

The Christological Debate between Cyril and Nestorius

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摘要：聶斯多略主義異端將天主而人的耶穌基督分作兩個位格，一位是屬於人性，而另外一位是天主性。聶氏否認他曾經如此教導一個二子論的學說。然而，在教會的第三個大公會議——厄弗所公會議，聶氏被裁定教導這個與尼西亞公會議所訂的正統信仰相反的異端。究竟聶氏的基督論是否一如所說的是聶斯多略主義？本文嘗試深入研究這個第五世紀的爭議，探討兩位主角：濟利祿及聶斯多略的基督論，最後對聶氏是否教導這異端作出檢討。與此同時，希望藉著這批判性探討，讀者能夠從正面的角度，欣賞在歷史上發生的事件，無論是爭議，甚或異端的出現，也是天主用以形成教會的信仰傳統的工具。

關鍵詞：厄弗所大公會議、濟利祿、聶斯多略、自立體的結合

Abstract: Nestorianism as heresy split the God-man into two distinct persons, one human and one divine. Nestorius denied that he had taught a doctrine of two sons. Yet in the Council of Ephesus (431), the third ecumenical council of the Church, he was anathematised for teaching the heresy not conforming to the orthodoxy of the Nicene faith. Is Nestorius' Christology justified as Nestorianism as depicted? This paper attempts to take a closer look at the controversy in the fifth century, to research into the Christology of the two protagonists, Cyril and Nestorius, and finally to review whether that of Nestorius is Nestorianism. Alongside with this critical review, it is hoped that readers can appreciate the positive side of what has happened in the course of history, that controversies, or even heresies, may also be the tools of God, who turns them into an instrument in forming the one deposit of faith of the Church.

Keywords: Council of Ephesus, Cyril, Nestorius, hypostatic union

1. Introduction

The Creed promulgated by the Council of Nicaea (325) professes that the Lord Jesus Christ is “consubstantial (*homousios*) with the Father.” The Constantinople Creed (381) states that Jesus is incarnate “from the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,” and that the Spirit is “lordly.” Basically the centrally important theological questions are resolved in the doctrine of the Logos and the Trinity. On the other hand, “the resolution had itself created the conditions that demanded a clearer resolution of Christological doctrine:”¹ a need to arrive at a clear theological presentation of how the doctrine of being one person could be reconciled with the presence of a human soul in Christ. “This task fell to the generation of Cyril in the mid fifth century.”²

Differences between the “schools” of Antioch and Alexandria mainly accounted for the Christological controversies of the fifth century. The clash was “no less than two great schools of ecclesiastical reflection.”³ In a nutshell, the Christology of the Antiochenes “may be summarised as the eternal Word assuming the man Jesus,”⁴ and that of the Alexandrians: “highlighted the Johannine theme of the Word becoming flesh.”⁵ Antiochenes were keen to stress Jesus’ full humanity

1 John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), p. 21.

2 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 21.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Gerald O’Collins, *Christology. A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 188.

5 *Ibid.*

while Alexandrians safeguarded a “dynamic soteriology.”⁶ Although both sides agreed on the fundamentals of the Nicene faith, namely, that Christ was truly God and truly man, Nestorius and Cyril approached it from different starting points. The former asked “how is this man Jesus Christ divine without compromising his humanity,” while the latter asked “how does the Word become human without ceasing to be divine.”⁷

The “Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East” signed on 11th November 1994 acknowledged that the controversies and the divisions in the past were due in large part to misunderstandings. Both Churches proclaim the common faith in the mystery of the Incarnation that “the Word of God... became incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit in assuming from the holy Virgin Mary a body animated by a rational soul,...indissolubly united from the moment of his conception.” It also expresses the mutual understanding of why the Virgin Mary is addressed in their respective title.⁸ The Assyrian Church of the East is a group of followers of Nestorius, being regarded as Nestorians, who did not recognise the Council of Ephesus (431) presided over by Cyril of Alexandria and remained unreconciled to the teaching of the council.

6 This tradition is mainly drawn from Athanasius’ ideas about salvation: the renewal or restoration of humanity is made possible through Christ’s Incarnation, so that men can share the divine nature and become gods. The emphasis is on the part of God’s action. It is ‘dynamic’ in the sense that it is not passive, or static, but ongoing.

7 Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 40.

8 *Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*, given at St. Peter’s, on 11 November, 1994. http://www.vatican.va/.../rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_1111194_assyrian-church_en [accessed 13 February 2019].

