

The Conciliar Epoch

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Today we begin a new period in your outline, an era that I would call the conciliar epoch. We have gone chronologically century by century. We've seen certain high points. We have noticed, for example, in our outline that we are creating, the time period of the apostolic fathers, immediately after the time of the Scriptures; the time period of the apologists; the pre-Nicene era, that is, that time before 325. Then there is the Nicene age of 325 to 381, and any time after Nicea, oftentimes, for example, in the great collection of texts by Philip Schaff, you've got the post-Nicene fathers. The [period of] 325 to 381 is a unique period in church history, and so this last theological period could be called the conciliar epoch. So in terms of the outlines that you were creating in your notes, speaking especially theologically here, we begin a new epoch called the conciliar Epoch.

Under that Roman numeral let me give you some sections. Section A will be a general view of this epoch, and here in this lecture, we'll be speaking about theology exclusively. We won't be talking about politics or culture, but here we are talking about the development of theology. As we look at this conciliar epoch, this conciliar time period, we have noticed as we overview the whole of our lectures that the Trinity and Christology are the two most difficult and perhaps most important doctrines of the church. These two important systematic [headings or topics] are obviously closely related to each other, inherently linked. The Trinity has been the object of extensive discussion, the exact relationship between the Father and the Son and the Spirit.

And now that we've come this far in the lectures, you realize the amount of controversy that you've seen with me as we've gone together through this period of time. It's not been an easy time theologically for the church. The church is taking the passages of Scripture and putting them together into a collage that is faithful to all the various instructions that you find in the Scriptures, especially concerning the Trinity. The Council of Nicea is a classic

Trinitarian council. And so the settlement of the doctrine of the Trinity with the resolution of the crisis of Arianism, we see immediately an agitation in the other area of doctrine, that being the doctrine of Christ. The speculations on the Trinity had their very origin in the study of the person of Christ, and the study of the person of Christ leads back to questions of the Trinity. The point of union of these two important themes—Trinity and Christology—is the idea of the incarnation of God. But in the controversy with the Arians, the Son of God is viewed mainly in his essential pre-earthly relationship to the Father. In the Christological controversies, the issue is not the pretemporal Christ but rather the incarnate, historical Christ, and the constitution of His divine human person. So let me paint the field of battle once again for you.

Up until 325 to 381, the main issues of dispute, although certainly not the only issues, are Trinitarian in nature—the relationship premundane or pretemporal relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. That conflict is basically resolved by 381, and immediately upon its heels comes the next great conflict, that being, the nature of Christ. We know that He is eternal with the Father, and we know that He is incarnate, but this incarnate Christ, who is He? He is the incarnate Son of God, isn't He? Of course. How does God become incarnate? How does He keep His full humanity, yet being fully divine? This is the issue of the conciliar epoch, the time of further councils.

The notion of redemption, which forms the center of Christianity, demands a Redeemer who unites in His person the nature of God and the nature of man, yet without confusing the two natures. In order to be a true Redeemer, this person must possess all of the divine attributes and at the same time enter into all relations and conditions of humankind, so that those relations and conditions can be raised to God. Therefore, we note that there must be four elements contained within an orthodox doctrine of Christ. These will seem quite obvious to you. One, He must be true God. Two, He must be true man. Three, He must be one person. Four, the divine and human in Christ must be united and yet distinct. One, two, three, four. True God, true man, one person, united yet distinct.

The result of the Arian controversy was the general acceptance throughout the church of the essential and eternal deity of Christ. Before the close of that controversy, the true humanity of Christ at the same time came in again for treatment. The church had always maintained that Jesus was fully God and fully man, and this was

in light of earlier Christological controversies, and again, as I'm generalizing, we must also remember that any generalization is inherently problematic. There were Christological controversies prior to this time period. We think of the controversy with the Docetic teaching, which maintained that this human Jesus was more phantasm than real, that He wasn't really hungry, He wasn't really thirsty, and He didn't really suffer on the cross because there wasn't a real human being in Christ. So that type of question had been dealt with by the church, especially in Docetism, but it comes once again into question in terms of the precise relationship between the human and the divine in Christ.

