



WAS GORDON CLARK A NESTORIAN?

An Analysis of Gordon H. Clark's book 'The Incarnation'

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A number of persons, having read Gordon Clark's *The Incarnation*,¹ have come to the conclusion that Dr. Clark was a Nestorian. That is, in his final book, Clark taught that Jesus Christ was not one person with two natures, but that He was really two "separate" persons. The present writers disagree with this conclusion. Dr. Clark did not turn away from the orthodox view of Jesus Christ; he merely attempted to state it more cogently. By this we mean that Dr. Clark was doing what a theologian normally pursues in clarifying important questions as to the history and formation of orthodox doctrine. The duty of a theological philosopher is to express the truth with greater specificity without voiding its principle motif. It is the purpose of this article to review and analyze *The Incarnation* to support this position.

In the Foreword of this book, John Robbins writes:

During the fourth and fifth centuries the church was disturbed by many controversies, but the most prominent seems to have been the debate about Christ. Who, precisely, was Jesus Christ? Was Christ both God and man? Was He the first of all creatures? Was He God in a body? Was He one of the modes of God the Father? Was He merely a man? Was He two persons, Jesus of Nazareth and the second person of the Trinity? The debate was lively and acrimonious.

The result was the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) formulation, which declared that Christ is:

Truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in

¹ Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1988). The section numbering and pagination used in this review are from Dr. Clark's book.

two natures inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the properties of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one substance, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, only begotten, God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who is Jesus Christ? Following the Council of Chalcedon, mainline orthodox Christianity maintains that He is the Godman. He is one divine person with two “distinct” natures. He is both truly God and truly man; yet there is no fusion of the natures.

Theologians call the union of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ in the one person the *hypostatic* union. At the incarnation, the eternal Son of God took upon himself, not a human person, but a true human nature (the human nature of Christ, of course, not being a part of the Trinity). From that time, state the theologians, Jesus Christ is (and always will be) one self-conscious, divine person, with two natures: one divine and one human.

The Chalcedonian formulation, however, did not settle this issue, nor did it end the debate. There is a problem that has existed since the fourth and fifth centuries, and one that has resurfaced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Twentieth century pluralist John Hicks states it this way: “*If Jesus has two complete natures, one human and the other divine, and yet was one undivided person [as per Chalcedon], how can that person be said to be genuinely human?*”²

That is to say, if Jesus Christ is, as taught in Hebrews 2:17, and asserted by the Chalcedonian creedal statement, “in all things like unto us,” how is it that He is not a human person? If He, as Chalcedon properly contends, did take upon himself a human nature so that, “according to the manhood,” He is “in all things like unto us,” then He had a human body and a human soul. Is He not then a human person? After all, the Bible repeatedly claims that He is not just a human nature; He is “the *Man* Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). If these things are so, it would appear that the balance of the Chalcedonian Creed contradicts its own the phraseology, “in all things like unto us,” because it denies that Christ was a human person.

² John Hick, in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), edited by Michael Goulder, 83.

Obviously something that is not a human person at all cannot be “in all things like unto us.”

Moreover, if the self-conscious person of the Godman is the second person of the Trinity, as mainline orthodoxy affirms, then the human nature would not be self-conscious. Yet, in Luke 2:52 we read that Jesus increased, not only in “stature” (i.e., physically), but also “in wisdom” (i.e., mentally), thus showing that Jesus’ human nature (for the divine nature being omniscient cannot increase) has a consciousness. But if the Godman has two consciousnesses, then it would seem that He is two persons: one divine and one human.

The responses from the Christian church to this problem have been abysmal. Sadly, one typical way of alleviating the difficulty has been the Kierkegaardian approach: place it in the realm of logical paradox. Another solution is to discard the biblical teaching that God is impassible, and to suggest that the second person of the Godhead actually suffered on the cross.

These, of course, are no real solutions at all. In the last book he ever wrote, *The Incarnation*, Gordon Clark boldly attempts to answer this conundrum, the one which he calls “perhaps the most difficult problem in all theology” (4).

In *Section one* (1-8) the author introduces the difficult subject of Christology. Then in *Section two* (8-15) Clark traces the history of early Christological heresies. In the third century Paul of Samosata taught what is sometimes called “dynamic Monarchianism”: Jesus was a mere man who progressively entered into a relationship with God in which he was more and more penetrated with the divine being, until he finally became God. The third century also witnessed the heresy of Sabellianism or “Modalistic Monarchianism.” Sabellius maintained that there was only one person in the Godhead who manifests himself in three “modes”: sometimes he is referred to as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit.