What has happened between the 1500 years plus that leads to the turning point towards communion of the two Churches in this respect? Is Nestorius' Christology justified as Nestorianism as depicted?

The council itself was contentious, heated and unfriendly. Procedure-wise, there were arguments about the lack of authority in Cyril to convene this council. The convenor and judge himself was one of the parties involved in the controversy. Moreover, the council was held in the absence of the patriarchs or authorised representatives of Constantinople and Antioch, which rendered it hardly having a comprehensive representation in the eyes of his opponents.

This paper attempts to take a closer look at the controversy, to research into the Christology of the two protagonists, and to review whether that of Nestorius is Nestorianism.

2. The Controversy

2.1 *Theotokos*—The Term Sparking Off the Controversy

2.1.1 The Term in the New Testament and the Writings of Church Fathers before Cyril of Alexandria

The Greek word “*Theotokos*” literally means “God-bearer”: the one who gave birth to God. Usually the term *theotokos* is translated into English as “Mother of God.” The faith in the divine motherhood of Mary has been existing in Christian thought since the first centuries.⁹

9 Pope John Paul II, *Theotokos, Woman, Mother, Disciple, a Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2000), p. 21.

In the newborn Church, Mary was recognised as the “Mother of Jesus.” In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:14), this title used by Luke in fact corresponds to the sayings in Mark and Matthew, wherein the people of Nazareth were so astonished at the wisdom and mighty deeds of Jesus that they asked: “Is this not... the son of Mary ? (Mk. 6:3)” and “Isn’t Mary known to be his mother? (Mt. 13:55).” “The title ‘Mother of God’ was attested in the equivalent expression ‘Mother of Emmanuel,’ which means God-with-us, in (Mt. 1:23).”¹⁰ Thus, Scripture reveals the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mother of God, although the term *Theotokos* is not expressly employed.

The Fathers of the Church, since its infant stage, saw in the name *Theotokos* a summary of the Church’s faith in the Incarnation. Hereunder is the information found and presented by Eirini Artemi in a journal with regard to the usage of this name by some Church Fathers.¹¹ The concept of Mary as God-bearer was clearly demonstrated when Ignatius of Antioch wrote his Second Epistle to John that the Virgin Mother of Jesus “bore the true God.” In his Letter to Ephesians, “Mary is glorified as the Mother of God and is full of grace and virtue.” “According to the early Church historian Socrates Scholasticus, Origen defended the term *Theotokos*... in a commentary on Romans a full two centuries before the Council of Ephesus defined the term.” Besides these, Alexander of Alexandria tried to defend against Arianism with the use of the term *Theotokos*. Athanasius also used this term in his teaching against

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Theotokos, Woman, Mother, Disciple*, pp. 21, 23.

¹¹ Eirini Artemi, “The Modulation of the Term Theotokos from the Fathers of 2nd Century to Cyril of Alexandria,” *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 2, no.1 (2014): 27-28. <http://www.researchpublish.com> [accessed 10 January 2019].

Arianism. Moreover, the Cappadocian Fathers also used *Theotokos* in their writings. Basil the Great employed this to show that “Mary gave birth to truly God and truly man.” Basil’s friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, said in his Letter to Cledonius that “whoever does not accept Mary as the *Theotokos* is godless.” Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa, used this term “to distinguish the holy Virgin from other women.”

O’Collins also states: “This Marian title had probably been used by Origen and had been commonly used by Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and other fourth-century figures.”¹² As the concept of Mary being the Mother of God was widely accepted in the traditions of the Church, it is not surprising that Cyril, “the ever-watching guardian of the theological traditions of Alexandria,”¹³ reacted so unrelentingly when Nestorius denounced the term *Theotokos* in his lectures.

2.1.2 The Views of Nestorius

Nestorius was enthroned as patriarch of Constantinople in the year 428. “He was an Antiochene in Christology, deeply influenced by the ideas of Theodore of Mopsuestia,”¹⁴ who had rigorously attacked the use of the term *Theotokos* before.

Not long after Nestorius took over the see of Constantinople, a delegation of Constantinopolitan monks asked for his ruling “affirming

12) O’Collins, *Christology*, p. 191.

13) Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 33.

