

The following are excerpts from “*Grace and Christology in the Early Church*” (Oxford Early Christian Studies) by Donald Fairbairn <https://www.amazon.com/Christology-Church-Oxford-Christian-Studies/dp/019929710X>

“...we need to recognize that adopting a view similar to that of [Theodorean/Nestorian] is not to adopt the early Church's dominant view, or even a well-represented patristic view. The view of Christ as a graced man who leads humanity to a higher level was vigorously and uniformly opposed...”

Begin Excerpts:

Grace And The Logos' Double Birth In The Early Church

I began this study with the question of the relation between the various Christologies of the early fifth-century Church, and I argued that one's evaluation of these depends to a great degree on one's assessment of what the central issue of the controversy was. If one were to consider the primary question to be whether a given Christology maintains that there is in Christ one person but two realities or natures, then one could argue that the theological differences between the major parties involved in the Nestorian controversy were not significant. If one were to consider Christology largely in formulaic terms and to ask whether a given writer began with duality or unity in Christ, then one could perhaps regard Cassian's thought as closer to that of Nestorius than to Cyril's. However, if one considers Christology to be the expression of grace, as I have done in this study, one will recognize that there was a fundamental contrast between two concepts of what God gives to humanity in grace through Christ, of how redemption is achieved, and therefore of who Christ must be (and is) in order to accomplish this salvation.

As I conclude this study, I will summarize briefly what I have claimed concerning these two patterns of grace and Christology, and I will then suggest what I believe these findings imply concerning the Christology of the early Church as a whole.

GRACE AND THE SINGLE SUBJECT OF CHRIST

I have attempted to show that for Theodore, Christ is a graced man, the one who is both the supreme example and the unique recipient of the Logos' co-operative assistance. As such he is the mediator of grace to us, the one who has received divine aid from the indwelling Logos in such a way that he can pass this on to us. Furthermore, although Nestorius writes very little about the soteriological concerns that lie behind his Christology, he nevertheless appears to follow Theodore's understanding. Both of them distinguish sharply between the Logos and the assumed man, both seem to regard the actual personal subject of Christ as the assumed man who receives the Logos' co-operation, and both appear to see the composite comprised of Logos and assumed man largely as a semantic or grammatical subject. This way of looking at Christ's person is possible because Theodore and Nestorius see grace as God's giving something (aid, power, co-operation) to us by first giving this to Christ the man.

In contrast, Cyril sees grace as God's gift of Himself to humanity through Christ. God shares with us his immortality and incorruption, and more importantly, he shares his natural communion, the very fellowship he has between the persons of the Trinity. Cyril insists that only God's own Son can give this to us, and therefore his portrayal of Christ's person centers around the idea that his single subject is God the Son, the Logos Himself. From this starting point, Cyril elaborates the idea that at the incarnation, the Logos added a concrete humanity to who he already was, thus embarking on a human mode of existence without ceasing to be God or changing in his deity. The incarnation brought the Logos' own (newly created) humanity into the intimate fellowship which he, as the Son of God, had with the Father. Since his humanity represents ours, Christ's life, death, and resurrection bring us into that same relationship: we become children of God by grace and share in the [Greek text removed] that God's only true, natural Son has eternally enjoyed with the Father. Because of Cyril's understanding of grace as God's giving Himself

to humanity, he cannot allow a conception of Christ as the recipient of grace. Only if Christ is the Logos himself, and thus the very source of grace, can he give grace to us.

I have argued that Cassian views the monastic task as a response to what God has already done in adopting the monk into his family and giving him communion with himself. The monk seeks to deepen that fellowship with God that he has already been given, not to attain to such communion through his ascetic efforts. Furthermore, Cassian hints that the fellowship God gives us is the love between the Father and Son, the very communion he has within himself. Like Cyril, Cassian argues that Christ is not a mere man or a composite, but rather he is the Logos himself, who has taken humanity into his own person at the incarnation. Only the true Son of God, the Logos, could make us sons by adoption.

