

“Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Mt 16:13)

✠ Lecture I: Heresies concerning the Nature of our Lord Jesus Christ ✠

Since the focus of Christianity is our Lord Jesus Christ, the believer must have a clear understanding of His person and work. **Christology** is the study of His person, **Soteriology** (Gr. *Soteria*) is the study of His work (i.e. salvation). The two are obviously related; who the Lord Jesus Christ is determines what He is able to do. In this introductory lecture, we will by the grace of God examine the most famous heresies concerning the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ and how our blessed fathers refuted them. We shall appreciate the strong relation between Christology and Soteriology in their theology.

1. The Arian Heresy:

Arius (c.250 – c.336) argued that the Holy Scriptural titles for our Lord Jesus Christ, which appear to point to His being of equal status with God, were merely courtesy titles. Our Lord Jesus Christ was to be regarded as a creature, although nevertheless as pre-eminent among other creatures. Arius was careful to emphasize that the Son is not like every other creature. There is a distinction of rank between the Son and other creatures, including human beings. Arius had some difficulty in identifying the precise nature of this distinction. The implication seems to be that the Son outranks other creatures, while sharing their essentially created nature. St. Athanasius had little time for Arius’ subtle distinctions. If the Son is a creature, then the Son is a creature like any other creature. After all, what other creaturehood is there?

For St. Athanasius, the affirmation of the creaturehood of the Son had two decisive consequences each of which had uniformly negative implications for Arianism. **First**, St. Athanasius makes the point that it is only God who can save. God, and God alone, can break the power of sin, and bring us to eternal life. An essential feature of being a creature is that one requires to be redeemed. No creature can save another creature. Only the creator can redeem the creation. Having emphasized that it is God alone who can save, St. Athanasius then makes the logical move, which the Arians found difficult to counter. The New Testament and the Christian Liturgical Tradition alike regard our Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. Yet, as St. Athanasius emphasized, only God can save. So how are we to make sense of this? The only possible solution, St. Athanasius argued, is to accept that Jesus is God incarnate.

✠ The logic of St. Athanasius’ argument goes something like this:

- a) No creature can redeem another creature
- b) According to Arius, our Lord Jesus Christ is a creature.
- c) Therefore, according to Arius, our Lord Jesus Christ cannot redeem humanity.

✠ At times, a slightly different style of argument can be discerned, resting upon Scripture and Liturgical Tradition:

- a) Only God can save.
- b) Our Lord Jesus Christ saves.
- c) Therefore, our Lord Jesus Christ is God.

The second point that St. Athanasius makes is that Christians worship and pray to our Lord Jesus Christ. He argues that if our Lord Jesus Christ were a creature, then Christians were guilty of worshipping a creature instead of God – in other words, they had lapsed into idolatry. Christians, St. Athanasius stresses, are totally forbidden to worship anyone or anything except God alone. He thus argued that Arius seemed to be guilty of making nonsense of the way in which Christians prayed and worshipped. St. Athanasius argued that Christians were right to worship and adore our Lord Jesus Christ, because by doing so, they were recognizing Him for what He was – God incarnate.

“The Christology of Jehovah’s Witnesses, also, is a form of Arianism; they regard Arius as a forerunner of Charles Taze Russell, the founder of their movement.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, *Vol.1 –P.550*).

2. The Apollinarian Heresy:

Apollinarius of Laodicea (c.310 –c.390), a vigorous opponent of Arius, argued that our Lord Jesus Christ could not be regarded as being totally human. In our Lord Jesus Christ's case, the Divine Logos replaced the human spirit. As a result our Lord Jesus Christ did not possess full humanity; He was without a human spirit because the divinity of the Logos provided the needed life. Apollinarius had anxieties that the Logos assumed human nature in its entirety. It seemed to him that this implied that the Logos was contaminated by the weakness of human nature. How could the Son of God be allowed to be tainted by purely human directive principles? The sinlessness of our Lord Jesus Christ would be compromised, in Apollinarius' view, if he were to possess a purely human mind; was not the human mind the source of sin and rebellion against God? Only if the human mind were to be replaced by a purely divine motivating and directing force could the sinlessness of our Lord Jesus Christ be maintained. For this reason, Apollinarius argued that, in the Lord Jesus Christ, a purely human mind and soul were replaced by a divine mind and soul. **The human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ is thus incomplete.**

