



Nestorianism after Nestorius

Nestorianism survived after the third Council, mainly east of the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire into lands extending from modern day Iraq to China. However, in the Christian world it became a spent force. Its only mournful and continuing legacy was to make some Christians in Syria, Egypt and Armenia suspicious if not downright hostile to the fourth Ecumenical Council, suspecting this Council of continuing Nestorianism. In the 7th century Nestorianism may have had some influence in the rise of Islam in the Middle East. In Islamic literature there is reference to a monk named Nestor who, it is alleged, acclaimed Mohammed as a prophet. There are traces of Nestorianism in the Qur'an (and, arguably, its polar opposite, Monophysitism). Certainly, St John of Damascus regarded Islam as a fusion of several heretical Jewish and Christian teachings. In the modern era, many liberal Protestant traditions are avowedly Nestorian in their Christology, so we could say that Nestorianism has never been completely eradicated.

Defenders of Orthodoxy

"If anyone does not believe that St. Mary is the Mother of God (Θεοτοκος), he is outside the Divinity. If anyone affirms that he (God) passed through the Virgin as if through a channel and that he was not formed in her divinely and humanly at the same time (divinely, because without the intervention of man; humanly, because according to the laws of gestation), he is also an atheist. If anyone affirms that man was first formed and then clothed with God, he is also worthy of condemnation. Because that would not be a generation of God, but an evasion of generation. If someone introduces two Sons, one of God the Father and the other of the Mother, and not just one, he also loses the sonship promised to those who believe orthodoxly ..."

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus (Ep. 101).



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Preface—Unfinished Business

The first and second Oecumenical Councils had confessed the Apostolic teaching that Christ was true God and true Man. What these Councils, however, had not considered was the christological question: "HOW are the divine and human natures manifest in Christ; how do they respectively operate; how are they joined for our salvation?"

Shortly after the second Council these questions became more urgently in need of clarification; not least because false teachers were arising spreading erroneous ideas which, if accepted, would have corrupted the Church's preaching of the gospel of Christ, just as Arianism had threatened to do so in the previous generation. The third Oecumenical Council was convened to consider precisely such questions, brought into sharp focus by Nestorius of Constantinople. However, no heresy is without its parents, so first we need to trace the historical threads of this heresy back to its origin in the teachings of Nestorius's predecessors.

The Origins of the Nestorian Controversy Diodore of Tarsus vs. Apollinaris of Laodicea

Heresy often start off as a novelty, a schismatic choice against the fulness (catholicity) of Tradition, which rapidly descends into error. However, the reaction against heresy can itself become heretical by an OVER reaction, itself generating new heresies.

No less is true of what has come to be known as Nestorianism after its arch-proponent, Nestorius of Constantinople (386-451). The origin of Nestorianism could arguably be traced back to Apollinaris of Laodicea in his reaction, in turn, against Arius. Apollinaris sought to emphasise the





divinity of Christ but at the expense of supposing (falsely) that Christ had no human soul, with the Logos replacing that. Diodore of Tarsus (died 390) reacted against this eclipse of the full humanity of Christ, a form of docetism, by isolating the human nature from the divine nature to such an extent that it became difficult to see how there could be just one Person in Christ. There was instead the Divine Logos who, after the Incarnation, "became" the human Jesus; but two persons not one, so that there was no real union between them. Diodore was a supporter of the first two Oecumenical Councils. It was not realised at the time that his understanding of the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ was weak; weak enough in fact for his Christology to be condemned subse-

From Diodore of Tarsus to Theodore of Mopsuestia

quently.

Diodore's approach to Christology was further developed by Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-429) who taught that the human and divine natures were completely separate, the divine Logos only having a connection with the human nature such that Jesus progressively triumphed over sin from his conception to the time of his baptism when by grace he had become the Son of God. This is a form of adoptionism in which Jesus becomes the Son of God (distinguished from God-by-nature). For Theodore, only after Christ's Passion and death could the connection between the Logos and Jesus be strong enough for him to become the Father's agent of salvation. In this Theodore more clearly presents Christ as two persons, not one. There is the Logos and then there is Jesus, two natures manifest in two distinct persons. For this reason he refrains from using such terms as "God born" or "God crucified".

The Orthodox have always understood these terms to refer to the singular Person of the Word made flesh. The Trinity has no parents; the Trinity has neither beginning nor end. Nonetheless, in the Incarnation God submits Himself to the fulness of the human condition in order to redeem humanity. Without God's **personal** intervention in the world in the flesh (John 1:14) we would have no prospect of salvation. Christ would be reduced to



Nestorius

the status of a sublime prophet and ascetic who only taught how we should live and die rather than (and also) being the Saviour of the world.

Nestorius (386-451), Archbishop of Constantinople for three years, taught that the Virgin Mary gave birth to a man, Jesus Christ, not God, the "Logos" ("The Word", Son of God). The Logos only dwelled in Christ, as in a Temple (Christ, therefore, was only *Theophoros*: The "Bearer of God". Consequently, Virgin Mary should be called "*Christotokos*," Mother of Christ and not "Theotokos, "Mother of God." In Nestorius we see most clearly the idea that there are two persons involved in our salvation and in this he takes Theodore of Mopsuestia's teaching on board and starts teaching this heresy actively, using his position of influence as Archbishop

The Third Oecumenical Council—the Virgin as Theotokos

of Constantinople to do so. A severe reaction against this heresy set in across the Church and the third Oecumenical Council was convened to deal with it.



Held in **Ephesus**, Asia Minor in **431** under Emperor Theodosius II (grandson of Theodosius the Great). 200 Bishops were present. The Council denounced Nestorius' teaching as erroneous. Our Lord Jesus Christ is one Person, not two separate "people": The Man, Jesus Christ and the Son of God, Logos.

The Council also decreed that Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Logos), is complete God and complete man, with a rational soul and body. The Virgin Mary, they confessed, is "Theotokos" because she gave birth not to man but to God who became man.

The union of the two natures of Christ took place in such a fashion that one did not disturb the other. The Council declared the text of the "Creed" decreed at the First and Second Ecumenical Councils **to be com-**

