn't have this, then either he is not a man, or at best, a monstrosity (imagine a human without a soul).
- Also, if Christ's mind were entirely divine and not human, then why is he shown in the Gospels to not know some things, or to feel powerful emotions (which God cannot do), etc.?

Orthodox Response

The Council of Constantinople in 381, condemned Apollinarianism.

- The famous response comes from Gregory of Nazianzus, who writes: “What has not been assumed cannot be restored; it is what is united with God that is saved.” Thus, if Jesus did not have a human soul, he did not save human souls, which is nonsense. Therefore, Jesus must have had a human soul, been in fact human in every way that we are, accept without sin.
- The two natures, divine and human, do not join in Christ, they meet, but each remains what it is.
- Here an Orthodox principle (not a new one) comes into play. Called the *communicatio idiomatum*, or the “sharing of names,” it asserts that because of the Incarnation, what may be said properly of God may be said improperly of the human nature of Christ, and vice versa. So, for example, in Christ we may say that God suffered. Of course it is impossible for God to suffer, and the Orthodox do not believe this really happened. It was in Christ’s human nature that he suffered. But because his divinity and his humanity are joined in his person, it is not wrong to say that God suffered, as long as we understand that we are speaking loosely.
 - It must be born in mind that this principle is only about the things we say—it is not meant to reflect the order of things, as if in some mysterious way God suffered. The claim here is that he did not, but we can say so as a kind of shorthand for “Jesus who was God and man suffered.”

As part of this discussion, two main ways of looking at Christ became evident. The first was the strategy of considering him as “Word-flesh,” where the emphasis is on the divine Word in the person of Christ, and a lack of interest in the human soul (an orthodox version of this might affirm a human soul in Christ, but then have very little to say about it). The second was the “Word-man” strategy, which emphasized the completeness of the human nature, but often had less to say about how the Word was to be understood to function in the person of Christ.

Nestorius

Made Patriarch of Constantinople in 428, he was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus (the 3rd Ecumenical Council) in 431 and subsequently exiled, where his stringent missionary activity was largely responsible for the establishment of the Syrian church, which to this day venerates him as a saint. Nestorius was a great preacher, but was not careful about the way that he said certain things. His preaching led him to his position, his lack of care led him to exile. A text discovered in 1895 from the end of Nestorius’ life contains his own claim that he never held the doctrine that was condemned by the Council. If this text is genuine and if Nestorius’ account is accurate, then it was his imprecision in language that caused so much trouble. It would also indicate that all involved felt the following doctrines to be false and heretical.

- Nestorius was asked early on to comment on the name “God-bearer,” commonly applied to the Virgin Mary. Nestorius felt that this was in the strictest sense not accurate, and that “Christ-bearing” would be more accurate. His reasoning was that Mary was not the mother of the divine nature, nor of the Father or the Holy Spirit, nor even of the 2nd person of the Trinity. What Mary bore was a man, which is all she would have been capable of bearing in any event.

- Nestorius feared that “God-bearing” would either be understood in the Arian sense, that the Son was a created being, or in an Apollinarian sense, that Christ’s manhood was somehow deficient.
- It was of primary importance for Nestorius to keep the divine and human natures in Christ from getting somehow fused together. “I hold the two natures apart, but unite the worship.”
- He largely rejected the *communicatio idiomatum*, judging it to be contrary to the practice of Scripture. He seems to have felt it would be too misleading.
- It was important that Christ live a genuinely human life, which would not have happened had his human mind been too dominated by his divine mind. So Christ’s two minds, existing side by side, had very little interaction with each other, for the human could not understand the divine, and the divine must not usurp the human.
- Each nature, he felt, had to have its own individuality. The word he used to describe this was the word that the Church was in the process of deciding would mean “person,” or what there were 3 of in God and 1 of in Christ.
- Because of all of this, the conclusion was drawn that he was teaching that Christ was two natures and two persons, and therefore he was in essence teaching two Christs, one divine and one human. Nestorius’ fundamental error seems to have been, not in his firm distinguishing of the natures, but in his inability to express their personal union.

Against Nestorius, the following were affirmed:

- Mary was to be called “God-bearer;” not to do so was understood to be a denial of the divinity of Christ. For the Church confesses that it is true that Mary gave birth to one who was God.
- Nestorius’ understanding of the relationship between Christ’s divinity and humanity seem to make their union a purely external one—it did not tie them closely enough together. But this is not strong enough, for it makes the Incarnation to be illusory—in such a picture, Christ did not *become* man, he was just really closely associated with a particular man.

The full resolution of these issues was also the finalization of orthodox Christology. It did not come at Ephesus, when Nestorius was condemned, but 20 years later at the 4th Ecumenical Council, held in the city of Chalcedon. It is this council, and the finalization of this doctrine, that will bring our studies this semester to a close. Therefore we will pause for several weeks before reaching it to discuss other important developments in the Church’s theology and practice during the all important 5th century.