Origen, whom we talked about earlier, and who in many ways provided the impulse for the whole Arian controversy, had been the first to speculate and to probe deeply into the nature of this relationship between human and divine. But certainly as we look at the history of the development of doctrine in the time period of the ancient church, there was still great obscurity and confusion as to how this Jesus of Nazareth was both fully God and fully man. Orthodox Christology is just like orthodox Trinitarian teaching, a child of intense and passionate religious conflict. We've talked about the problems of the life of poor Athanasius, thrown out of the empire. I mentioned one other time very briefly that literally the hairs of his beard were plucked out of his face by his fellow theologians. He was treated well, wasn't he? We're going to have the same type of intense passionate discussion in the next area of conflict, which will be Christology. And probably there is a longer and more passionate debate concerning the nature of Christology than there was concerning the nature of Trinitarian thought. As we go through this course we're going to find all the issues are not settled by the end of the ancient church period, which is generally at least for this course considered to be 600, so this is an argument, a debate which will be in the main clarified through the end of this course but which will also continue into the medieval period.

As we look at the development of the doctrine of Christ (here again, I remind you these are some general impressions into this area), we see two competing schools of Christology. One is called the Alexandrian school. We've also talked about different schools in terms of biblical interpretation—the Alexandrian and the Antiochene. Many of the generalizations which we've seen from biblical interpretation will be carried over into Christological speculation, and this is an important practical point for us today. How we handle the Bible will influence and affect the way in which we understand theology. This isn't a course in practical theology

or systematic theology, so I won't spend a lot of time speculating and elaborating on this important point, but I want you to remember that the biblical schools of interpretation are reflected in the ways in which the doctrine of Christ is developed, and so how you see the Scriptures today is also going to influence the way you exegete those Scriptures, and so this is a very important practical lesson.

The Alexandrian school of theology had a characteristic mystical and speculative side to it, and this school of biblical interpretation, but now we're moving into Christological interpretation, the Alexandrian school of Christology wanted to hold the union of human and divine in the incarnation so close that this school of Christology fell into the danger of losing the human in the divine or at least mixing it with the divine. Okay, let me say it again. The Alexandrian school of Christology unites the human and the divine to such an extent that the distinction of the two gets blurred. On the other hand, we have the Antiochene school of Christology. This Antiochene school, which in general is characterized as more sober in its exegesis, more reflective of the various teaching, this school inclined to the opposite extreme of an abstract separation of the two natures. One important principle which I've hope you've noticed throughout the whole course is being set before you now. The history of the development of doctrine not only in the ancient church, but through the Middle Ages, through the Reformation, and modern periods, is in my opinion oftentimes seen as a walking between two extremes.

Oftentimes, a certain theme of the Scripture is pushed by one school to an extreme or another passage of Scripture is pushed to another extreme by another school, and the complete and complex biblical teaching is often seen and certainly is seen in the history of the development of doctrine, as the middle way between these two extremes. We've seen this over and over again in terms of the Trinitarian discussion, the union of Jesus eternally with the Father, the union of the Spirit with the Son and the Father. These important Trinitarian questions were pushed to extremes by both schools, and we found that the balanced Trinitarian teaching was taking the various passages of Scripture that are hard to put together and putting them together and holding that delicate balance. That's the most difficult school to follow, that is, the middle school, the orthodox school in terms of Trinitarian thinking.

And that same principle of interpretation is going to be seen throughout the forthcoming lectures in Christology in the development of the doctrine of Christ; that is, that both the Antiochene school and the Alexandrian school hold on to two truths, that is, that the nature of Christ as human and divine must be separate—that's the teaching of the Alexandrian school—and that the human and divine natures of Christ must be united—that's the Antiochene school. Both of these teachings are correct, but you can't stress the one teaching without seeing and balancing the other teaching as well. Now again, this is a generalization. And all generalizations are inherently problematic, but this gives us in this first part of our lectures some overview as to the way in which discussion is going to continue. So as I begin to flesh the theological controversy out, you'll be able to see now the path in which proper Christological teaching is going to go.

