



Development of the Orthodox Definition of Hypostatic Union; Cyril & Celestine Conspire to Silence Nestorius; Nestorius's Polemic: *The Bazaar of Heraclides*

22. In chapter 10 of *Nestorius and His Teaching*, Bethune-Baker presents excerpts from one of these discussions that document Nestorius's definition of the hypostatic union:

Bethune-Baker, J. F. *Nestorius and His Teaching*, 148-49:

At the end of the first part of the discussion in the *Bazaar of Heraclides* Superianus asks Nestorius to pass in review briefly the theories of the Incarnation to which he is opposed, and then to state his own theory clearly so that no one can misunderstand him. (pp. 148-49)

Superianus. Since then there are many who ... understand the words "He was incarnate" and "He became man" in different senses: please pass in review their opinions; and write what is your opinion and which view you approve as correct that you may give no occasion to those misrepresenting you.

Nestorius. The incarnation of our Lord was in flesh endowed with a soul,—a rational soul, and one capable of knowledge and complete in its nature and in its powers and natural functions—and not in seeming only, nor by a change of *ousia* ("substance" or, "attributes"). Nor was the incarnation a welding of two natures into one; nor were the natures changed one into another; nor was the incarnation for a supplying of the natural functions, in such a way that the flesh should not act in its own nature. But they (Alexandrian theologians) attribute the things of both natures to One. (p. 149)

23. The problem that developed between Nestorius and Cyril was definition of terms. Cyril was not only imprecise with his language but he was also fuzzy with his theology. It was at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that the definition of the hypostatic union was formulated.

Douglas, J. D. (gen. ed.). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 501:

INCARNATION. Having declared in the doctrine of the Trinity (Council of Nicea, A.D. 325) that the Father and the Son are coeternal and consubstantial, the fathers of the church could not avoid the question: How could the eternal Son, who is equally God with the Father, so partake of our flesh as to become a man as we are men?

Some suggested that the Son assumed a true body and soul, but in place of the human spirit ... was, the divine Logos. Realizing that this impugned our Lord's full humanity, others, e.g., Nestorius, affirmed this humanity, but spoke of Jesus in a way that made Him virtually a distinct person from the divine Logos.

NOTE: We have established that this was not the case with Nestorius. He sought to identify Christ as possessing two natures united in one Person. What is mentioned here is the result of Cyril's distortion.

Reacting against the suggestion that the divine Son and Jesus were two persons, Cyril of Alexandria and his followers argued that, as a result of the incarnation, the human and the divine (natures) were fused into one nature (Monophysitism). After much controversy, following the lead of Pope Leo I, the church came to define the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 by declaring that our Lord Jesus Christ is true God and true man consubstantial with the Father in all things as to His divinity, yet in his humanity like unto us in all things, sin excepted. This one and the same Jesus Christ is known in two natures "without confusion, without conversion, without severance and without division, the distinction of natures being in no wise abolished by their union, but the peculiarity of each nature being maintained, and both concurring in one person and substance (Council of Chalcedon)."



24. This is an accurate definition but because of Cyril's imprecise vocabulary it has acquired a title that suggests that the attributes of the divine nature and the attributes of the human nature merge into one Person.
25. Bethune-Baker elaborates on how the term "hypostatic union" was challenged by Nestorius based on the vocabulary of the fifth century:

Bethune-Baker, J. F. *Nestorius and His Teaching*, 171-74:

In the *Bazaar of Heraclides* Nestorius argues the matter at length, asking what in the world Cyril means by a "hypostatic union" if not what he himself understands by a union of two distinct natures in one Person. (p. 171)

It is by the arguments of Nestorius himself that we must judge of his meaning. But a few words, by way of preface, may supplement what has been already said as to the different meanings which the terms involved in the discussion bore, and call attention to the ambiguity of the phrase. Nestorius, as we have seen, is always consistent in his use of the term *hypostasis* in connexion with the doctrine of our Lord's person. It always has, for him, the sense of "substance", and that the two substances, Godhead and manhood, though united in the one Person, continued to retain their respective and different characteristics, which are summed up under the term "natures". (pp. 171-72)

