Moments of Crisis:
The Council of Ephesus (AD 431)
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Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Let me ask you again: who is Jesus?
That is the question we are facing this Reformation Month. It is the question that dominated the early church councils. It was the reason the Constantine invited bishops to Nicaea in AD 325, and we will discover that it is the focus, in one way or another, of the ecumenical councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. It is a key question for us today.

I was reminded of this a couple weeks ago, when Don joined the church. As I read the membership ritual, I saw, once again, this sentence: *We especially emphasize the deity of Jesus Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit.* If we’re not careful, this could be considered an heretical statement - that we emphasize the deity of Jesus Christ over against his humanity; that we weigh one nature as more important than the other. We find ourselves very close to being in violation of the Nicene Creed – and actually in violation of the rest of the orthodox creeds.

I say that we are in danger, but not that we have crossed over in to heresy. It is because we are attempting to balance the errors of our day; to point out that Jesus is divine as well as human. When people demote Jesus to the status of a prophet, a wise teacher, an enlightened man, and make him less than the Bible reveals him to be, we come with a balancing scale and add the counter-weight of deity. Jesus’ real humanity is vital and precious. But so is his real deity. He is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). *And being in very nature (μορφή, morphe) God ... he made himself nothing taking the very nature (μορφήν, morphen) of a servant, being made in human likeness (Όμοιωματί, homoiomati) ...* (Philippians 2:6-7). As the creeds affirm, Jesus was both fully human and fully God.

And we emphasize the personality of the Holy Spirit in the face of those who would make HIM nothing more than an attitude (as in Mormonism), a frame of mind, a conscience, or some impersonal force (or, Force²), or some universal spirit behind the universe (as in Hinduism). Even many Christians (so-called) seem to have the idea that the Holy Spirit is that sort of Jiminy Cricket³

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1 Manual, Church of the Nazarene, 2013-17 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013), ¶801. The Reception of Church Members, p. 254

2 As popularized in the Star Wars movies (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076759/).

3 From the Walt Disney animated story, Pinocchio. (http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/124733)
voice of conscience that guides us to try to do the right thing. When I hear someone refer to the Holy Spirit as “it”, I have been quick to correct with “he”. In the Bible, the Holy Spirit is always depicted as a person with intentional behaviors. He does ... He speaks ... He teaches ... He fills ... Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, “I will send him ...” (John 16:7).

Now, interestingly, it is the nature of his mother, Mary, that opened up a question about who Jesus is? And it was the Church’s title for Mary that led to the Council at Ephesus in AD 431. Let me see if I can set it up for you.

Nestorius was installed as Archbishop of Constantinople on April 10, AD 428. He seems to have quite quickly become embroiled in a controversy, in which he tried to find a middle ground. The argument was over the title for Mary, the mother of Jesus. One group insisted on calling her Theotokos, roughly translated, “Mother of God” (I’ll explain that a little better later). The other group rejected that title for Mary.

What was really at issue, though, was the nature of Jesus Christ himself. The first group said that God had become a man in Jesus Christ, born in a Bethlehem stable to a virgin named Mary. As Jesus was God (remember, the Word became flesh), Mary, being the mother of Jesus, was the one who gave birth to God Incarnate. Thus Theotokos (Θεοτόκος). Theotokos is a compound Greek word, θεός (theos) meaning God, and τόκος (toko), one who gives birth – together “one who gives birth to God”, or simply “mother of God”.

The group that rejected the title believed that God is eternal and thus could not be born. That means God could not have a mother or “creator”. Archbishop Nestorius suggested a compromise: call Mary Χριστοτόκος (Christotokos), mother of Christ. And that created a completely new problem. Because Archbishop Nestorius taught that Jesus Christ had two distinct natures, or two separate “hypostases” - substances, natures, essential being. The Greek word means “to stand under”, as the foundation of a house. In reference to a person, it is the essential nature of that person – what he is made of. And Nestorius’ compromise meant that Jesus had two essential natures - one human and one divine - residing in one person; or two persons in one body. If Mary were only Christotokos, the Mother of Christ, the implication was that she gave birth to a human baby, who somehow, at some later time, was inhabited by a divine nature, the Logos, or Word of God. The human Jesus and the divine Logos were different “persons”, “essences”, possessing a single body. That meant that Jesus was not God, not divine; and the Logos was not human. And that would mean that the Word did not become flesh, but merely inhabited it.

Even more of a problem was the further question of whether Jesus had a sin nature. “How can Jesus Christ, being part man, not be partially a sinner as well, since man is by definition a sinner since the fall?” The answer was what Nestorius had given – that Mary gave birth to the incarnate

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5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theotokos
Christ (the man), but not the divine Logos who was eternal and existed before Mary. Thus Mary could not be the Mother of God, but only the Mother of Christ. Furthermore, said Nestorius, no union between the divine and human is possible. If Christ were like us he could not be truly God and if he were divine he could not be like us. It would be impossible for God to be hungry, to grow, to suffer, to mature, or to die.

The Patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril, heard about it from a layman, Eutychus (whom we will hear from next week), and took issue. Cyril appealed to Pope Celestine to call a council. Celestine suggested that Cyril give Nestorius ten days to recant or be excommunicated. John of Antioch urged Nestorius to submit, telling him that “you have the whole of the East against you, as well as Egypt.” Nestorius refused and instead asked Emperor Theodosius to call a council. He hoped to convict Cyril of heresy and vindicate himself.

Complicating matters is the fact that the Empire, so carefully united under Constantine, had come undone, and was once again divided into two parts. Constantinople was the imperial capitol of Emperor Theodosius II; Rome was the imperial capitol of Valentinian III. The dispute was between Alexandria in Egypt and Constantinople. Involving the pope had political overtones. Emperor Theodosius called the council and Celestine sent a papal legate. Emperor Valentinian apparently stayed out of it.

A date was set and Theodosius summoned the metropolitan bishops to Ephesus, the seat of the veneration of Mary. That is interesting to me, because that was where the apostle Paul encountered a riot over the local goddess Artemis, the “mother goddess of fertility.” The riot was because local craftsmen were losing business because people were converting to Christianity. Had veneration of Mary replaced the worship of Artemis? That is, had Mary become their substitute goddess? The date for the council was set was Pentecost - June 7, 431.

Nestorius arrived first, and being from an imperial city was accompanied by a detachment of troops with orders to keep the peace. The appearance, though, was that the troops were there to support Nestorius. Cyril arrived a few days before Pentecost. Those from Palestine and Philippi arrived five days late. Cyril called the first session to order on June 22. Nestorius refused to acknowledge Cyril’s authority. And John of Antioch, a supporter of Nestorius, had not arrived with his delegation. Nor had the papal representatives. Cyril managed to get the imperial representative to read the Emperor’s decree of convocation, and the council proceeded to ratify the pope’s condemnation of Nestorius as an heretic. The Council also branded Pelagius and his successor Caelestius as heretics, but that is a different subject and a story for another day.

When John of Antioch arrived, he was angry at having to make such a long journey, it appeared, for nothing. So they, along with Nestorius, held their own council, condemning Cyril for heresy, deposing both Cyril and the Bishop of Ephesus, Memnon. The emperor agreed with Nestorius, but quickly changed his mind.

Over the next six sessions, from July 10 to 31, in what is characterized as “a heated atmosphere of confrontation and recrimination”, the bishops ended up condemning Nestorius, deposing him and labeling his doctrine as heresy. The condemnation of Nestorius was agreed to by
a smaller council held at the same time in Rome. The Council at Ephesus denounced Nestorius’ teaching and upheld the Nicene Creed (without the modifications of Constantinople (AD 381)).

They decreed that Jesus was one person, not two; that he was complete God and complete man, with a rational soul and body. They declared it to be unlawful for anyone to teach a doctrine other than that established at Nicaea. That meant that Mary was Theotokos, “one who gave birth to God”.

The emperor had always supported Nestorius and at first tried to ratify the decisions of both councils - that of Cyril and the rival one held by Nestorius. That meant that, at first, Theodosius declared that Cyril, Memnon, and John were deposed. Memnon and Cyril were confined. But the envoys of the Council managed to persuade the emperor to accept Cyril’s council as the true one. Nestorius could see what his future held, so he requested permission to retire. The council of Ephesus was officially dissolved in October. Pope Celestine had died before the end of the Council in July, but his successor, Sixtus III, put the papal stamp of approval on the action of the Council.

The result of the Council of Ephesus was a division in the Church. In AD 424, seven years before the Council, the Persian Church had declared itself independent of the Byzantine and Roman Church, and aligned with Nestorian doctrine. They moved further from Roman doctrine and more Nestorian over the next decades. In AD 486, the head of the Persian church, Metropolitan Barsauma of Nisibis, publicly accepted Nestorius’ mentor as a spiritual authority. The divide continued for 1500 years until 1994 when the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East declared a resolution expressing their “common understanding” of the doctrine concerning the deity and humanity of Jesus, and recognizing the legitimacy of their respective descriptions of Mary. The Assyrian Church refers to her as “the Mother of Christ our God and Savior” and the Catholics refer to her as both “the Mother of God” and “the Mother of Christ”.

It is correct to refer to Mary as “the Mother of God Incarnate”, for she is the mother of Jesus. It is not correct to refer to her as “the Mother of God Eternal”, for he is, in fact, eternal and uncreated. And while Mary’s title is what sparked the debate, the deeper issue is always, “Who is Jesus Christ?” We have come to believe that the Scriptures are clear. And yet, we still face people who are not so clear about what the Bible says - or means. It is vital to us that we understand these early debates, these early controversies, and the agonies of the Early Church as they attempted to understand and define the doctrine of the Church. I say “agonies” because they were difficult, painful, in some measure political, the birth pangs of the faith, and the defense against heresy.

Who is Jesus? In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being ... (Hebrews 1:3). To Paul he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation ... for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Colossians 1:15-20). The early song of the church says, “Who being in very nature God ... made himself nothing, ... being made in human likeness ...” (Philippians 2:6-11). Very God and very man, light of light, of the same substance, both completely and fully human and completely and fully God. And so beautifully expressed in the opening words of John’s gospel –

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.

John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, “This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.’”

From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God’s unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us. (John 1:1-18, NLT)

For further reading –
Theodosius II - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_II)