So in both cases of the Alexandrian and the Antiochene interpretations, the mystery of the incarnation and the permanent union of the divine and the human in Christ is more or less weakened or altered in both of those extremes. As I mentioned in the introductions, there are four things which are necessary to have a proper Redeemer according to the Bible—complete humanity, and yet complete divinity. In the one case, the incarnation, the coming of flesh of Christ, becomes a transmutation or mixture of human and divine. In the other case, the divine becomes a mere indwelling in human, a moral union of two persons or even to put it in the most extreme expression, a schizophrenic type of Christ.

Both extremes must be avoided because both extremes imperil the most important teaching of Christianity and that concerning our salvation in Christ. The church is faced with a problem, that in opposition to both of these extremes, the church had to assert the personal unity and still the distinction of the two natures in Christ with equal weight. If you put yourself once again back in the shoes of fourth- and fifth-century Christians, you can see that this is not going to be an easy theological problem. I'm so thankful that I live in the twentieth century and can look back upon this in terms of the history of doctrine rather than to have to go through these struggles once again.

The church through the Christological controversies, which especially agitated the Greek church for more than two hundred years, the church finally does come through this difficult age, and so this is primarily a problem of the Eastern church rather than the Western church. The Western church, and we can begin

to speak now of the Roman church, was in the main more calm during this time period, and yet they also play a very important role in the work of discussing and coming to a fruitful conclusion of this important doctrinal development. Those are some general impressions of this conciliar epoch.

Let me give one more general impression which provides the complete backdrop for the era that we'll be investigating in great detail. There are five important controversies through this era, and we'll be talking about some of them in very little detail and some in more detail as we see the importance of the development of the doctrines—five different controversies. First of all, going backwards a little bit chronologically, we have the Apollinarian controversy, which we've talked about hardly at all up until this point. This comes right at the close of the Nicene age or era, and this controversy concerned the full humanity of Christ; that is, whether this human Jesus who was fully divine assumed not only a human body and a soul but also a human spirit. The question was given tripartite structuring of anthropology—body, soul, and spirit—did Jesus in fact assume all three parts? The answer is if you assume that type of anthropology, yes, Jesus had to have assumed also a human soul or what we call a *nous*.

The second controversy is one that we'll be talking about in today's lecture, the Nestorian controversy. This controversy relates to a rejection of the double personality of Christ, and we'll see exactly what the Nestorian controversy discusses, especially as we talk today about the Council of Ephesus in the year 431. Now remember, 381 is the Council of Chalcedon, and fifty years later we have the Council of Ephesus. The third major field of battle is the Eutychian controversy, one which we won't spend much time on. The Eutychian controversy discusses the idea that Jesus only had one nature, and the Eutychians maintained that the human nature of Jesus was absorbed into the divine nature of Jesus, so that there was no longer both a human and a divine nature, and that's going to be seen to be wrong.

And then the last two—the Monophysite dispute, M O N O P H Y S I T E. That's a reaction to the problem of Eutychian theory, and we won't be speaking extensively about that, but once again we talk about the two natures of Christ and their union. And finally the Monothelite controversy, which occurs in the seventh century, which is a little bit beyond what we want to talk about in this course. That takes fifty years to resolve—from 633 to 680, and this will end with the rejection of the doctrine of one will in Christ.

That being then the one Monothelite, the one will in Christ.

These are just summaries of the controversies we'll be looking at—some in great detail, some in very little detail. The Apollinarian controversy is one we won't spend any more time on; it's a time that is backwards chronologically for us, that is concomitant with the Nicene age. Then the Nestorian controversy, and we'll be spending quite a bit of time on that today. The Eutychian controversy, the Monophysite controversy, and the Monothelite controversy. This corresponds to letter A in your lecture outline as we look at some general events of this time period.

Move with me now to B, a summary of the events of the conciliar epoch. What is happening historically? We've just outlined what is happening theologically; let's talk a look at the historical events. Most of the events during the last time period of our church occur in the East, as I mentioned just a minute ago. This epoch begins with the Council of Ephesus in 431 and ends in the third Council of Constantinople against Monothelitism in 680, 681. Now again, we're moving a little bit beyond the borders of this course with the third Council of Constantinople.