14) J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 310.

the orthodoxy of the veneration of Mary as Mother of God,”¹⁵ *Theotokos*. This was prompted by their clash with some members from the company of Nestorius “who were propagating the old Antiochene Christology that the title of Mary should be *Anthropotokos*,”¹⁶ Mother of the man. In his reply, Nestorius admitted that these two terms, “as they were being used by both contending parties, were capable of orthodox interpretation.”¹⁷ In this way, he attempted an amicable “compromise by proposing a moderated form of Antiochenism to the local monks.”¹⁸

In December of 428, Proclus, a local candidate who had failed to succeed to the Constantinopolitan throne, preached a sermon on the Mother of God, professing holy Mary the *Theotokos* in the presence of Nestorius. This sermon was greeted with great applause. Nestorius was so displeased that in the following year, he started to give a series of lectures “as a corrective to the use of the term *Theotokos* and the Christology implied by it, which seemed to him dangerously close to Apollinarianism.”¹⁹ He considered that *Theotokos* was not a right term, due to the fact that “Mary was not the mother of God but rather the mother of the man whom Christian faith recognises as divine and thus calls God.”²⁰ Conversely, “*Anthropotokos* acknowledges that Mary is the mother of this man but can... suggest that he is merely a man.”²¹ To address Mary as *Anthropotokos* was also not “orthodox Christian faith in the deity of Christ.”²² Instead, he proposed an expression,

15 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 27.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, pp. 33-34.

20 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 28.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

Christokos, which, in his view was a much better term because it was closer to the recognition of Mary in the New Testament, and it “clearly affirmed that it was the Christ who was (both) God and man. Mary was neither Mother of God nor merely Mother of the man.”²³

To refute Mary as the Mother of God, Nestorius referred to a quote in Scripture about the deity of Christ that he was “without father, without mother, without genealogy (Heb. 7 : 3).” He said “Mary... did not give birth to the Godhead... A creature did not produce him who is uncreatable.”²⁴ In spite of the fact that he said Mary “gave birth to the human being,” who was “the instrument of the Godhead,”²⁵ Nestorius denied that the human being, the Son, was a mere man. Instead, the Holy Spirit “formed out of the Virgin a temple for God the Logos, a temple in which he dwelt.”²⁶ For Nestorius, “that which was formed in the womb is not in itself God. That which was created by the Spirit was not in itself God...But...God is within the one who was assumed...,” who in turn “is styled God because of the one who assumed him.”²⁷

In his heated argument, he employed “intemperate language”²⁸ which inflamed those who held a different view from his. Quoting F. Loofs²⁹ materials as reference, Norman Russell put in his book that Nestorius had used such words as: “That God passed through from

23 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 28.

24 Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 124.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

28 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 311.

29 Friedrich Loofs, a German theologian (1858-1928). He was a professor of Church History at Halle University from 1888 to 1926, and was best remembered for his studies of the history of dogma.

the Virgin *Christotokos* I am taught by the divine Scriptures, but that God was born from her I have not been taught anywhere.”³⁰ Kelly, also utilizing Loofs’ materials, explains that according to Nestorius, “God cannot have a mother, and no creature could have engendered the Godhead; Mary bore a man, the vehicle of divinity but not God. The Godhead cannot have been carried for nine months in a woman’s womb, ... or have suffered, died and been buried.”³¹

While Nestorius said that those who called Mary *Theotokos* were heretics, the disputed title was widely accepted in the Alexandrian school. While he meant to “exclude all notion of Mary as some form of ‘goddess’ producing a divine offspring whose humanity was questionable,”³² his sayings quickly triggered off the refutation from his opponents, who labelled him a new Paul of Samosata reviving the heresy of adoptionism that Jesus was not “strictly speaking” God.

2.1.3 The Views of Cyril

The main opponent of Nestorius was Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria. He was shaped in the Alexandrian tradition, nurtured in the school of Athanasius, and was depicted as “the most thoughtful and prolific spokesman for the Alexandrian tradition.”³³

When the news of what had been happening in Constantinople spread, at nearly the same time Cyril of Alexandria started to compose

30 — Frederick Loofs, ed., *Nestoriana: die Fragmente des Nestorius* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1905), pp. 277-278, in Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 34.

31 — Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 311.

32 — McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, pp. 29-30.

