

6.2 St Cyril of Alexandria & Monophysite Heresy

e. St. Cyril in Alexandria

St. Cyril simply referred to Christ as one person in two natures

*"...We must understand our Lord Jesus Christ in one person (προσωπον). As the Word he is divinely born before all ages and times...but in these last times was born of a woman according to the flesh. To the same one we attribute both the divine and human characteristics."*¹ And again he uses the term in this way: *"He (Christ) is the one and only son, not one along side another son, considered in this way to be one person..."*²

Nestorius response was to dismiss Cyril as having, *"a spirit sick with the madness of Apollinaris and Arius."*³ It is very clear from the beginning that while they are taking different approaches the difference is much more than approach - they are very real – and very fundamental. Little wonder they view one another as heretical. The central issue is not the term Theotokos – that is the product of the issue. The central issue is the context and attributes of the divine and human properties of Christ.

As previously noted, Nestorius views the properties of Christ as individual, differentiated prosopa (προσωπα), "subjects" rather than natures, and he speaks of this approach as "prosopic," and again, when combined (in Christ) they form a single prosopon (προσωπον) - person. What he is attempting to do, as noted previously, is to isolate the impassible divinity and passible humanity into a single person. But the only way he can do that without the impassible mixing with the passible is to separate them to into two subjects – which means it really is bi-personhood.

For Nestorius and the Antiochans, Christ was a man that had the divine impassible God within him, and as such he was the man *with* God, or as Cyril would say of their belief: *"ανθρωπος θεοφορος*, a man *chosen* by God, and not God Incarnate." Because of the rigid separation of the two subjects, Nestorius did not say, and would not say, *the Word became flesh*, that the flesh of Christ, his humanity, experienced any aspect of divinity. In his words:

*"wherever mention is made of the Lord's economy, the birth and the sufferings are not passed down to us as applied to the Godhead, but to the manhood,"*⁴

What Cyril was in fact teaching, was a clarification of the Patristic interpretation of the bible's teaching about Christ...He says:

¹ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, pg. 133

² *ibid.* pg. 83

³ McGuckin. *Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy*, pg.366 (from the Second Letter of Nestorius to Cyril).

⁴ *ibid.* 366

6.2 St Cyril of Alexandria & Monophysite Heresy

“Godhead is one thing, manhood quite another. So what are those things which we say have come into unification? One cannot speak of things ‘united’ when there is only one thing to start with;

there must be two or more...but they are not separated...in terms of individual distinctiveness, so that they exist apart and distant from one another. On the contrary they are brought together into

an indissoluble union, for as John says: ‘the Word became flesh.’”⁵

The word Nestorius uses to describe the relationship of the properties of Christ is very telling: “*conjunction*,” which is in stark contrast to St. Cyril’s use of the term “*union*.” This is another very consistent and significant difference between them. For Nestorius the “*subjects*” are conjoined in the “*person*” of Christ. As it implies, they are together but rigidly separate.

For St. Cyril however, there is a union of the natures within the one person that was expressed as - a union according to hypostasis, or “*Hypostatic Union*” as it would come to be known.⁶ He also employed other phrases clearly meant to convey the richness and complexity of the Hypostatic Union, such as: “*one out of two*,” and “*of two different things, of two complete things*.”⁷ And so from this we have the “*what*” of the incarnation, of the Logos becoming flesh; the communion of properties is a hypostatic union of the natures of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ.

St. Cyril of Alexandria:

“The Logos suffered impassibly”

“The whole mystery of the incarnation is in the condescension and humility of Christ.”

“His humanity belongs not to itself but to the Logos.” “...And to the Logos alone can be attributed the authorship of and responsibility for, all (Christ’s) actions.”

“And, with this earthly body, which had become the body of the Logos, he was at once God and man, and combined in himself what was by nature divided and separated.”

“He who was God by nature should, in the act of self emptying, assume everything that went along with it. This is how he would be revealed as ennobling the nature of man in himself by making it participate in his own sacred and divine honors.”