The findings of this study show that the Nestorian controversy was not at heart a debate about whether Christ had a complete humanity or whether he was a single person. It was a debate about whether God Himself had entered personally into the experiences of human life. Theodore's and Nestorius' concept of grace did not require such a direct, personal presence of God in the world. For them it was enough that the Logos gave his co-operation to the pioneering work of the assumed man as that man blazed the trail to the second *katastasis*, and the graced man could then give that aid to those who followed. Because of this, Theodore's and Nestorius' concern for God's impassibility could rise above other considerations, and their insistence that the Logos did not suffer or die led them to a Christology in which the personal subject was the assumed man.

While Cyril and Cassian basically shared this understanding of the Logos' immutability, their idea of grace as God's giving Himself to humanity demanded that they see the incarnation as a direct personal presence of God in the world, and thus that they see the single subject of Christ as the Logos himself, the one who took humanity into his own person. Since this was the central issue of the controversy, then the key question that exposed this issue was whether the one horn of Mary was the same one who had been begotten of the Father before the ages. Theodore and Nestorius so divided the Logos and the assumed man that there was no genuine sense in which the Logos could be said to take part personally in the man's birth, suffering, and death. The Logos was born of the Father and the man of Mary, and one could say that Christ was born twice only because the word 'Christ' referred to both Logos and assumed man.

Cyril and Cassian insisted that it was the same person, the Logos, who was born twice; it was the Logos who suffered and died, and thus they maintained that Mary must be called *Theotokos*. The Logos went through these human experiences as a man, in the humanity that he assumed, rather than in his divine nature *per se*. But nevertheless it was the Logos who underwent these experiences. I have contended that part of the reason Cyril and Cassian made this bold claim was that their concept of grace demanded it. In the light of the prevailing view of God's impassibility, they would not have been likely to say that God was born if they had not been firmly convinced that the Scriptures taught it, the Church believed it, and it was necessary for salvation as they conceived it.

Because of this, it is appropriate to view the question of the Logos' double birth as a sort of theological shorthand for an entire complex of beliefs regarding grace, salvation, and Christology. When a patristic writer affirms that the one born of Mary was the Logos who had previously been born from the Father, this assertion almost certainly means that he believes only God himself could bring about human redemption. Furthermore, the reason for this belief may well be that the writer in question holds to an understanding of grace consistent with (and perhaps even the same as) that of Cyril. Conversely, when a writer denies the double birth of the Logos or refuses to affirm it explicitly, it is likely that his view of salvation is closer to Theodore's.

This question, rather than that of how strongly one distinguishes the human and divine realities in Christ, is the key interpretative tool for understanding the relation between the major players in the Nestorian and Eutychian controversies. With this question in mind, I will now look briefly at two key Orientals (so-called 'Antiochenes'), three key Western writers, and finally at the Chalcedonian Definition. In doing so I hope to show the plausibility of my claim that the Cyrillian way of looking at grace and Christology was in fact the consensus of the whole Church in the years prior to Chalcedon.

Pause Excerpt.

Approximately 15 pages house the following sections before the conclusion, and these are not included here as the goal is to draw out the broader approach and conclusion:

7.2. THE ORIENTALS

7.2.1. John Chrysostom

7.2.2. John of Antioch Before and After the Council of Ephesus

7.3. THE LATIN CHURCH FROM LEPORIUS TO LEO

7.3.1. Leporius and Augustine

7.3.2. Pope Celestine

7.3.3. Pope Leo the Great

7.4. THE CHALCEDONIAN DEFINITION

Resuming Excerpts:

7.5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Writing in 1939, Galtier compares Leporius' *Lib. Emend.*, Cassian's *De Incar. Dom.*, and the Reunion Formula, and he asserts:

In spite of the diversity of words and formulae, in spite of their perhaps embarrassing and inelegant expressions, these men were committed to the affirmation of the intrinsic identity which exists between the Son of God and the son of Mary. So it becomes clear what the error attributed to Nestorius was: it was not God who, strictly speaking, was born as a man. So also the dogma of Ephesus is put forth: it was the very Son of God who, in being born as a man, became the son of the virgin.