33 — Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Oxford handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 131.

his paschal letter, though he did not directly mention Nestorius. Apart from this paschal letter, Cyril addressed a letter to the monks of Egypt in which he responded specifically to the issues raised by Nestorius. In the letter, Cyril centred on the unity of the person of Christ, and referred to Mary as Mother of God. He insisted that the title *Theotokos* was “implied by the divinity of Christ.” Though it might not be Scriptural, it did express “the belief of the Apostles that Jesus Christ is God and is supported by patristic testimony. The title safeguarded the true union of God and man in Christ.”³⁴ Cyril remarked that Nestorius “destroy the mystery of the economy of the flesh by saying that the holy Virgin should not be called *Theotokos*.”³⁵

In other words, this single title encompasses the entire plan of salvation, and that was the reason why the title was so important to Cyril that he summoned all his resources to attack Nestorius. This title “was seen as an absolute marker of the faith, not only defending the honour of the Virgin Mother . . . , but more significantly in this argument fulfilling the role of a cardinal defence of belief in the personal deity of the Saviour.”³⁶

Apart from compiling the above letters, Cyril also sought to ally with the Eastern bishops. According to Russell, Cyril even wrote to Celestine, bishop of Rome, complaining that “the Romans had been greatly scandalised by Nestorius’ teaching.”³⁷

34 Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 35.

35 Cyril, *Against Nestorius* 1.1, ACO I,1,6, p. 18.9-11, in Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, pp. 44-45, 135.

36 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 29.

37 Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 130.

When copies of Cyril's encyclical letter were forwarded to Constantinople, the equally hot-tempered Nestorius became annoyed, and "responded with a curt letter protesting at Cyril's aggression."³⁸ And when Cyril was aware of the response of his rival, he wrote his first letter to Nestorius, which resulted in an exchange of letters between them. Their letters unfolded that the core of the dispute on the term *Theotokos* was in fact the Christology regarding the two natures in Jesus Christ.

2.2 The Christological Controversy

2.2.1 Nestorius' "Conjunction"

As an Antiochene, Nestorius' focal point was to defend Christ's integral humanity. He made his point by insisting that "the two natures of the incarnate Christ remained unaltered and distinct in the union," and envisaged "the Godhead as existing in the man and the man in the Godhead without mixture or confusion."³⁹ Above all, Nestorius was concerned that the impassible Word could not become the subject of the God-man's sufferings, particularly the Passion. Furthermore, for the redemption to be effected, Christ must have had "a genuinely human life of growth, temptation and suffering."⁴⁰ If Christ's humanity had been fused with His divinity, an authentically human experience would have been impossible. Therefore, divinity and humanity must remain intact, "each retaining its peculiar properties and operation

38 — Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 130.

39 — Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 312.

40 — *Ibid.*

unimpaired.”⁴¹ He described each of these two as a “nature,” and “each having its *prosopon* (i.e. its external...form, as an individual) and its *hypostasis* (i.e. concrete subsistence)..., not that each nature was a... subsistent entity, but it was objectively real.”⁴² Here, Nestorius clearly demonstrated that he took *prosopon* as person, and *hypostasis* as nature. He stated that “Christ was a single being, with a single will and intelligence, inseparable and indivisible.”⁴³ Therefore, “there was but one *prosopon* in the God-head.”⁴⁴

Yet Nestorius had an interesting view that “it is Christ who is the *prosopon* of the union,... the common *prosopon* of the divinity and the humanity.”⁴⁵ “He assumed that each of the natures continued to subsist in its own *prosopon* as well as in the ‘*prosopon* of the union’.”⁴⁶ By this, he seemed to suggest that the “*prosopon* of union or common *prosopon* is not identical with either the *prosopon* of the Word or the *prosopon* of the humanity, but that it results from the coalescence, coming together or union of the two natures or *ousiai*.”⁴⁷

The above interesting view, as John McGuckin points out, is due to the fact that for Nestorius, the pre-existing Logos (Word) was neither Christ nor the man Jesus of Nazareth. Christ was more than the term “the man Jesus.”⁴⁸ The word Christ “connoted the whole mystery of

41 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 313.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 315.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 157.

the intimate relationship of Jesus with the divine Logos, and the union of Logos with him.”⁴⁹ Christ, the *prosopon* of union, “manifests in this single union the differentiated *prosopa* of the divine Logos and the human Jesus.”⁵⁰ One problem is that, as O’Collins observes, Nestorius used “*prosopon* to cover the sum total of individual properties that manifest themselves.”⁵¹ For Nestorius, “each nature can be said to enjoy its own (natural) *prosopon*.”⁵² This leads to another problem that Nestorius used “the same technical term to connote the disparate concepts of differentiation and convergence: there are two *prosopa* (Jesus and Logos) and only one *prosopon* (Christ)”.⁵³ The *prosopa* were inhere within Christ.⁵⁴ He strived with precision to present his theology, but in the end caused more confusion.

