

## **Reformed Christology: Modern Nestorianism?**

[Prepared for Professor Gurgel, Systematic Theology 223, May 26, 2000]

*By Justin Cloute*

The Christian Church has existed for almost 2000 years. Throughout those years, false doctrine has continually plagued the church. Some of the most vicious attacks have come from within the visible church, by those who have promoted subtle false doctrine. The first 500 years were especially tumultuous. Trying to take the young Church's eyes off God's Word, Satan worked hard to confuse. Many of the false teachings that infiltrated the Church in those years continued to cycle and recycle in different disguises throughout the history of the Church. This should not surprise us. Heresy has always fought against God's Word by taking on similar forms. King Solomon said it well, when he said "there is nothing new under the sun."

This paper will briefly examine the ancient heresy of Nestorianism, and then show that Reformed Christology is similar to that of Nestorius.

### **Background of the Early Christological Controversy**

By the end of the fourth century AD, the Church had settled on a Scriptural understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. This understanding was expressed in the words of the Athanasian Creed. Unfortunately, upon the settlement of that doctrine, another controversy arose that was inextricably connected to the Trinitarian issue. This controversy is known as the Christological Controversy. The discussions in this controversy sought to understand the person of Christ, and how the two natures, divine and human, relate to each other.

The seeds of this controversy were planted as two opposing schools of thought developed. The first school found its home in Alexandria, which was known for its theological leanings towards speculation and mysticism. Alexandrian theologians emphasized the unity of the two natures in Christ, and in this way diminished the humanity of Christ by mixing it into his divinity. The other school was centered in Antioch and was known for its meticulous reflection and intellect. The school of Antioch focused on the separateness of Christ's natures. They did this to the point that they made Christ into two separate persons. Riots and witch-hunting were a common thing as each school condemned the other of heresy. The tension between these two different schools of thought caused the newly crowned emperor, Marcian, to call a church council in 451 AD.

### **Nestorianism**

About 30 years earlier Nestorius became the bishop of Constantinople. Frightened by the fact that many in Alexandria had begun to call Mary, the *Qeotoko* (God-bearer), Nestorius began to preach against this term. He said that Mary could only be called the *Cristotoko* (Christ-bearer). Since he thought that it was impossible for God to be borne, to suffer, or to die, he proposed that only the human nature of Christ took part in these actions.

Nestorius also believed that it was impossible for Christ to have a human nature without a human personality. For this reason he taught that Christ had two personalities, one human and one divine. He claimed that the "twofold Christ" is displayed in John 2:19, which says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." In his first letter to Cyril of Alexandria, he wrote, "Does he not call himself both a destroyable temple and God who raises him up? And if it was God who was destroyed - and let that blasphemy be shifted to the head of Arius! - the Lord would have said, "Destroy this God and in three days I will raise him up."<sup>1</sup> Nestorius incorrectly takes "temple" to mean "human nature."

It may be best to summarize Nestorius' understanding of how the two natures relate to one other in the person of Christ by using a simile. Nestorius seems to paint the picture of the divine nature as a father who reaches out his hand in order to pull his son (human nature) along with him. The unity of the person is lost in such a picture. Schaff calls this union only a "moral unity, an intimate friendship or conjunction."<sup>2</sup> Here the relation between the two natures is only superficial and mechanical.

Because Nestorius denied the intimate union of natures in the person of Christ, he also denied the unity of Christ in his work. Schaff comments, "It [Nestorian theory] cannot conceive the reality of the two natures without a personal independence for each. With the theanthropic unity of the person of Christ it denies also the theanthropic unity of his work, especially of his sufferings and death; and in the same measure it enfeebles the reality of redemption. Jesus needed to be True God in order to die for the sins of the whole world."<sup>3</sup> Luther emphasized the importance of the unity of the person in Christ's work of redemption. He says, "Otherwise – if He were only man, as other saints are – He would be unable to deliver us from even one sin or to extinguish one little drop of hell's fire with all His holiness, His blood, and His death,"<sup>4</sup> Nestorius made Christ into two separate persons, and thus destroyed Christ's work of reconciliation as the God-Man. Later we will look at passages from Scripture that make it clear that Christ had to be the perfect God-Man in order to redeem the world from sins. But now let's look at how the Council of Chalcedon affirmed Biblical truth by setting limits on what could and could not be said about the person of Christ.

