

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 31

Fighting Over Jesus – How much God, How much man?

Today's lesson builds from several lessons we have already studied. We will review those lessons briefly before launching into today's lesson!

First we need to review the important centers of the church as well as a critical difference between two of them! Then, we will review the Arian controversy and the resolution reached in the Nicene and Constantinople conferences. Putting these two together, with a sprinkling of the lesson on Constantine, will prepare us for the controversy in the 400's as well as next week's lesson on the issues of the Roman Pope as ultimate authority in the Western church (what we now call the "Roman Catholic Church").

GEOGRAPHY

During the times recorded biblically (specifically Acts), the early church was headquartered in Jerusalem. We read of a council held with the church leaders in Jerusalem, for example, in Acts 15 where those leaders made decisions for the churches that were outside Jerusalem. The basis for the leadership decisions from the Jerusalem church was two-fold: the authority of the Apostles as Jesus originally charged, and the governing role of the Holy Spirit. Luke records the letter written by the apostles and elders as saying, "It seemed good to *the Holy Spirit* and to *us* not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements..." (Acts 15:28).

However, history teaches us that Jerusalem was not the center of the church for long! In 68-70 A.D., the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. The Christian population by and large fled before the destruction. We also have reason to believe that a number of the apostles had already followed the commission of Christ to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19) and had left for the mission fields. For example, we can read from history and deduce with relative certainty from scripture that Peter went to Rome (1 Peter 5:13 indicates Peter is writing from "Babylon," a fairly common description of Rome. Most scholars who accept Peter as the author of 1 and 2 Peter readily agree that Peter wrote from Rome.).

So, where did the church concentrate, if at all? Was there a location where the other churches went for authority? Some of these questions we will answer next week. For this week, we need to recognize that there were several centers of the church that seemed to take dominance for a variety of reasons over other areas.

As we go into the second, third, and fourth centuries, the centers that seemed to command the most attention were Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople. Rome and Antioch were historically significant centers of the faith by scripture alone. Rome could claim both Peter and Paul as two principles behind its early growth. Antioch was the church where disciples were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Alexandria was a significant heritage sight for Jews, and by extension, the church as well. It was in Alexandria that the Jewish scriptures were first translated into Greek, a translation readily used by the apostles in the New Testament. In fact, a number of leaders in the early church believed the Holy Spirit responsible for that translation. The belief was strong enough to cause Jerome quite a bother when he sought to translate the Old Testament into Latin straight from the Hebrew rather than from the Greek version. (See Jerome lesson if you missed that!) Constantinople was significant because the “Christian Emperor” ruled from there! The church became the official religion of the empire in 380, and where the Emperor was, there was power. Any church official that had his ear, and that of his family, would by definition be a center of the faith.

Now, we would like to hope that the church approached these divided power centers with the humility of Christ. History seems to indicate differently. While the motives may have seemed pure to the participants,¹ we can see these four church centers regularly vying to best the other ones and get greater power “for the kingdom.”

This week, we are honing in on disputes between, mostly, the church at Antioch and the church at Alexandria (although these disputes certainly affected the church at large...but more on that later!). We would do well to remember that these two church centers already approached scripture in a significantly different way from each other.

The church at Alexandria was the central learning center for an allegorical view of scripture. Good scholars were expected to look beyond the literal or historical meaning of scripture to find the real spiritual meaning. This meaning was found in an allegorical framework. As authority for this view, the Alexandrians would have appealed to Paul’s use of allegory in Galatians 4. Paul writes that, “It is written that Abraham had two sons.... These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar...and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem.... But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal. 4:22-26).

¹ For as Jeremiah 17:9 records, “the heart is deceitful above all things.” It is amazing what we can rationalize if we choose!

Opposite to this view was the school in Antioch. Antioch was the center for biblical interpretation that was primarily historical and literal. Much like John Chrysostom whom we studied last week, the Antioch approach took scripture at face value looking at it as historically true without the hidden meanings unless the particular scripture indicated that it was to be taken differently.

It is a safe assumption that the two schools of thought did not think much of each other! We may likewise assume that the differing interpretations of scripture inevitably led to differing theologies! We see that in a number of places, several of which we consider this class. As we will also see, these differences caused great political wrangling as each school tried to ensure Constantinople and the Emperor stood behind it.

THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

Now that we've review our geography, we need to refresh our minds on the issues brought about by Arius and his followers. These people believed that Jesus Christ was actually created by God and was not eternal in origin. The church labeled this heresy and through two councils (Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381) brought this heresy to a close.²

But, the issue of "Who was Jesus" was not fully answered in these councils. These councils resolved the pre-existence of Jesus and verbalized the Trinity. However, philosophical questions were still left unanswered. These were the issues that would erupt in the 400's. Various parties used these issues to try to validate their views on church leadership.