The next heresiarch is the fourth century Apollinaris. He concluded that Jesus was neither fully God nor fully man. Rather, he was a human being (with a human body and a human soul) who was indwelt in such a way by the divine Logos that he is to be recognized as a combination or “co-mixture” of the two natures. In this

combination, Jesus was two-thirds human and one-third divine. In the fifth century we have Eutyches the Monophysite. He claimed that the incarnate Christ had only a single divine nature which was clad in human flesh. He thus conceived of Jesus as a mingling of the two natures rendering him a third nature, a *tertium quid*.

The fifth century also brought forth Nestorianism. Nestorius recognized the shortcomings of these other heresies. But he also saw the difficulty of maintaining that Christ was fully God and fully man, while at the same time teaching that he was only one person. This, said Nestorius, is irrational. As Thomas Morris has pointed out, other Christian thinkers, such as Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), and Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), had also seen this problem. They did not go so far as Nestorius and conclude that Christ must have been two separate persons, but apparently they did hold to what Morris calls “the two minds view of Christ.”³ It is not rational, so these thinkers said, to maintain that the Godman has only one self-consciousness. If this were so, he could not be fully man.

Nestorius, who had a very large following, was branded a heretic, along with the others listed above. But why was he so marked? What did some of the early church leaders have against this man? As cited by Dr. Clark, the historian John Cassian wrote voluminously against Nestorius. Says Cassian: “*Nestorius maintained that that which was formed in the womb of Mary was not God Himself,*” and that “*no one ever gave birth to one that was before her*” (11-12). But what is the problem with this? Is it not obvious that the eternal second person of the Godhead could not be formed in the womb? The divine Logos, being eternal, could never be born.

It was for this reason that Nestorius refused to call Mary the mother of Jesus *theotokos* (“mother of God” or “bringer forth of God”), as we read in the Chalcedonian Creed. Nestorius explains: “*Everywhere the Scripture of God, when it makes mention of the Lord’s incarnation, transmits to us a birth and a suffering not of the divinity, but of the humanity of the Anointed One [i.e., Christ], so that the holy virgin is to be called by the more accurate appellation “bringer forth of the Anointed One,” not “bringer forth of God.”*”⁴ Again, this is far from heretical. It is

³ Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 102-103.

⁴ Cited in R.J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, 1968, 1978), 43.

biblical truth when properly formulated. However, it is this issue that was more controversial than the relationship between the two natures. Even Augustine held and practiced Mariology. Mary was elevated already in the Church as being the Mother of God, and the established doctrine of veneration. But did Nestorius really believe what his accusers alleged? Dr. Charles Hodge, Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary wrote on the history of this issue dealing with Nestorius that:

The integrity of the two natures in Christ having been thus asserted and declared to be the faith of the Church, the next question which arose concerned the relations of the two natures, the one to the other, in the one person of Christ. Nestorianism is the designation adopted in church history, for the doctrine which either affirms, or implies a twofold personality in our Lord. The divine Logos was represented as dwelling in the man Christ Jesus, so that the union between the two natures was somewhat analogous to the indwelling of the Spirit. The true divinity of Christ was thus endangered. He was distinguished from other men in whom God dwelt, only by the plenitude of the divine presence, and the absolute control of the divine over the human. This was not the avowed or real doctrine of Nestorius, but it was the doctrine charged upon him, and was the conclusion to which his principles were supposed to lead. Nestorius was a man of great excellence and eminence; first a presbyter in Antioch, and afterwards Patriarch of Constantinople. The controversy on this subject arose from his defending one of his presbyters who denied that the Virgin Mary could properly be called the Mother of God. As this designation of the blessed Virgin had already received the sanction of the Church, and was familiar and dear to the people, Nestorius's objection to its use excited general and violent opposition. He was on this account alone accused of heresy. As, however, there is a sense in which Mary was the Mother of God, and a sense in which such a designation is blasphemous, everything depends on the real meaning attached to the terms. What Nestorius meant, according to his own statement, was simply that God, the divine nature, could neither be born nor die.⁵

There are two things which the reader should pay attention to in this statement by Hodge. First, Hodge points out that “*This was not the avowed or real doctrine of Nestorius, but it was the doctrine charged upon him, and was the conclusion to which his principles were supposed to lead.*” Now what makes this interesting is that