### **The Council of Chalcedon**

Even though the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) anathematized Nestorius, little was done to correct or explain the problems with his doctrine. It was not until 451 AD at the Council of Chalcedon that the issue was addressed. The Symbol of Chalcedon, which was the written statement of the council, basically affirmed four things: 1) Christ is True God 2) He is True Man 3) He is One person 4) The divine and human in Christ must remain distinct.

The elements of the Symbol of Chalcedon that specifically addressed Nestorianism can be found in these two phrases: 1) "one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly (*asugcutw*"), unchangeably (*atrepw*"), *indivisibly* (*adiaretw*"), *inseparably* (*acwristw*") [emphasis mine];" 2) "the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, *not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten* [emphasis mine], God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ;" In the first phrase the word, *adiaretw*", signifies that Christ was not divided with respect to place or space; and the word, *acwristw*", emphasizes that Christ was not divided with respect to time. Chalcedon proclaimed the fact that Christ could not be separated or divided in his Person or His work.

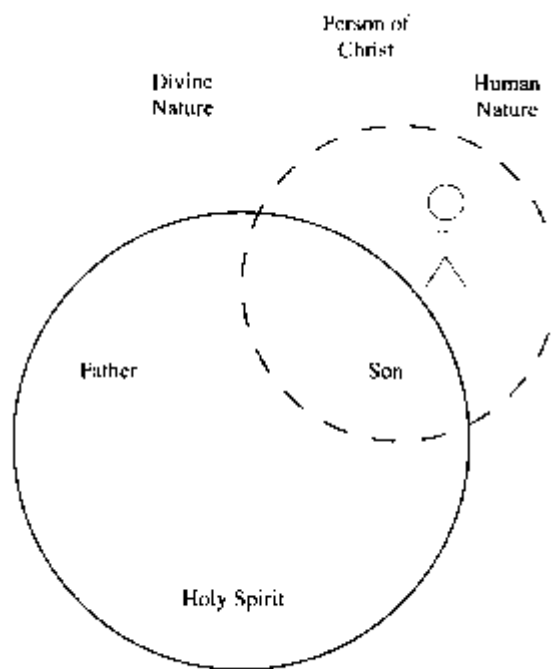
However, a thousand years later, John Calvin once again separated the person of Christ. To this day Reformed Christology, which has its roots in Calvinism, continues to divide the person of Christ 1) in his person and 2) in his work.

### **Reformed Christology**

#### **Christ's natures remain separate in the person of Christ**

Reformed theologians claim agreement with the symbol of Chalcedon, but in reality this agreement is only superficial. "On the basis of the philosophical principle that 'the finite is not

capable of the infinite' (*finitum non est capax infiniti*), they insist that the Son of God, after the incarnation, is not everywhere present according to his human nature, but that his presence is limited to a single place."<sup>5</sup> Grudem, an author of a popular Reformed dogmatics book, says, "When we are talking about Jesus' human nature, we can say he ascended to heaven and is no longer in the world (John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 1:9-11). But with respect to his divine nature, we can say that Jesus is everywhere present."<sup>6</sup> Quotations like this one demonstrate that the Reformed do not hold to the unity of person in Christ as it is found in Scripture and as it was affirmed at Chalcedon. To say that Jesus' human nature is contained within his human body, but that his divine nature supercedes this body and fills everything, is to say that Jesus' human nature was not always with his divine nature. This is a separation of Christ. The This separation of Christ can be seen most clearly in this diagram from Grudem's *Systematic Theology*:<sup>7</sup> (see diagram on next page) [If this diagram did not transfer correctly it can be found in Grudem's *Systematic Theology* p.558]



This diagram shows that like Calvin 400 years earlier, Grudem, insists that the human nature can not contain the divine nature. If we were to judge according to logical principles, which have their origin in the heads of ancient philosophers, we would agree: the finite cannot contain the infinite. But if we judge according to God's divine Word, we have to disagree with this principle, because the finite contained the infinite in the person of Christ. Grudem is

correct in saying that it is impossible for us to fully understand how the divine took on flesh in the person of Christ. We turn to Scripture to understand this union.