As regards the unification of the two *prosopa* in the person of Christ, Nestorius was desperate to maintain their distinctive character, and to avoid any prediction of a confusion or mixing of the two natures deduced from the union. As such, he proposed the term “conjunction” to denote the inter-relation of the respective *prosopa* of the two natures in order to remove any speculation that the unification of natures produced the person of Christ.

Regarding such sayings, his opponents “interpreted his language about the man Jesus being ‘assumed’ and about the Word being present

49 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 157.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

51 O’Collins, *Christology*, p. 190.

52 *Ibid.*

53 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 158.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

in him as in a temple to mean the ‘conjunction’ of two separate existing subjects, Jesus and the Word of God, who did not truly become flesh.”⁵⁵ ‘Conjunction’ represented no substantial unity, but merely a moral one. Apart from this, his description was misunderstood also due to Nestorius’ word choice: ‘*prosopa*’ to refer to ‘natures’ in Christ. As a result, Nestorius was said to have taught a doctrine of two Sons, with two natures in Christ.

As a matter of fact, *hypostasis* has a number of meanings. It can be used in equivalence to *prosopon*, which is understood as ‘person’ in the present day. Yet *hypostasis* can sometimes be used as *ousia*, which means ‘nature’. In one of the anathemas of the Nicene Creed (325), *hypostasis* and *ousia* (nature) were used as synonym, but in the synodal letter (382) of the Council of Constantinople I, *hypostasis* was identified as *prosopon* (person), and *ousia* with nature. As these key words “were still in the process of becoming technical terms” and were used by the two rivals “in a fluid manner,”⁵⁶ the matter was further made complicated. Nestorius understood *prosopon* as ‘person’, and *hypostasis* as *ousia* (nature). It is one of the reasons why Nestorius considered Cyril promoting modalism when the latter preferred “hypostatic union” to his proposed “conjunction”. On the contrary, Cyril understood *hypostasis* as ‘person.’ When Nestorius talked of two *prosopa*, he was in fact referring to the two ‘natures’ in Christ. It seemed to Cyril that Nestorius presented a “meaning of two different roles, forming a *prosopic* union by conjunction,.. and entailing two

55 O’Collins, *Christology*, p. 190.

56 Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 40.

sons, one human and one divine.”⁵⁷ They both mis-interpreted the other’s points as much as they were themselves being mis-understood.

2.2.2 Cyril’s Hypostatic Union in Jesus Christ

While Nestorius aimed at defending the integral humanity of Christ by distinguishing his two natures, Cyril’s main concern was to maintain the single-subject Christology he had inherited from Athanasius. “Dynamic soteriology” was fundamentally a part of Alexandrian thinking. Athanasius summed this up that the Incarnation was “a salvific encounter and exchange between God and man.”⁵⁸ Cyril followed this thinking and deduced that the Incarnation was a free act of God as well as for the benefit of mankind. “The divine Logos appropriates human nature,” which became the means by which the fallen human nature was restored. As such, the Incarnation, sufferings, death on the cross and the resurrection were “the economy of salvation,” being worked out “in and through that bodily condition.”⁵⁹ Thus, Cyril objected to Nestorius’ term “conjunction” because it did not imply a real union of the Logos and the man Jesus. He doubted whether this extrinsic union of the divinity and the humanity, as Nestorius had described, was able to effect salvation.

Regarding the manner of the relationship between the divinity and the humanity in Christ, Cyril opined that “the union of the two states did not...connote the destructive absorption of either constituent parts,”

57—Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 40.

58—McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, pp. 183-184.

59—*Ibid.*, p. 184.

but rather “enhancing individual elements with the union.”⁶⁰ The two natures, “in coming together in union in the Incarnation... constituted a new condition, that of ‘God-enfleshed-in-history.’”⁶¹ Under this new condition through interpenetration, “deity is...able, through its union with humanity, to experience historical and conditioned reality directly and personally.”⁶² “Likewise, human nature, which in itself cannot exceed its natural limitations, is able... to be so enhanced that it transcends its original condition.”⁶³ God “enfleshed” is both God and man.

In his correspondence with Nestorius, Cyril used the term *hypostasis* and regarded it a suitable term with which to replace Nestorius’ preferred concept of *prosopon*. “To speak of the one *hypostasis* of the Word was a simple way of connoting the single divine subjectivity that constituted the incarnation... Cyril also applied the word to denote the manner of the Christological union: the *hypostatic union*.”⁶⁴ This refers to a union of the Godhead and manhood founded on one *hypostasis*: the one person of Christ incarnate.