⁵ Cited in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

Dr. Hodge is one of the most recognized and respected theologians in the history of the Christian Church (who happened to be one of Dr. Clark's favorite theologians). Hodge maintain that Nestorius was falsely accused and his teachings were forced to a conclusion that he did not aver himself. This is very important in our consideration. Because the writers believe that is exactly what has taken place with the false allegations against Dr. Gordon Clark. Second, he notes that there is a way in which Mary can be called the Mother of God and another way "*in which such a designation is blasphemous.*" Hodge then points out, "*What Nestorius meant, according to his own statement, was simply that God, the divine nature, could neither be born nor die.*" Why is this important? Hodge maintains that the key to answering the *theotokos* question was, in principle, answered in the Chalcedon formulation. Hodge first tells us that Nestorius was not a Nestorian, and then secondly he points out that Mary only gives birth to the human nature, body and soul, and the Second Person of the Godhead is placed in that womb. We shall return to Dr. Hodge's own attempt to resolve the issues which still was not clearly explicated in Chalcedon as to what constitutes a "human person" or a "human nature."

It should therefore be of no surprise that Cassin also charged that Nestorius taught that it was not God the Son who suffered on the cross (11). This is hardly heresy. God is impassible and cannot suffer. Orthodox Christianity maintains that Christ suffered on the cross as touching His humanity, not His divinity. So far it seems that that Nestorius is guilty only of asserting that Jesus Christ was fully God (a divine person) and fully man (a human person), and of unduly separating the two persons.

In *Section three* (15-17) Dr. Clark discusses "the fatal flaw" in this matter, i.e., the absence of definitions. How does the Creed, and how do others, define "person?" How are "subsistence" and "nature" defined? Herein is the difficulty. The author suggests the definition of a "person" as a "complex of thoughts or propositions" (54-55, 64, 76). As taught in Proverbs 23:7: "as he [a person] thinks in his heart, so is he." A person is what he thinks. The author comes back to this definition later in his book.

Section four (17-22) covers “the middle ages and the Reformation,” including parts of the seventeenth century as well. During this period of time, among other things, the unity of the divine and human person was emphasized. Dr. Clark explains what took place as follows:

*The hypostasis of the Son not only produces the personal unity: It is the person of the God-man. The Logos is the person. This requires two assumptions not found in the Creed of Chalcedon. First, the Logos assumes the place of the Ego for the human side of Christ. Second, it presupposes the humanity of Jesus, but denies its personality. Otherwise, if the **Logos** is a person and if the human Jesus is a person, Nestorianism is the result. Therefore, the human nature of Christ is impersonal. This has become the commonly accepted view, but it involves a great difficulty. Aside from the fact that for most people “impersonal human nature” is an oddity, to say the least, the view oscillates between its tendency to become Nestorian and its equally clear tendency to become Apollinarian. If the human nature has no human will, it is hardly a human nature, and therefore the view reverts to Apollinarianism. But if the humanity of Jesus includes a human will and is thus a complete human being, we have Nestorianism again. Neither ancient nor modern Christology has escaped this dilemma. It may also be borne in mind that the Trinity has three persons but only one will.*

The author concludes the section by saying that “neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the Protestant churches have solved the problem; the Greek Church is not much better” (22).

The last one hundred and fifty years have seen a resurgence in the study of the doctrine of the incarnation. Therefore, in *Section five* (22-50) Dr. Clark takes us into the nineteenth century. He first cites the work of H. C. Powell, who contends “that the early church lacked the idea of an individual personality or ego.” Powell goes on to say that the first scholar to attempt a definition of a person was the sixteenth century rationalist Descartes. Others, of course, followed. But the crux of the matter is that when the early theologians were formulating the doctrine of the incarnation the terms used were at least somewhat ambiguous. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why such confusion is prominent in this area of Christology.

Jumping ahead to *Section six* (50-55) for a brief interlude, Dr. Clark returns to “definitions.” He cites Proverbs 23:7 as the best way to describe a person, i.e., he is “*a composite of propositions*”; “*as a man thinks in his heart, so he is. A man is what he thinks.... Whether the propositions be true or false, a person is the propositions he thinks*” (54-55). If this definition is used, then Christ must be a human person, because He had human thoughts. Being omniscient, He also is a divine person.