**What Scripture says about the communication of natures in Christ:**

Scripture makes it clear that a real union takes place between the divine and human in Christ. Colossians 2:9 says, “For in Christ *all the fullness* of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Notice that it does not say, “the fullness of the deity took on the human nature encompassing it with its presence.” Rather it says quite clearly that: “all the fullness of the Deity (that is, the entire essence of the Logos) lives in Christ (One person) in bodily form.” A careful exegesis of this passage makes it clear that in Christ there is no place where the fullness of God is without his human nature.

This is where the Reformed err. Look back at the diagram. The Bible knows nothing about that area in the dotted lined circle that is outside of the second person of the Trinity. The dotted lined circle is the area in which the Reformed let logic run too far. The divine nature was completely united with the human nature in Christ.

The Bible gives us a lesson in Christ’s nature in three different kinds of passages. The passages that speak about Christ can be divided into: 1) personal propositions 2) *genus idiomaticum* and 3) *genus majesticum*.

First, we see the unity of the person by looking at the personal propositions in Scripture. Here the concrete (that is, “concrete” in the old use. “The divine and human natures as they appear united in the person of Christ”<sup>8</sup>) of either nature is predicated of a concrete of the other nature, so that when the subject and predicate are taken together they name the whole person – Christ.<sup>9</sup> Romans 1:3-4 says, “regarding his Son [concrete of the divine nature], who as to his human nature was a descendant of David [concrete of the human nature], and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ [whole person].” In this passage, it is clear that both natures united to form the One person - Jesus Christ.

Secondly Scripture gives attributes of either nature (divine or human) to the person of Christ. These passages form what is known as the *genus idiomaticum*. The person of Christ is ascribed attributes (or activities) that are human (such as, being able to suffer) in I Peter 2:21: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered (human attribute) for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” Or Christ is credited with activities that are divine (such as immutability in Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”) In both of these references, the activities of Christ are attributed to the whole person of Christ. Notice that the two natures are not two separate person in these Biblical descriptions. For this reason, we must say that the divine and human nature united, while remaining distinct, in Christ.

There is yet another kind of *genus idiomaticum* passages, which give human attributes to the divine nature. These passages boggles are minds, as we exclaim, “How can this be!” But nevertheless Acts 3:15 says, “You killed [human attribute] the author of life [divine nature].” Conversely, John 6:62 gives divine attributes to the human nature: “What if you see the Son of Man [human nature] ascend to where he was before [divine attribute = existing in heaven before]!” Christ fully possessed both divine and human attributes.

In the third group of passages, know as the *genus majesticum*, we can see that God chose to communicate divine attributes to the human nature of Christ. The Reformed completely ignore what these passages say. The Son of Man received gifts from the divine nature. In Matthew 28:18, God gave “All authority in heaven and on earth (omnipotence)” to Jesus. Luke

5:22 reminds us that Jesus also had omniscience while in the body: “Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, ‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?’” In Ephesians 1:23, we are reminded that Jesus’ human nature also received omnipresence. It says, “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” While on earth in the form of a man, Jesus also claimed that he had divine honor. In John 5:22 he says, “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.” Even though our human minds can not fathom how the human nature could receive these divine gifts, we believe that both natures shared in the divine attributes, because Scripture tells us that it was so. None of these examples speak of Christ as two persons. For this reason we hold firmly to what was said at the Council of Chalcedon. Christ is: True God, True Man, One Person, distinct, and yet inseparable, concerning his divine and human natures.

### **The Reformed also separate Christ’s work**

Naturally, the Reformed divide the person of Christ in his work. Grudem uses the story of Jesus calming the storm on Galilee to demonstrate how the two natures work separately: “Particularly striking is the scene on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat, presumably because he was weary (Matt. 8:24). But he was able to arise from his sleep and calm the wind and sea with a word (Matt. 8:26-27)! Tired yet omnipotent! Here Jesus’ weak human nature completely hid his omnipotence until that omnipotence broke forth in a sovereign word from the Lord of heaven and earth.”<sup>10</sup> Here we see the idea that there were two competing forces (human nature and divine nature) working in Jesus. Sometimes the human worked, at other times the divine worked. He uses the same type of logic to explain the death of Christ. “In a similar way, we can understand that in his human nature, Jesus died (Luke 23:46; 1 Cor. 15:3). But with respect to his divine nature, he did not die, but was able to raise himself from the dead (John 2:19; 10:17-18; Heb. 7:16).”<sup>11</sup>

This interpretation of what happened on the cross is the same as Nestorius’. Nestorius used John 2:19 in the same way (confer page 1). He says, “The incarnate God did not die, but quickened him in whom he was made flesh.”<sup>12</sup> When the Reformed say that the divine nature did not die, they are saying that the divine was separate from the human at the moment of death. This teaching caused Nestorius to be anathematized. This is not what Scripture teaches!