"Hypostatic union" (ἕνωσις ὑποστατική, *henōsis hypostatikē*) may mean a union of two *hypostases* (substances, e.g., God and man), the result of which is the formation of a new *hypostasis* which is something other than either of the two out of which it is compounded. If this is what Cyril intended, using *hypostasis* in the sense of "substance" (the merger of God and man into a hybrid "substance"—and Nestorius evidently thinks this is the obvious meaning of the phrase), then Nestorius could not regard the phrase as anything but a summary statement of the doctrine of the Person of our Lord which he dreaded. For it would express the blending or compounding or confusion of the Godhead and manhood (the two *hypostases*, or "substances") which he himself believed to still remain, each in its own nature (i.e., essence), although united in our Lord's person. Nestorius insists that though it is a person in whom the union is realized, the union itself is not of persons—the component parts of it are not persons, but distinct substances of Godhead and manhood with their distinctive characteristics. (p. 172)

The phrase "hypostatic union" ... would not give adequate recognition to the reality of the human nature and experiences of the Lord Jesus Christ; it would tend to "dehumanize the manhood"; or else it would suggest a "mixture" which resulted in the degradation of the Godhead.

If, however, Cyril meant by it ("hypostatic union") only that the "substances" (Godhead and manhood), while retaining their distinctive properties, found their union in one Person—so that it was the Person who was "one", while the substances (Godhead and manhood) were "two"—and that therefore genuinely Divine and genuinely human experiences alike were His; then Nestorius was in complete agreement with him.

As after all these years we read the words of Cyril ("hypostatic union"), a canonized Doctor of the Church, whose terminology has become our own, we are scarcely conscious of the ambiguity. We assign to his terms a conventional meaning, and familiarity with them makes us suspicious of any other form of words—if Nestorius objected to them, it was because he was a heretic. But again it must be said, it was a period when terms were "in the making".

26. The dialogue continues with Nestorius systematically discrediting Cyril's definitions of the hypostatic union. This is much too involved for us to indulge the time required for Nestorius examines the writings of Cyril quite extensively. Nevertheless, Bethune-Baker quotes this context on pages 175-188 of *Nestorius and His Teaching*.
27. For our part we now have accumulated enough information to quote Nestorius's view of how the term "hypostatic union" should be defined biblically:

Bethune-Baker, J. F. *Nestorius and His Teaching*, 151:



The incarnation of our Lord was in flesh endowed with a soul,—a rational soul, and one capable of knowledge and complete in its nature and in its powers and natural functions—and not in seeming only, nor by a change of *ousia* (“substance” of true humanity). Nor was it (the incarnation) a welding of two natures into one; nor were the natures changed one into another; nor was it (the incarnation) for a supplying of the natural functions, in such a way that the flesh should not act in its own nature. But they attribute the things of both natures to One, while they vindicate to each the proper things of its own nature. The *ousia* (“substance” of undiminished deity) of the Godhead is preserved and is impassible (incapable of suffering) while it is in the *ousia* of the flesh (the incarnation of undiminished deity with the flesh of true humanity); and the flesh also remains in the *ousia* (“substance”) of flesh while it is in the nature and person of the Godhead (the incarnation of true humanity with undiminished deity). For the body is one, and both natures are one Son; that He may act completely in the nature of men, inasmuch as He is man, and remain as God, in that He is by nature God.

The union is not to be conceived of as a change of *ousia* (“substance”)—either into another *ousia* (“substances” of Godhead and manhood transformed into a third kind of “substance”) or into a physical compounding into a single nature (the merger of “substances” into one that is composed of all the attributes of each). For a physical union implies the passible (sufferable) and changeable, such as a nature which is created and made, not the uncreated and unchangeable and unalterable.