Returning to *Section five*, Dr. Clark cites the work of two other nineteenth century theologians: Charles Hodge and W. G. T. Shedd. Their attempts to solve the problem of the hypostatic union are highly problematic. Hodge states that “*the one nature [of Christ] is never distinguished from the other as a distinct person. The Son never addresses the Son of Man as a different person from himself*” (45). Hodge is implying that if Christ had been two persons then some kind of conversation would be recorded between the two. As Dr. Clark points out this is a logical blunder. First, even as John states at the end of his Gospel (John 21:25), there are many things which Jesus did which are not recorded in the Bible. Perhaps the two persons did have conversations of which we are not told. Second, perhaps no conversation was necessary. The Logos, being omniscient, would have known all things that the human person was thinking even before He spoke. In any case, Hodge’s argument is based on silence, and an argument from silence is always a fallacy.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge claims that the “man Christ Jesus” had a substance, nature, attributes, and a soul or mind all of which were different from the *Logos*. But as Dr. Clark writes: “*Do not nature plus attributes, plus substance, plus soul, make a person?*” (43).

Shedd simplifies the whole matter. In his *Dogmatic Theology* he simply states that “*the Godman was a new person*” (47). Now since Shedd denies that Jesus was a human person, in this statement he is implying that the second person of the Trinity changed, i.e., alterations occurred. But he goes on to make it explicit when he writes: “*The Trinity itself is not altered or modified by the incarnation. Only the second person is modified*” (47). This is truly an astonishing assertion from a theologian of Shedd’s stature. Somehow, he says, the immutable Son of God became mutable.

The present writers would add that the confusion continues in the twentieth century. Louis Berkhof, for example, writes:

*There is but one person in the Mediator, and that person is the unchangeable Son of God. In the incarnation He did not change into a human person, nor did He adopt a human person; He simply assumed a human nature, which did not develop into a human personality, but became personal in the person of the Son. The one divine person, who possessed a divine nature from eternity, assumed a human nature and now has both.*⁶

Here Berkhof has correctly stated the position of mainline orthodoxy. But in the same paragraph he goes on to say: “After this assumption of a human nature the person of the Mediator is not divine only but divine-human.... While He has but a single self-consciousness, He has both a divine and human consciousness, as well as a divine and human will.”

In these last sentences Berkhof has contradicted what he previously asserted. The unchangeable second person of the Godhead did indeed change. He is no longer divine only; He is now “divine-human.” Too, the question needs to be asked: ‘How can there be only one self-consciousness while at the same time there are two consciousnesses?’ What or who can be conscious except a self?

Then there is Morton Smith. In agreement with the Chalcedonian formulation, he holds to the traditional view. In volume one of his *Systematic Theology*,⁷ Dr. Smith writes: “There are not two personalities in Christ, but two natures in the one person.” Further, he maintains that as touching his human nature “Christ was truly man.” But then Dr. Smith adds: “It was the divine person who assumed an impersonal human nature. In other words, he did not unite himself with a human person, but with a human nature.” One wonders, not only what “an impersonal human nature” is, but also how Christ can be considered “truly man” and not be a human person.

It is also perplexing when we read Dr. Smith’s statement that “Christ’s person may be described as theanthropic, but not his natures,” just prior to the claim that “it was the divine person who assumed an impersonal human nature.” How is it

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1933, 1987), 184.

⁷ Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, Vols. I & II (Greenville, South Carolina: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994). The quotes from Dr. Smith used in this review are from volume I, pages 358-361.

possible for the divine second person of the Godhead, who is immutable, to become “theanthropic?”

As noted above, responses of orthodox theologians to the question raised by John Hick have been abysmal. In the final two sections of his book, however, the very orthodox Gordon Clark does give us some answers. Dr. Clark, after resuming his analysis in *Section seven* (55-64) in *Section eight* (64-74) discusses the subject of “Divine and Human Persons.” “*If Jesus was not a human person*” asks Clark, “*who or what suffered on the cross? The second person could not have suffered, for Deity is impassible.... If then the second person could not suffer, could [an impersonal human] nature suffer*” (67).

Dr. Clark continues: “*On the contrary, only...a person can suffer.*” Moreover, asks the author, “*how can a human consciousness, mind, heart, and will not be a human person?*” Further, if the Bible teaches, as it does, that He is “the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5), how, we may ask, “can a man be a man without being a human person?” Is the salvation of the elect accomplished “*by the alleged death of an impersonal [human] nature?*” No, if the Bible teaches that it was “the Man Christ Jesus” who went to the cross in behalf of elect sinners, then “*the one who died on the cross was a Man, he had or was a soul, He was a human being, a person*” (67-70).

