Class 4 Summary – Eutychianism

What is Eutychianism?

Eutychianism is the heresy which denies that there are two natures in Christ. It is named after Eutyches, the monastic superior of a large monastery at Constantinople, who was born in about 378 AD and died in 454 AD. He held that there was only one nature (physis) in Christ “after the union” of his divinity and humanity, and for this reason his view is sometimes called Monophysitism. Eutyches taught that Christ’s humanity was so united with his divinity that it was not the same as ours, a view which the Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon in 451 AD, decreed to be incompatible with our salvation through him.

Put in a nutshell, Eutychianism is the view that the union between God and humanity in Christ is so complete that his humanity is no longer distinguishable from his divinity. We must, therefore, speak of one and only one nature in Christ. Christ’s humanity is not of the same nature as ours: in effect it has been subsumed in the divinity. Thus a third thing has come into being – neither God nor man, but God-man.

Eutyches was a powerful and influential monastic superior and resident in the imperial city of Constantinople. He had taken great exception to Nestorius and to the separation between Christ’s divinity and humanity that he detected in Nestorius’s teaching. However, just as Nestorius’s problem was an inadequate account of the union of Christ humanity and divinity, so Eutyches had an inadequate grasp of the distinction between the divinity and humanity in Christ. For him even the merest mention of any form of two-ness in Christ meant dualism, separation, two Christ’s – in short, Nestorianism. Eutyches consequently insisted on speaking of only one reality, one nature in Christ.

In speaking of only one nature, Eutyches believed that he was remaining loyal to the teaching of St. Cyril of Alexandria who had secured the condemnation of Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. By this victory, Cyril had established himself as the touchstone of Christological orthodoxy to such an extent that almost all subsequent Christological debate revolved around the question of fidelity to Cyril.

When brought before the standing council or “home synod” of Constantinople in 448 AD, Eutyches admitted that Christ might be spoken of as two natures before the union, but only one nature “after the union”. He was also very reluctant to affirm that Christ’s body was of the same nature as, or consubstantial with, our own. He argued that such language was not found either in Scripture or in the writings of the early Church Fathers. He was, however, prepared to concede this point (under very heavy pressure) as a sign of his respect for Episcopal authority. This concession was not enough for the assembled bishops, and Eutyches was condemned for his insistence on one nature – and only one nature – in Christ.

Eutyches’ fortunes suffered something of a roller-coaster ride in the years following his appearance before the synod of Constantinople. These ups and downs ended in a city called Chalcedon in 451 AD, where an ecumenical council was gathered by the Emperor Marcian. It was in this Council that Eutyches’ teaching was finally condemned in what came to be known as “the Chalcedonian Definition”.