This idea appalled many of the Church Fathers because of its soteriological implications. How could human nature be redeemed, it was asked, if only a part of human nature had been assumed by the Logos? Perhaps St. Gregory of Nazianzus, who stressed the redemptive importance of the assumption of human nature in its totality at the incarnation, made the most famous statement of this position:

“If anyone has put their trust in him as a human being lacking a human mind, they are themselves mindless and not worthy of salvation. For what has not been assumed has not been healed; it is what is united with His divinity that is saved ... Let them not grudge us our total salvation, or endue the Savior only with the bones and nerves and mere appearance of humanity”

3. The Nestorian Heresy:

Nestorius (~c.390 – c.451), Patriarch of Constantinople, objected to the title “Theotokos” (Mother of God) as applied to Virgin Mary. He believed that St. Mary gave birth to a mere human being and that the Divine Logos descended and filled this man; thus, in his opinion, Virgin Mary should be called “Christotokos” (Mother of Christ) or even “Anthropotokos” (Mother of humanity). Nestorius said that it is impossible for the Virgin to give birth to God for the creation never gives birth to the creator. Besides, whatever is born of flesh will merely be flesh. In other words, his concept meant that the Lord Jesus Christ became a dwelling place for the Logos. As such, the Lord Jesus Christ is considered a “Theophorus” (Carrier of God), which is the same title given to St. Ignatius of Antioch. His theory that the divinity descended and filled the Lord Jesus Christ meant that there was no hypostatic (personal) union, but rather the divinity accompanied Him or filled Him as in the case of saints. Nestorius affirms that he distinguishes between the two natures of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the relation between the divine and human nature started after the birth from the Virgin and was not a hypostatic union. Nestorius and his followers criticized the wise men for worshipping in front the Child Jesus. Moreover, they taught that the divine nature was separated from the human nature on the cross.

When the Church called St. Mary “Mother of God”, she confirmed that she gave birth to the incarnate Logos and not that she was the source of the Divine Nature. As St. Elizabeth said, “How did this happen to me, that my **Lord's mother** should visit me?” (Lk 1:43) Archangel Gabriel said, “The **Holy one** who is to be **born** of you will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35) St Cyril of Alexandria, said in his speech before the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus:

“Hail to Mary, mother of God, majestic treasure of the whole world, the lamp unquenchable, the crown of virginity, the scepter of Orthodoxy, the indestructible temple, the dwelling of the illimitable, mother and virgin. Hail to you who contained Him, who cannot be contained, in your holy virginal womb...”

4. The Eutychian Heresy:

Eutyches (c.375 – c.454), an archimandrite or monastic supervisor in Constantinople, zealously opposed the Nestorian Heresy, and was so highly concerned with the unity of the two natures (divine & human), which Nestorius separated, that he fell in another heresy. Eutyches said that the human nature was absorbed and dissolved in the divine nature as a drop of vinegar in the ocean. **He thus denied the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ.** This heresy is also called the “**Monophysite Heresy**” because it denied the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ and only accepted the divine nature.

✚ In a Nutshell:

- Arius denied the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and was excommunicated by the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.
- Apollinarius denied the complete humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ and was excommunicated by the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.
- Nestorius separated the two natures of our Lord Jesus Christ denying the hypostatic union between them and was excommunicated by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.
- Eutyches denied the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ claiming that it was absorbed by His divinity and was excommunicated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

* This lecture was adapted from: *'The Nature of Christ'* by H.H. Pope Shenouda III, and *'Christian Theology: an introduction'* by Alister E. McGrath.