

Jesus Christ, the Author of Life

Peter said, “You killed the Author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this” (Ac 3:15). The resurrection of Jesus Christ assures Christians that they will share the destiny of their Hero. Peter’s word for “author” in wider usage meant a military or political leader or hero. The stem of the word suggests “origin”, but the meaning of “prince” or hero” is not far away. Peter used the same word for “author” in the sense of “Prince” when he said, “God has exalted Him to His right hand as Prince and Saviour” (Ac 5:31). Christians’ “state” or “commonwealth” is in heaven (Ph 3:20). They are like a colony in a foreign country, and they bear the name of Jesus Christ. He regards their affairs as His own, and He will give them a share of His glory.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews shows that this word in the senses of “author” and “prince” or “hero” was current in early Christian preaching. He wrote, “It was fitting for Him, because of whom all things exist, and through whom all things exist, that, when He brought many sons to glory, He should make the Author of their salvation complete through sufferings” (H 2:10). Jesus Christ leads many brothers to the honour or glory that salvation will bring. He has brought this salvation about by means of His suffering. Peter in Acts 3:15 speaks of Jesus Christ as the “Author of life” by means of His death and being raised again. Again in Hebrews Jesus is called the “Author” or “Founder” of Christian faith. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith. For the sake of the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (H 12:2). In this context the writer was speaking about the consequences for how Jesus’ followers live. They have Jesus’ example, because He is their prince, or hero as He leads and inspires them. For He, in His own faith in God, endured suffering, shame, and death and reached eventual glory.

Moreover, when the word for “prince” or “hero” in the sense of “author” or “originator” of life is coupled with the words “you killed” we are confronted with the great mystery of two natures in the incarnate Son of God. It is not God’s nature to be killed. However, it is not adequate to say that the Son of God died as a human being, but did not die in His divine nature. The same mystery surfaced when Paul wrote, “If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). Both Peter and Paul speak about His divine nature in terms that are strictly appropriate for the other nature, His human nature.

When we speak like this about Jesus Christ we have the heart of the Gospel. It was not a natural property for God the Son to have human flesh and blood. The blood of a human being on its own cannot benefit another human being except by way of a physical transfusion. However, because the blood of Jesus Christ was the blood of God the Son, it has the super-human power to cleanse from sin. John wrote, “the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 J 1:7). The flesh of a human being who is mortal because of sin cannot give life to any other human being. However, because Jesus’ flesh is the very own flesh of the Word, who is God (J 1:1; 1:14), it has the power to give life to the world. Jesus said, “If anyone eats of this Bread, he will live for ever, and the Bread that I shall give is My flesh, for the life of the world” (J 6:51) and “Truly, truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me and I in him” (J 6:53-56).

What is involved in such statements? What is appropriate to Jesus’ human nature is being ascribed to His whole person. Even more. What is appropriate to Jesus’ human nature is ascribed directly to His divine nature. To deny this is to deny the heart of the Gospel.

These questions were the concern of the Second Letter of Cyril of Alexandria to Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople in 430 AD. Cyril’s starting-point was the two sets of statements about Jesus Christ in the second article of the Creed. We say that one and the same person is “one Lord” and “very God”, and “of one substance with the Father.” Yet we say that this same person suffered and was crucified, was raised, ascended, and sits at the Father’s right. So if we say that Mary is “the one who gave birth to God”, that is not essentially an attempt to ascribe undue honour to Mary, but a profound statement of what happened when Jesus was born. We are not suggesting that His divine nature began to exist when He was born of the Virgin. He had been co-eternal with the Father, but for us and our salvation was also born in time as a human being.

Both Cyril and Nestorius agreed that strictly the divine nature did not undergo a change when the Word became flesh, or when Jesus suffered. However, Nestorius made the mistake of speaking of Christ as two subjects or entities. For Jesus’ divine nature was the subject of all His incarnate experiences.

What Cyril wrote is a good commentary on Peter’s words, “You killed the Author of life, but God raised Him from the dead.”

“In like manner we say that He ‘suffered’ and ‘rose again.’ Not as though God the Word suffered in His own divine nature either stripes or the piercing of nails, of the other wounds inflicted on Him, for the Godhead is incapable of suffering because it is without a body. But because that which had become His own body suffered these things, therefore again He Himself is said to have suffered them for us. For He who cannot suffer was in the suffering body. We also think about His death in this way. For the Word of God is by nature beyond decay, and Life, and Life-giving, but, because His own body ‘by the grace of God’... ‘tasted death for every man’, therefore once more He Himself is said to have suffered death for us. Not as though He experienced death as regards His own (divine) nature — to say or hold that is madness — but that, as I said, just now, His flesh tasted death. So likewise, when His flesh was raised, the resurrection again is spoken of as His

resurrection, not as though He had seen decay, God forbid, but because once more it was His own body that was raised.”

Related questions also arose. When we worship Jesus Christ, do we worship only His divine nature, or the one person in two natures?

Cyril wrote: “In this way we confess one Christ and Lord, not as worshipping a man conjointly with the Word, that there may not through this phrase ‘conjointly’ be insinuated the appearance of division — but as worshipping one and the same (Lord), because the body of the Lord is not alien from the Lord, with which body also He sits with the Father Himself: not again as though two sons sit with the Father, but One united to His own flesh. But if we reject this personal union either as impossible or unseemly, we fall into the error of making two sons. For in that case we must distinguish and speak about the Man in His own person dignified with the title of Son, and again the Word which is of God in His own Person possessing by nature the Sonship, both name and reality. We must not then divide the one Lord Jesus Christ into two sons...”

The Gospel involves the paradox that He who is beyond suffering and death in His own divine nature suffered, died and rose to life again. Because the body that He had made His very own suffered and died, the sufferings and death were His own.

When we discuss such important questions we do not act like a scientist dissecting a creature in a laboratory. Christology is essentially about how Jesus Christ has saved us. We call Him the “Author of life” because, when He who is life in Himself in His divine nature was crucified and rose again in His own human body, He brought us life and salvation.