Cyril approached Christology from the oneness of the person rather than the distinction of the natures. Nevertheless, “his conception of the union, ... as ‘*hypostatic*’, analogous to the union of soul and body,” which, to the Antiochenes, related as form to matter.⁶⁵ Besides this,

60— McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 196.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

65 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 313.

the Antiochenes understood the term *hypostasis* almost as a synonym for *ousia* (nature), which must remain unchanged and unconfused. It is understandable that, on the part of Nestorius, Cyril's Christological views must be rejected.

The controversy led to the Council of Ephesus, with the result that the Christological position of Cyril finally received conciliar endorsement.

3. The Council of Ephesus

The council was not to the advantages of Nestorius. Firstly, it was held in Ephesus instead of his intended place of Constantinople or its environs, and with theologians "who could appreciate the subtlety of his arguments."⁶⁶ Secondly, John of Antioch, who could follow the Christology of Nestorius and had committed to support him in the council, failed to arrive on time. The council convened by Cyril had already reached the decision to dispose Nestorius by the time John arrived. This decision was subsequently endorsed by the Pope.

Shortly before the council, Cyril had started to seek ecclesiastic allies from the Eastern bishops, and to solicit support of the emperor. He even wrote to Pope Celestine in the summer of 430, with a selection from Nestorius' writings, reporting that "people were staying away from Nestorius' liturgy."⁶⁷ These were sent to a Western expert on Eastern affairs for assessment. The judgement was not favouring Nestorius.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

In the meantime Constantinople pressed for an ecumenical council to settle the controversy. The decision from the emperor was to hold the council in Ephesus, which was already a centre of devotion to the Blessed Virgin. The council was to be held on 7th June of 431, the feast of Pentecost.⁶⁹

Unaware of this development, Cyril called a synod of Egyptian bishops. With their condemnation of Nestorius and the mandate from the Pope to execute the decisions of the Synod in the East, Cyril wrote the Third Letter to Nestorius, with the notorious Twelve Anathemas appended to it. Nestorius immediately sent the Twelve Anathemas to John of Antioch. As a result, the Antiochenes rallied to the defence of Nestorius.⁷⁰

At the beginning of June 431, Nestorius arrived at Ephesus with sixteen bishops and a military escort, but was met with hostile reception from the bishop of Ephesus and his forty Asian bishops. Five days after the appointed day of 7th June, the bishop of Jerusalem arrived with sixteen bishops from Palestine. Yet there was no sign of the papal delegation, nor of the Eastern bishops. During the period of waiting for the Easterners, Nestorius alienated two of his supporters, Theodotus and Acacius, by maintaining that “neither birth from the Virgin nor being fed at the breast could be attributed to God.”⁷¹ These two persons were so annoyed that they persuaded Cyril to go ahead and convene the council in the absence of the Easterners. In addition, there was also

⁶⁹ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 38.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

a letter and a verbal message from John of Antioch delivered by his advance party that the main party was delayed. The verbal message was “if I am late, do what you must do.”⁷² John in fact meant that Cyril could proceed to start the council if he was further delayed beyond the week needed for the remaining journey. Even a letter signed by sixty-eight bishops was delivered to Cyril urging him to wait for the Easterners, Cyril used the verbal message as a pretext to convene the council immediately on 22nd June without further waiting.⁷³

Cyril’s right to preside the council was undisputed by those present. The representative of the emperor originally wanted to disperse the assembly on the morning of 22nd June, but Cyril outwitted him. Due to the wilful absence of Nestorius, the council could only be commenced in that afternoon at the cathedral of Ephesus, the Great Church dedicated to Mary. Cyril’s Second Letter to Nestorius was read in the council. Over 120 bishops testified that they recognised in Cyril’s letter the orthodox faith of Nicaea. Then Nestorius’ reply was read, and at the end, the bishops anathematised Nestorius. When subsequently Cyril’s Third Letter was also read in the council, it was heard in silence, and no acclamations were recorded. Despite this episode, the council proceeded to the formal deposition of Nestorius, to whom the notice was served the following morning.⁷⁴

72 Reported in Cyril, *Ep.* 23, ACO I, 1,2, p. 67, 8-9, in Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 47.

73 Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, pp. 46-47.

74 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50.