The union was not one of natures into a single nature, nor of confusion, nor a change, nor a changing of *ousia* (“substance”)—whether of God into man, or of man into God—nor a mingling of natures, nor a compounding into one nature, so that they should be mingled and be affected by one another as being physically united as to natural functions.

28. In another excerpt, Nestorius addresses the assertions of Cyril directly and in doing so clearly distinguishes the differences in the conception of the “hypostatic union” held by each:

Bethune-Baker, J. F. *Nestorius and His Teaching*, 159-60:

They (the Alexandrians at the Council of Ephesus) spoke deceitfully and led many astray, though they did not keep this examination secret. As this man (Cyril) wished—for he wished the matters not to be duly examined lest he himself should stand condemned; for he persuaded them all, ... and they who were in collusion with him so presented the matter to the many as though he were the vindicator of Christ’s divinity, and was preventing me from maintaining the opposite. And so he carried them all away into opposition to me, insomuch that they would not listen to a word until I should utterly make an end of Christ’s humanity,—as though I were maintaining to him (Cyril) that Christ was man in *ousia* (“substance” i.e., essence), but God by an equality of honour. And he employed prejudice against me, and was saying against me, making God a man, that Christ should not be considered to be anything at all save only God the Word (undiminished deity).

And I of necessity aimed my arguments against him, maintaining that He is also a man; and I proved it to him from the Divine Scriptures and from the Fathers. And this he also used against me, as though I had said that Christ was man only. For when I demanded that he should make confession in this matter he was unwilling to confess. For I was not accusing him of not confessing Christ to be God, but of refusing to say that Christ is perfect man in nature and operations, and that God the Word (deity) did not become the nature of man—so that God the Word should be both (God and man) by nature² (the merger of *hypostases* into one different *hypostasis* or “substance”). (pp. 159-60)

29. Bethune-Baker designates a footnote at this point to help clarify this final point:

² i.e., the result of Cyril’s refusal to confess Christ as perfect man is that the Word must be both natures at once.

30. Here is where we must tie together several of the things we have observed in our study:



- (1) Nestorius held the biblical view of the union of “substances” or attributes into one Person which defines the Lord as undiminished deity and true humanity: two natures in one Person.
- (2) On the other hand, Cyril subscribed to the heretical doctrine of *Theotokos*, that Mary was the “mother of God” and that as such she was to be elevated to a sinless status so that the deity of Christ was emphasized over His humanity.
- (3) This approach led to another heresy known as Monophysitism, literally “one nature” which also emphasized the deity of Christ over His humanity.
- (4) Cyril viewed the *hypostasis* as the essence of God being born *with* the flesh: “He (Cyril) clearly reckons the birth of His flesh to be His (the Word’s, i.e., His deity’s) birth.” (Bethune-Baker, p. 164)
- (5) Nestorius accurately considered this to be an attack on the deity of Christ which Cyril made a big deal at Ephesus of defending.
- (6) If deity is born then this *hypostasis* must take on the attributes of humanity and thus experience the same sufferings as humanity. This is blasphemous.
- (7) It was the humanity of Christ that was our substitute. Deity cannot take on sinfulness nor can it be judged. However, the innocent and impeccable humanity of the Christ was qualified to become a substitute for the guilty.
- (8) Christ was the perfect mediator. A mediator must be equal with both parties in a dispute. He was equal with the Father in that He was undiminished deity and He was equal with man in that he was true humanity.
- (9) And this was possible because He possessed two natures in one Person.
- (10) If emphasis is placed on the deity of Christ, damage is not only done to the principle of His human nature but also to our Lord’s qualification to be Messiah, Mediator, and Savior.
- (11) Thus the false doctrine of *Theotokos* led the Alexandrians into Monophysitism which clouded the Gospel and provided the framework for an idolatrous worship of Mary.
- (12) To protect these heresies, Cyril distorted the correct definition of the “hypostatic union” constructed by Nestorius by asserting that he taught that Christ was two Persons, one undiminished deity and the other true humanity.