The Council of Chalcedon, which we probably won't get to in this lecture but in the next, but could begin it, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 is the most important point in this period. So we begin with the Council of Ephesus, we end with the third Council of Constantinople two hundred years later, more than two hundred years later, but the Council of Chalcedon in 451 is the most important council of this era.

In the fourth century, Nicea and its council, because of the pressure of the Arian struggles, was considering the nature or was struggling with the doctrine of the Trinity. The significance of the Council of Nicea for the doctrine of the incarnation only begins with a dispute surrounding this person Nestorius. This was because the Creed of Nicea stressed more strongly than any of the credal predecessors the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father and His Godhead, and then we didn't talk about this much in the lectures on Nicea, and then goes on to predicate to the incarnation and the whole activity of the Son in His earthly work, this full consubstantiality. And so, in the Council of Nicea, without any real visible opposition, we have the acknowledgment of the unity of the God-man again without fully understanding the nature of that unity, and so the credal statement of Nicea is going to become a rallying point of doctrine against this person

Nestorius.

I've been mentioning Nestorius, and we'll look at him in just a minute, but this new Christological epoch is first of all shaped by two theologians, Nestorius and Cyril. Nestorius was patriarch of Constantinople between the years 428 and 431. In general, remember this is in general, Nestorius primarily stresses the distinction of the two natures of Christ without wishing to deny the unity in Christ, as has been supposed in some books. In other words, he wants to stress the correct and important theological principle of the distinction of the two natures of Christ. Not wanting to deny their unity, although at times his theology is caricatured in that manner.

Cyril, as you can imagine, on the other hand, puts the unity in Christ in first place without being able to interpret the distinction in Christ, in a way that can handle the problems then current with Nestorius. Nestorius wants to stress the distinction; Cyril wants to stress the unity without being able to fully elaborate the true distinctions between the two persons. The Council of Chalcedon has been called, and I think rightly by a number of books, a *via media* between these two extremes.

What is the Christological thinking of this time period in general? What are the issues that are being debated? I see three or four basic issues. Number one, on both sides, both the Cyril side and the Nestorius side or the Alexandrian side versus the Antiochene side, both the full Godhead of Christ and manhood are acknowledged. Neither one denies the divinity or deity of Christ. Neither one denies that Jesus was human. The chief concern is with the relationship between these two parts. Second, we have a more progressive trend of theology, applying itself decisively to the question of the manner of the unity in Christ, and so marks out the levels on which unity and distinction are to be sought in Christ. In other words, there is a part of the theological field that wants to investigate this complex unity and distinction issue. This movement, point three, which lies in the logic of the development is in a sense stopped by Cyril and his supporters, this pushing ahead of theological discussion. Cyril sees this discussion becoming dangerous, and especially in terms of the nature of Christology, they see in these Christological errors above all the Antiochenes to be a danger to the unity in Christ. And so they, therefore, create an emphatic unity of Christology and do so by centering it decisively on the Logos. Their opponents see this wrongly as a return to the late Arian positions which were held

only by a few extremists. And so four, what we have as a result is a modern and an archaic way of posing the problem of the unity of the human and the divine in Christ standing side by side in conflict with each other.

We've talked about this fellow Nestorius and Cyril. Nestorius is obviously going to be the loser in this debate. He is the one who is incorrect, and so without spending too much time on Cyril himself, turn with me to a very brief introduction to the thought and theology of Nestorius. On the 10th of April in the year 428, Nestorius was consecrated bishop of Constantinople. Nestorius shared the general Antiochene trend in Christology, the distinct reality of the two natures in Christ. This type of Christology spoke of the manhood as a man within this one person of Christ, and so they had real problems creating a unity in this Jesus of Nazareth of full divinity and full humanity. They almost spoke of this man within Jesus, and it was the stress upon the humanity that leads Nestorius to object to the use of a theological term applied to the mother of Jesus, the virgin Mary. Nestorius refuses to give her the title "the mother of God." And there's a technical Greek word that which I'll be using, *theotokos*, which is the word *theotokos*, two words, two prefixes, two compounds, the mother of God. What do you think? Should that term be applied to the virgin Mary? Should the mother of Jesus of Nazareth be called the mother of God? If you don't have a quick answer to that question, then it's really good that you come with me through this theological controversy because this was the foundation stone for the discussion itself. Does Mary properly receive the title "mother of God"?