Since a true union seems philosophically impossible to both Nestorians and the Reformed, they say that it cannot be. Both of these errors stem from putting as much weight on philosophical principles, as on the Word of God. If the Word of God does not reign supremely, one will always end up with false doctrine.

### **What Scripture says about the Christ’s work**

The intimate communication of natures in Christ leads us to realize that whatever Christ did he did in one undivided act. “Christ performs all official acts (apotel esmata) according to both natures, each nature in intimate communion with the other contributing that which is peculiar to it, in one divided act.”<sup>13</sup> Scripture never separates the natures of Christ in his work. What he does, he does as the God-Man. When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching he ascribed the work of Jesus in the title of “Lamb of God”, saying, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29). Notice he did not say, “Look the divine nature of Christ that takes away the sin of the world,” but rather he ascribed the work to the whole person.

Paul also proclaims that the person of Christ died (official act) for our sins in I Corinthians 15:3b: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” The Reformed would explain this

passage by saying that one must change the word “Christ” to “the human nature.” To do this is to allegorize and to deny that God meant what he said in His Word.

**The “Happy Inconsistency” of the Reformed understanding of Reconciliation**

We thank the Lord that the Reformed do not follow the ways of Nestorius when speaking about Christ’s work of reconciliation. They do not completely take the divine nature out of the picture. This has been referred to as a “happy inconsistency.” They realize that Christ’s divine nature must have been involved in his death. But they are unsure about the role that the divine nature played in this events. Grudem seems perplexed when he says, “Moreover, it seems difficult to understand how Jesus’ human nature alone could have borne the wrath of God against the millions of people. It seems that Jesus’ divine nature had *somehow* [emphasis mine] to participate in the bearing of wrath against sin that was due to us (though Scripture nowhere explicitly affirms this).”<sup>14</sup> Even though the divine nature did not die, it somehow mysteriously participated in the death. The Reformed must wonder how the divined nature participate in the “bearing of wrath against sin.” Since the divine was not completely united in the person of Christ during his death, how could the death of a man be powerful enough to forgive the sins of the whole world? This question shows the nature of their inconsistency.

We praise the Lord that, although the Reformed divide Christ’s work, they do not carry out this division to its logical conclusion. Thus they still acknowledge that: “Jesus went through the experience of death as a whole person, and both human and divine natures somehow shared in that experience.”<sup>15</sup> Even though they say this, we pray that the Reformed will one day confess what the Bible says about the intimate union of the person of Christ.

**What the Bible says about Reconciliation:**

In the Old Testament, Psalm 49:7 tells us that the death of a man (human nature) would do nothing for us: “No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him.” The reconciliation of man to God is further explained in Romans 5:10. “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life!” We rejoice in the fact that God sent His Son – the God-Man – to die for all of our sins. Although our human minds fail us, when we try to comprehend this great mystery. Let us never stop worshipping our Gracious God and Savior who loved us enough to save us.

**Endnotes**

---

<sup>1</sup> Nestorius, “First Sermon Against the Theotokos,” *The Christological Controversy*, ed. Richard A. Norris, Jr (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 129.

---

<sup>2</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol III*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1910) 720.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 720.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer, *Dogmatic Notes*, p. 159

<sup>5</sup> James R. Janke, "'We (still) do not have the same spirit' A Critique of Contemporary Reformed Christology and Its Impact on the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," *We Believe in Jesus Christ*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: NPH, 1999) p.267

<sup>6</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology* p. 558

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.558

<sup>8</sup> Meyer, p.153

<sup>9</sup> Taken from the backside of the yellow handout from Prof. Gurgel entitled: "The Three Categories of Passages in the Genus Idiomaticum"

<sup>10</sup> Grudem, p.559

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.560

<sup>12</sup> Schaff, p.718

<sup>13</sup> Meyer, p.158

<sup>14</sup> Grudem, p.560

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.560