Later Galtier argues that Leporius, Cassian, Cyril, John of Antioch, Celestine, and everyone else affirmed that the Son himself descended into the virgin's womb and was born according to the flesh for our salvation. He states that this was the faith of the Church and that one cannot regard the Christological controversy as being merely a matter of personality conflicts or political clashes. My research on Cyril and Cassian and the brief sketch I have made in sects. 7.2-4 support Galtier's conclusions. If one steps away from purely terminological concerns and accepts the issue of the Logos' double birth as the decisive question in fifth-century christology, then one cannot justifiably argue that the West, the Reunion Formula, or even the Orientals themselves were closer to Nestorius than to Cyril. There were not two equally established 'schools' at Antioch and Alexandria, and thus there was no question of which school more closely resembled Western Christology. Rather, in the early fifth century there was an unequivocal Christological consensus, opposed by only two or three major figures: Theodore, Nestorius, and perhaps Theodoret.

My research also suggests that this consensus about Christ's person in the early Church was undergirded by a deep consensus understanding of what I call Christological grace. For Athanasius, Chrysostom, Cyril, and Cassian, the declaration that the Logos was the subject of Christ was the primary way of safeguarding the understanding of grace that they believed to be biblical and to represent the Church's faith.

Only if the Logos was born twice could the incarnation bring about God's direct, personal presence in the world.
Only if Christ was God the Son himself could the incarnation be an act of Divine Self-Giving.

Only if the Logos was the one born of Mary could he give us participation in himself by giving us a share in his own communion with the Father.

This was the concept of grace and salvation that lay behind the rallying cry that the Logos was Mary's Son, and this understanding reveals a very deep, specific consensus about grace and Christology among these writers.

Accordingly, it is worth asking how widespread this consensus understanding of grace was. We have seen that other writers of the time insisted on the double birth of the Logos. Did they do so because they, like Cyril, believed that only God could give us his own communion with the Father, or did they affirm the Logos' double birth simply because they believed that only God could overcome human mortality and corruption? If the latter, then this understanding would concur with part of what Cyril and Cassian asserted, but one could hardly call it a specifically 'Cyrillian' concept of grace. In this case one might conclude that while there was a great deal of consensus in the early Church about who Christ had to be in order to save us, there was more variety of thought about what or whom he actually gave us in salvation. On the other hand, if other writers of the time affirmed the double birth of the Logos because they too saw grace as God's sharing with us the communion he has within himself, then one could reasonably argue that the doctrine of grace we find in Cyril is not simply his own, but is the belief of the early Church as a whole.

In connection with this question about how widespread and deep the consensus was, it is especially striking that there was no known personal or literary connection between Cyril and Cassian. Furthermore, Chrysostom's thought, and even his language and vocabulary, closely resemble Cyril's, with once again no significant connection between the two men. That there were such closely related understandings of grace and salvation in apparently 'independent' writers – indeed writers from three different regions – thought to belong to different schools – suggests that the Cyrillian doctrine of grace was not simply Cyrillian or even Alexandrian, but that it reflected a deep and widespread consensus, just as his Christology did. It is thus plausible to think that further research may find a similarly specific Christology in other writers from the same period. I suggest, and perhaps further research will establish, that faith in the divine Logos-made-man, who has given us his own natural communion with the Father, represented the consensus faith of the whole Church in the early fifth century. Whether or not my suggestion about the depth of the consensus on grace and salvation is borne out by research on other patristic writers, the early Church's unequivocal consensus regarding Christology has important implications for the contemporary Church.

Only those contemporary Christologies that begin with the personal downward movement of the Logos to the sphere of humanity and that focus on Divine Self-Giving as the heart of redemption can claim the sort of historical authority I mentioned in the Preface. Of course, to begin with the Logos' downward movement is to approach Christology from above, and this approach consorts ill with the sensibilities of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpreters. Many today are more comfortable approaching Christology from below, beginning with the obvious humanity of the Jesus whom the Gospels present to us and working towards an understanding of some sense in which this man can be said to be (or to become) divine as well. To these people, Theodorean/Nestorian thought about Christology and grace is much more congenial. However, we need to recognize that adopting a view similar to that of Theodore is not to adopt the early Church's dominant view, or even a well-represented patristic view. The view of Christ as a graced man who leads humanity to a higher level was vigorously and uniformly opposed by the Church when it appeared in the fifth century. When similar views reappear today, we must acknowledge that they carry no historical authority, but only the censure of the historical Church. We who value and wish to follow the patristic faith must recognize that to do so requires the proclamation of God the Son's birth as a man, in order to give himself to humanity. Only such a view carries with it the authority of the early Church.

End Excerpts.

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