“..one out of two”

⁵ Florovsky, G. *Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, pg.77

⁶ Early in the debate he used Μια φύσις του Θεου Λογου σεσαρκωμενη: the one incarnate φύσις of God the Word. Much of course has been made of this axiom because Monophysites would later use it to substantiate their belief in a single divine nature of Christ. However Cyril explained the use of the term and later abandoned it for the concept he meant to convey from the beginning: one person – υποστασις

⁷ Florovsky, G. *Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, pg.188, 191

6.2 St Cyril of Alexandria & Monophysite Heresy

“...of two different things”

“...of two essences”

“One nature of God the Word incarnate”⁸

“He (Cyril) starts from contemplation and not ideas. Here is where his power lies.”

- G. Florovsky

St. Cyril’s Terminology

Communicatio Idiomatum	Communion of properties”
Impassible/Impassibility	The absolute “otherness” and separation of God by nature from all that is not God
Passible/passibility	The state of all creatures to be affected by conditions outside themselves
God-in-Himself	The impassible nature of God within the Holy Trinity. Used by Cyril to explain how the Trinity remained impassible while Christ as the Logos suffered and died
God-in-man	Cyril’s phrase to explain how Christ as God suffered & died
Ousia (ουσια)	The essence of God, the term was used as “nature” or “substance,” “genus.” Usually in context of the Trinity
Hypostasis (υποστασις)	Used early as “nature.” Cyril will replace physis with this as “the actual concrete reality of a thing” or existence.”
Prosopon (προσωπον)	Historically used as “face/ mask,” Nestorius uses as “the observable character,” or “defining properties” with non-ontological “mask” connotation
prosopa (προσωπα)	Nestorius’ term for the individual subjects within the prosopon - divided into “divine” and “human.”
Henosis (ενωσις)	“Union.” Cyril’s term for the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ
kenosin (κενωσιν)	“Self emptying” of the Logos to become true man while remaining God

⁸ Μια φύσις του Θεου Λόγου σεσαρκωμένη; the one incarnate φύσις of God the Word. Much of course has been made of this axiom because Monophysites would later use it to show Cyril taught a single, divine, nature in Christ. However He explained the use of the term and later abandoned it for the concept he meant to convey from the beginning: one person (υποστασις) of God the Word incarnate.

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Two Subjects	Implication of Nestorius' teaching of two prosopa, bi-personhood of Christ
"God bearing Man",	Condemned teaching of Nestorius to separate the divinity and humanity of Christ into separate subjects, "God in Temple"
Christotokos	Term adapted by Nestorius to show Logos remained "Christ bearer"- ontologically separate from man
Ἀνθρωποτοκος "bearer of man"	Nestorius' preferred term for Christ, also to avoid popular term "Theotokos "God bearer"
Hypostatic Union	Cyril's term for the ontological union of divine and natures in human Christ, the Logos of God

f. Monophysitism

Monophysitism was an even more serious Christological heresy. It originated in the 5th century A.D. Its chief proponent was the monk Eutyches, who stated that in the person of Jesus Christ the human nature was absorbed into the divine nature like a cube of sugar dissolves in a cup of water. Therefore, Christ was left with only one nature, the Divine (Greek *mono-* one, *physis* - nature).

Eutyches' position on monophysitism went beyond the Christology as expressed by Cyril of Alexandria and is also anathematized by non-Chalcedonians who accept the faith of Cyril. Eutyches formulated this doctrine in response to the heresy of Nestorianism, which divided the person of Christ almost to the point of having two separate persons (not two natures, as the Orthodox believe).

Monophysitism (particularly Eutyches' variety) was condemned at the 4th Ecumenical Council⁹, held in Chalcedon in the year 451. Apollinarianism had previously been condemned at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381.

⁹ The **Fourth Ecumenical Council** took place in Chalcedon in 451 AD, and is also known as the **Council of Chalcedon**. It ruled that Jesus Christ is "in two natures" in opposition to the doctrine of Monophysitism. The council also issued canons dealing mainly with the organization of the Church. The respective acceptance and rejection of this council led to the break between the Chalcedonian Orthodox (the "Eastern Orthodox Church") and the Non-Chalcedonians (the "Oriental Orthodox Church").

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MONOPHYSITE VIEW OF CHRIST
(COPTIC, ARMENIAN, SYRIAN JACOBIAN, MALANKRA, ETHIOPIAN)

TRINITY - GOD IN HIMSELF
(Impassible / Eternity (Theologia))

