Class 3 Summary – Nestorianism

What is Nestorianism?

Nestorianism is the heresy which denies that Christ was a single person, at the same time God and man. It is named after Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, who was born sometime after 351 AD and died sometime after 451 AD. He objected to the use of the term *Theotokos* (God-bearer) as a title for the Virgin Mary because he thought it suggested an Apollinarian denial of Jesus’ full humanity. Nestorius was opposed chiefly by St. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria (Egypt), and his teaching was condemned by the Third Ecumenical Council, held at Ephesus in the year 431 AD.

Nestorius did not set out to be novel or original, far from it: he saw himself as preserving the integrity of the Christian faith, and he was responding to what he saw as dangerous talk that was being spread about in his place and time – and it really was dangerous talk.

The danger Nestorius saw was that in his time piety had led some to speak of the Blessed Virgin Mary as “Theotokos”, which means in Greek “God-bearer”. There was no doubt that Mary bore someone; the Gospels tell us she was the mother of Jesus of Nazareth and no one was contesting that identity. However, Nestorius thought that to say she was the mother of God was to make a disastrous, if almost imperceptible, leap of logic.

In Nestorius’s view, Mary could be called the mother of Jesus, mother to the human nature in Christ, but she could not be called God’s mother. Divine nature, by definition, cannot have a mother. Being eternal, divine nature has no beginning, and therefore it can have no mother from which it first came into being. According to Nestorius, therefore, you could call Mary the mother of Jesus, but not the mother of God.

Nestorianism is a Christological heresy, a bad misunderstanding of who Christ is, for in denying that Mary was the mother of God, Nestorius was effectively saying that although the two natures of Christ belonged to one person, there was a dividing wall between them: Mary is the mother of one half, but not of the other.

The real point of the condemnation of Nestorianism is not to affirm that Mary is the God-bearer, but rather to affirm the full significance of the prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-14). That is what Nestorius missed. John’s prologue tells us that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. The union of fallen human nature with the utterly holy divine nature necessarily changes the unholy: divine nature acts like a refining fire, burning away the tarnish of sin and death – and everything changes for us and for the whole cosmos as a result of this marriage of the uncreated with the most cherished of all creatures.

You see, our salvation isn’t accomplished through Christ’s work, but rather through who he is. What he did…his actions…his death & resurrection…is simply the logical working out of his identity as fully divine and fully human.