What was the dispute over?

The core of the dispute was over how much Jesus was man and how much Jesus was God. Now, we might say at the outset that this probably has never been a major probing issue for most in this class. I dare say that unless you are fairly well steeped in Greek philosophy (maybe the word should be "addicted" rather than "steeped"), this may even seem a silly point of dispute. Certainly, it never bothered the apostles! But they were Hebrews, with a Hebrew mindset, not Greek philosophers trying to integrate Christianity with Greek philosophy!

² Sort of! There was a large number of Arian converts among the Goths. As we reach the late 300's /400's and the Goths were invading, there were some ramifications for the church because of the Goths' Arian beliefs. But, that belongs to a later class.

So, we might first set out the controversy and then look at the ripples left in the church from it. The starting point is that all admit Jesus was God. As God, certain things should apply to Jesus! One important thing is that God is unchanging. Malachi 3:6 plainly states, “I the LORD do not change.” Another is that God cannot be tempted in the way men can. James wrote, “God cannot be tempted by evil” (1:13).

So, how can Jesus be fully God, not change, and be fully man, subject to temptation? Here, we have questions about the will power of Jesus on earth. Was he tempted as we are and just said, “No!”? Was his temptation less than that of a normal human (even discounting the effects of the fall)?

On the other hand, we can set aside the questions of will and look at the mind. Consider these questions: Did Jesus possess the mind of God or the mind of man? Did he have human limitations on his mind? When Jesus was a child in school, did he always have the right answer? Did he never miss a question? Or, was his mind limited? If so, could he say something that was wrong?

The Antiochenes believed that salvation necessitated a full and complete humanity of Jesus. If Jesus was not fully human in his mind, then how can his atonement save our minds? If Jesus was not fully human in his will power, then how could his perfect life serve to substitute for ours and truly conquer our grave? According to the Antiochenes, Jesus had to have a fully personal human life, except one without sin.

Meanwhile, the Alexandrians differed on this point. To the Alexandrians, the body Jesus had “did not have to have its own independent center of intellect, action and will.”³ They argued that Jesus’ body was an impersonal human nature (This was a lot easier to do when your approach to scripture is allegory based!). Essentially, this was a denial that Jesus was fully human.

At the Council of Constantinople, one advocate of the Alexandrian school, a fellow named Apollinarius believing that only God alone can save sinners, denied the full humanity of Jesus and, as a result, had his teaching condemned. As the Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, “that which He has not assumed He has not healed.” Gregory went on to add that if only half of Adam fell, then Jesus only needed to be half human to save. But if all of Adam fell, then we need a savior who is completely human.

³ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Intervarsity Press 1999), p. 207.

The Antiochenes had a voice piece on this issue named “Theodore of Mopsuestia!” Theodore’s basic principles for his teaching on this issue centered on all of the Godhead as unchanging; yet, Jesus had free will and struggled in his human form. When this is sifted out, the result for Theodore was that God did not change when he became man, and while the manhood was fully intact with its mind and will, there was some change in the human. God assumed humanity, and humanity was assumed by God.

But, it was not the other way around! Humanity did not assume God. Humanity was assumed by God and became God. God then lived in a human form. Theodore would work hard to emphasize the union as one where we cannot readily separate the two natures. Theodore would use the word “one person” to describe both natures in Jesus.

Needless to say, the Alexandrians were upset. Not only by the teaching of the Antiochenes, but also by the condemnation of Apollinarius by the council of Constantinople. Then, the big blow up came. The year was 428. An Antiochene named Nestorius was the new Bishop in Constantinople (bad from the Alexandrian perspective...they wanted the ear of the Emperor, rather than the Antiochenes having it!). Nestorius preached a sermon on Mary the mother of Jesus. A major point of the sermon was that believers should **NOT** call Mary the Greek word “*theotokos*” (θεοτοκος).

Now we need to know that *theotokos* can be translated “mother of God,” but the translation is not solid. The translation is more literal as “bearer of God.” In fact, many Eastern Orthodox churches today that give their liturgies in English will keep this word in Greek rather than give an inadequate translation. Nestorius thought it wrong to suggest, as *theotokos* does, that Mary brought forth God. Mary did not. Mary brought forth the Christ child, the human nature, but not the divine nature. Nestorius taught that divine nature cannot be born nor can it die. He would allow people to say, “Christ was born of a woman” but not that “God was born of a woman.” Furthermore, he felt if Mary gave birth to God, then Jesus was not fully human.