Nestorius says no. The reason is that what was born of her, what was born of this virgin, is the manhood of Christ. What is born of the virgin Mary is a manhood, and so we can't talk about God being born of a virgin, that is, according to Nestorius a fundamental violation of that which is divine. But to the Alexandrian school of theology with their stress upon the oneness of Christ's person, to deny this term "mother of God" seems to deny the unity of the God-man. And so under their bishop, Cyril, they preceded to the attack. On Easter 429, Cyril preached a sermon in which he declared that anyone who abandons the title "mother of God" meant the repudiation of the faith of the Council of Nicea, and by the way, that was against the law. And the abandonment of that faith by those who refused to give Mary that title was sent out throughout all the churches in a letter. That sermon was sent out, and everyone was warned that they shouldn't abandon that title.

Meanwhile, copies of Nestorius's sermons on the same subject reached the city of Rome, and the bishop there sent those sermons on to his friends, especially Cyril, and asked if these are in fact the sermons that he heard that Nestorius was giving. Cyril then addresses a letter directly to Nestorius, and this letter is famous known as "The First Letter of Cyril to Nestorius" in which he urges Nestorius to accept the use of the word *theotokos*, and this letter was followed early in 430 with a second and more vehement letter. The second letter is going to be much more famous and important than the first.

In August of that year, the bishop of Rome, having received full documentation from Cyril concerning Nestorius, held a synod in Rome which condemned the teaching of Nestorius. And in that synod they gave Nestorius ten days upon receipt of this synodical decision to recant, and the documentation of that synod was given to Cyril to procure from Nestorius. In November of that same year, Cyril assembled his own synod, which drew up some further documentation against the teaching of Nestorius, and this third synod and this third letter contain it the famous twelve anathemas against Nestorius. So together, two documents are given to Nestorius—the documentation from the synod of Rome and Cyril's own synod or third letter of Cyril to Nestorius—and these things are then taken by airmail to Nestorius and presented to him for his response.

When the invoice carrying these things arrived in December, they discovered that the emperor, whose name by the way is Theodosius II, had previously issued a mandate for a council to come together to meet at Ephesus by Pentecost 431. So let me recount the events that we've seen so far. Some issues are arising; the issue that sparks the controversy is the title "mother of God" being applied to Mary. Cyril says that we must use that term because obviously she's the human mother of Jesus, but she is also the mother of God because Jesus is both truly human and truly God. This is a good term, Cyril says. Nestorius says, No, Jesus was born of Mary. The human Jesus was born. She is not a God bearer. What woman can be the mother of God? God has no mother. This is a bad term, says Nestorius. The issue is whether Jesus is a complete unity of human and divine or rather completely human and completely divine somehow united. Do you see how the issues are lining up? The issues receive churchwide investigation. The bishop of Rome hears about this controversy, hears that Nestorius is teaching that the title "mother of God" could not be applied to Mary. He is afraid that the full divinity of Christ is being challenged, writes to

his friend Cyril, and so together these two important and powerful leaders in the church come up with the letters of exhortation and finally synodical decision telling Nestorius that he must recant of his error in terms of Christology. And this gentleman, Cyril, adds twelve anathemas to him, that if he doesn't do these things then he is anathematized. And so these things are brought physically to Nestorius and concomitant with that the emperor himself is aware of this great controversy brewing in the church, Theodosius II, and Theodosius does not want these errors happening in the church, so he calls for an important council to be meeting in the city of Ephesus by the year 431.

In our next lecture, we'll take a look in detail at this Council of Ephesus, which will meet prior to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, twenty years before this, when the issues are going to come to a head between Cyril and Nestorius, between these two schools of Christological thinking, as the church moves into the development of this new and exciting era of doctrinal discussion. Who is this Jesus? How can He be fully God and fully man in one person? ...