John of Antioch's party finally arrived on 26 June. John was furious with Cyril and held another council with the disagreeing bishops. This council found Cyril's Twelve Anathemas fused with the teachings of Apollinarius and Arius. They reported this to the emperor, whose response was to send an official to Ephesus with letters annulling all the decisions of the two gatherings presided by Cyril and John respectively, but confirming the depositions of both Nestorius and Cyril. With the arrival of the Roman legates on 10 July, the council was re-convened at once.⁷⁵

Both sides appealed to the emperor. The emperor decided to resolve the matter by summoning theological experts, seven from John's party and another seven from Cyril's for further discussion in September, but no result was achieved. Finally, the government ordered both Cyril and Nestorius be deposed and exiled. Nestorius was made to return to the monastery near Antioch. Cyril was eventually allowed to return to Alexandria in October. Cyril's council was ultimately accepted by the emperor and confirmed by the Pope.⁷⁶

On the theological side, the Council of Ephesus re-confirmed the doctrine professed in the Nicene Creed, as well as declaring Mary *Theotokos*, for according to the flesh she gave birth to the Word of God, who became flesh by birth. This dogmatic declaration becomes the first of the four Marian dogmas of the Blessed Virgin.

⁷⁵ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, pp. 50-51.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

4. Review of the Christology of Nestorius

Nestorianism has traditionally been understood as the heresy that split the God-man into two distinct persons. Despite Nestorius himself denied that this was what he had taught, with the condemnation confirmed by the Pope, his case seems to have been decided and closed. Yet, in the early twentieth century, the discovery, translation and publication of “the *Book of Heracleides* (the *Liber Heraclidis*), an apologia which he wrote some twenty years after the controversy, in which he avowed himself satisfied with the Christology of Leo canonised at Chalcedon, has seemed to make a reassessment necessary.”⁷⁷

Shortly before the rediscovery of a manuscript of this Book in 1895, F. Loofs⁷⁸ started to assemble sources necessary for a Nestorian reconstruction, including several works both by Nestorius and his supporters. The re-editing of the works, together with the various letters kept by the conciliar record,⁷⁹ have enabled the theologians of the present day to review the Christology of Nestorius in a different light.

The materials of this paper as presented above have already suggested that Nestorius did not really teach a “two-Sons” Christology. So where does the misunderstanding come from if there is one?

The tradition of the customary use of the language as described above accounts for much misunderstandings. Amid this chaos, Nestorius endeavoured to present a doctrine of the mutual reciprocity

⁷⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 311-312.

⁷⁸ cf. Footnote 29 above.

⁷⁹ McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 127.

or interpenetration of the *prosopa* (nature) by using the word 'conjunction' to express the unity of the two natures in Christ. He lacked an appropriate term to express it. Aloys Grillmeier presents in-depth views in this regard. He points out that to understand Nestorius' saying, it is necessary to follow his idea of Incarnation as a whole. For Nestorius, "the Incarnation is not an act of the human *prosopon* of Christ... but is clearly a divine act. The divine *prosopon* appropriates Christ's human nature."⁸⁰ "And the *ousia* of the divinity makes use of the *prosopon* of the humanity,"⁸¹ as Nestorius himself says in the *Liber Heraclidis* and quoted by Grillmeier. Nestorius also understood that this mutual compensation is "on one hand active and divine and on the other passive and creaturely."⁸² Nestorius employed the idea of mutual compensation to stress the divine freedom in the Incarnation. This idea was developed from that of "the *mutual compenetration* of the two natures in Christ,"⁸³ which is being described as '*perichoresis*' in Greek. According to Grillmeier, using this "parallelism of the trinitarian *perichoresis*" with his "Christological *perichoresis*," Nestorius demonstrated his full understanding in its "theological significance."⁸⁴ "Just as in the Holy Trinity the three *prosopa* are joined through the one *ousia* and thus penetrate each other in essence, so in Christ the two *ousiai* penetrate each other without confusion to form the unity of one *prosopon*."⁸⁵ By making use of this analogy, Nestorius aimed at explaining the Christological ontology. Grillmeier says that this is a

80 Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), p. 446.

81 Nestorius, *Liber Heraclidis*, in Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 446.

82 Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 447.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 448.