When word got back to the Alexandrians, they were horrified. Not only was Nestorius speaking ill of Mary (especially bad in light of the Holy Spirit’s statement through Elizabeth that Mary is “Blessed among women” [Luke 1:42]), but he also did so in a sermon on Christmas morning! The Alexandrians were waiting for a slip up from the Antiochenes, and this was seen as it! Cyril was the bishop of Alexandria at the time, and while we must be careful assigning motives to people, evidence seems to indicate both Nestorius and Cyril were not quite on the up and up in their behavior.

We say this because Nestorius knew that the Alexandrians were fond of calling Mary *theotokos* and most likely directed his sermon at them (basically, he was calling them heretics at that point). Likewise, we have a good indication Cyril had spies in the services waiting to catch Nestorius in a mistake! Cyril then went to work to bring down the Antiochene Bishop of Constantinople. Cyril (most historians agree, though certainly we have no eyewitnesses!) had anonymous placards set up around Constantinople suggesting Nestorius was heretical in his views on Mary and Jesus.

Cyril also started writing letters to Nestorius and other bishops about the subject. In the letters, Cyril asked a number of questions of Nestorius. The questions put Nestorius (not the sharpest theological mind) in a tough position. He could not really ignore the letters. The more Nestorius wrote, the harder it was to keep clear and orthodox answers. Ultimately, Nestorius presented with two Christs instead of one. He was never able to get the two natures into one person!

When Nestorius refused Cyril's requests that Nestorius recant his views, Cyril appealed to the Bishop of Rome! The Bishop of Rome had an opportunity here to exercise authority over other Bishops that did not necessarily agree with the authority that was rightfully Rome's. So, the Roman bishop (Pope) wrote a letter back to Cyril condemning the views of Nestorius as unorthodox and asserting that he should be removed as Bishop of Constantinople. Cyril took the letter to the Emperor and pressured the Emperor to call a council to investigate and condemn Nestorius.

The Emperor called a council to meet in Ephesus in 431. Cyril and his supporters arrived first. Before anyone else came, Cyril managed to both start and finish the meeting! The end result was condemnation of Nestorius and removal from his position because of his "godless teachings."

Just about the time the meeting was "over," Nestorius and his bishops arrived! Rather than go quietly in the night, Nestorius called to order his own council condemning Cyril and reconfirming Nestorius as Bishop of Constantinople.

Just when things could not get more tangled, the entourage from Rome arrived, joined Cyril and his crew, and reiterated the orders deposing and condemning Nestorius! Now, it was time for the Emperor to sort it all out.

A compromise of sorts was reached. Nestorius was deposed, and no real clarity on the issue of Jesus was reached. The council ultimately chose to proclaim that Jesus had two natures, but they are distinct in thought and not in reality. In other words, Jesus had a full human mind and a full God mind, but only one mind!

Confusing? You bet it is! And, it really is no resolution to the matter. The resolution did not come until a later council held at Chalcedon in 451. The drama behind this council is every bit as compelling as that behind the council at Ephesus. Cyril had died and his successor was a man named Dioscorus. Dioscorus stirred up great trouble and nearly split the church. There was a false synod called, there was heresy adopted in the name of orthodoxy, and there was violence against other bishops. Out of this arose Pope Leo I in ways of authority and power that we will discuss next week.

For this week, however, we should note the conclusion of the Jesus/man issue as given by Chalcedon. Interestingly, the “answer” is not really a solution. Rather, the answer is that of a mystery! Jesus is “one and the same Son; the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rationale soul and body; consubstantial with the Father in Godhead and the same consubstantial with us in manhood; like us in all things except sin...begotten of the Virgin Mary the *Theotokos* as regards his manhood...made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation ... the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one person...not parted or divided into two persons.”

Rather than a comprehensible explanation, we are given a mystery. The truth is found in both sides. Jesus is fully God, and fully human. Yet, he is not two beings, but one.

One might ask, are we supposed to fathom how God could be man, or merely accept that he was? That seems the point of Christian singer/teacher Michael Card. In his song, “To The Mystery,” he writes:

*When the Father long to show
The love He wanted us to know
He sent His only Son and so
Became a holy embryo*

*That is the Mystery
More than you can see
Give up on your pondering
And fall down on your knees*

*A fiction as fantastic and wild
A mother made by her own child
A hopeless babe who cried
Was God Incarnate and man deified*

*Because the fall did devastate
Creator must now recreate
So to take our sin
Was made like us so we could be like him*

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “In the beginning was the word...and the word was God... and the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:1, 14).
2. “For as the many died by the trespass of the one man [Adam], how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” (Rom. 5:15-16)
3. “For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin” (Heb. 4:15).
4. The mystery: God "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has even seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16); yet "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9).