John Murray, an advocate of the Chalcedonian view, has nevertheless also seen the difficulty with “definitions.” He writes:

It may be that the term “Person” can be given a connotation in our modern context, and applied to Christ’s human nature, without thereby impinging upon the oneness of His divine-human Person. In other words, the term “nature” may be too abstract to express all that belongs to His humanness and the term “Person” is necessary to express the manhood that is truly and properly His.⁸

The present writers are in agreement with Clark and Murray on this point. It seems best, if we are going to retain the classic language on this subject (i.e., Person and nature), to say with the *Westminster Confession* (8:2) that Jesus Christ possesses “*two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood,*” that is that He is fully God and fully man. And that in the incarnation these two

⁸ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), II:138.

natures “were inseparably joined together in one Person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which Person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.” That is, there is one Lord Jesus Christ, one God-man (i.e., the one Person), who possesses two distinct and inseparable natures, both of which are to be considered “personal,” in that He is fully divine and fully human. There is nothing impersonal about the divine or the human natures. Otherwise Jesus Christ could not be fully God or fully man. As touching His humanity, Christ has a human mind or soul, and a human body. He is “the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

In *Section nine* (75-78) Dr. Clark reaches “The Conclusion.” He has offered a definition of a person. This is something which the early church and many others after that have failed to do. As noted, according to Dr. Clark a person is “a composition of propositions.” This being the case, Jesus Christ is the one Godman, who is both a divine person (nature) and a human person (nature). He is “one Jesus Christ,” fully divine and fully human. Both the divine and human natures (persons) are compositions of propositions.

It should be noted that Gordon Clark does not separate the two persons of Christ, as Nestorians do; rather, he “distinguishes” between them. It is important to understand the difference between “separation” and “distinction.” Nevertheless, many may write off Clark’s conclusion by branding it “Nestorianism.” But that is merely a case of *ad hominem* abusive argumentation. Let them show where it is that Dr. Clark has erred. He has attempted what few have—to define a person so that meaning can be attached to “a person.” In the opinion of these reviewers, *The Incarnation* is a major step forward in the ongoing study of Christian theology.

Sadly, Dr. Clark died prior to finishing his manuscript. But believing that it only needed several more paragraphs, he asked John Robbins to complete it for him. Dr. Robbins’ concluding words adequately summarize Clark’s thoughts on the subject:

If, as seems to be the case, we now have a solution to the puzzles of the Incarnation, a solution that avoids the contradictions and meaningless words of the traditional formulations, a solution that is supported by Scripture itself, we are obliged to accept it. Jesus Christ was and is both God and man, a divine person and a human person. To

deny either is to fall into error. Once the key terms are defined and clearly understood, the Incarnation is an even more stupendous and awe-inspiring miracle than the church has hitherto surmised (78).

This is an adequate summary of Dr. Clark's teaching in *The Incarnation* if we understand what he means by "a person." If we miss this point, we will miss what Dr. Clark is saying in this monograph. We now want to look more specifically at the unity of the person of Christ.

One more point should be made clear. Dr. Clark endorsed the Westminster Confession's position on the incarnation and its importance in the proper understanding of both the mediatorial office of Christ and the Virgin Birth as held forth in the Chalcedonian creed. Clark writes:

"This Chalcedonian doctrine is necessary to support the function of Christ's mediatorial office. The reason is that if Christ were a mere man, he could not function as mediator; nor could he if he were simply God. In both cases he would be confined to one extreme and fail to link the two. If Christ were neither God nor man, but an angel or something else, he would be a barrier between God and man rather than a mediator. But as both God and man, as truly God as man and as truly man as God, Christ can be the Mediator and unite God and men."

Dr. Clark goes on to state: *"In the middle of section 2 the Confession states the method God chose to accomplish the incarnation. Christ became man by the Virgin Birth."*⁹

Dr. Clark was not trying to contradict the Chalcedonian doctrine that historically had been formulated and accepted in the Church of Jesus Christ. Rather, like any good philosopher theologian, he was seeking to give greater specificity in understanding a doctrine that has caused troubling issues concerning the doctrine of the Incarnation. This he attempted as others before him have done, and those after his death have attempted. Dr. Clark's point, like that of Murray is going to the real issue, what do the terms mean? How do we define them? Definition, taught

⁹ What Do Presbyterians Believe, (The Trinity Foundation, 1965), 95.

Dr. Clark, is essential to any theological or philosophical discussion. In sum, the Chalcedonian formulation is maintained and defended by Dr. Gordon Clark.

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