84 *Ibid.*

85 *Ibid.*, p. 449.

concrete proof that Nestorius is truly concerned about the “substantial unity in Christ.”⁸⁶

Nestorius correctly recognised that each of the two natures in Christ is concrete and distinct. He regarded the *prosopon* as “the ground of the conjunction of the two natures,” so as to establish “an ontological basis” to this unity.⁸⁷ The problem is his assertion that the unity in Christ was “by means of compensation of *prosopon*.”⁸⁸

Had Nestorius made reference to the contemporary theological position of Christology, he should have known that his “metaphysical analyses”⁸⁹ failed to reflect the tradition truly. The traditional *communicatio idiomatum*,⁹⁰ which is understood as ‘interchange of characteristics’ nowadays, includes the notion of “the unity of the one acting subject.”⁹¹ This doctrine justifies the sayings such as “the Son of God died on the cross,” and Jesus’ mother is the “Mother of God.”⁹² The famous term of *Theotokos* “already contained a metaphysical intuition that the Logos was the final subject in Christ.”⁹³ Grillmeier says “this is a theological omission” for Nestorius “not taking this tradition seriously enough and not having thought it through sufficiently.”⁹⁴

86 Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 449.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 450.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 451.

89 *Ibid.*

90 *Communicatio idiomatum* is a technical term for the theology of Incarnation. It means ‘interchange of characteristics’, and is based on the oneness of person subsisting in the two natures of Jesus Christ. The characteristics of the Divine Word can be ascribed to the man Jesus, and those of Jesus to the Word.

91 O’Collins, *Christology*, p. 191.

92 *Ibid.*

93 Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 451.

94 *Ibid.*

Simultaneously, Grillmeier recognises the concern of Nestorius with regard to the misuse of this doctrine in Apollinarian and Arian, and even in Cyril's writings. This could be the reason why Nestorius did not give the due value to this old tradition of the *communicatio idiomatum*. As such, Grillmeier defends that Nestorius "meant to keep its substance. If he misunderstood a part of this tradition, it was only in good faith to save another part. His opponents isolated the negative part of his affirmations from his positive insights and paid no attention to his philosophical background."⁹⁵ Above all, "it is essentially the Cappadocian narrowness of the relationship between nature and *prosopon* that he was unable to transcend."⁹⁶ There is in fact inadequacy in the Christology of Nestorius. Nevertheless, the claim against Nestorius that he had taught a doctrine of two Sons is reversed in the book of Grillmeier.

5. Conclusion

This fifth century controversy demonstrated that the Church had a need for a commonly agreed technical language to express Christ as one singleness in personhood, as true God and true man in two distinct natures. Despite their different approaches, Nestorius and Cyril were heading towards this same goal. In the tradition of the Church, Cyril's doctrine is honoured as orthodox and Nestorius's teaching as heresy. McGuckin, however, comments that Nestorius "was no less 'dogmatic'... than Cyril or any of the other leading hierarchs of

⁹⁵ Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 451.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

his period.”⁹⁷ The tragedy of Nestorius, as noted by Grillmeier, was that he could not transcend “his old patterns of thought” and “of the relationship between nature and *prosopon*.”⁹⁸ Though he did not have a breakthrough in his Christology in this regard, it is crystal clear now that Nestorius’ teaching is not Nestorianism in any strict sense.

God reveals himself in history. Through his only Son, Lord Jesus Christ, the revelation of God is fully revealed. His mystery continues to unfold in the course of history, through the reflection of the patriarchs, particularly in the first few centuries. In this controversy, if one says it was caused by the personality of the two protagonists: Nestorius being proud and Cyril overbearing, their personalities were transformed as the tools in the one revelation of God. If another says that, as in the words of McGuckin, the controversy was due to the clash of two ecclesiastical schools,⁹⁹ they were again the tools to complement each other to pass on the one deposit of faith of the Church. The Council of Chalcedon (451) resolved the disputed question of “how the confession of the ‘one Christ’ ... reconciles with belief in the ‘true God and true man’, ‘perfect in Godhead, perfect in manhood.’”¹⁰⁰ The council declares that Christ is “in two natures”, and not “from two natures”. “The unity in Christ is not to be sought in the sphere of the natures.”¹⁰¹ From the Chalcedonian Definition, “two brief formulas may be extracted... to determine christology: Christ ‘without confusion’ and ‘without division’ ...—one person or hypostasis in two natures.”¹⁰²

97 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 21.

98 Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 452.

99 McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 21.

100 Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 482.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 485.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 486.

The faithful of this present age are so blessed to have inherited the hard-earned one deposit of faith. Now we can without confusion profess that the Lord Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, without fear of being challenged. Now we can celebrate the Feast of Mother of God on 1st January, which was restored by Pope Paul VI in 1974 “in conformity with the ancient... liturgy... of Rome” that this Feast, forming a part of the Christmas season, “is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation.”¹⁰³

103 Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus, for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 1974. http://w2.vatican.va/content/.../hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus.html [accessed 14 February 2019]