

## **Learning from the Church Fathers (16) Cyril of Alexandria (ca.375-444 A.D.)**

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The emergent church movement is one of the latest controversies on America's religious scene. Its postmodern leaders question the importance of doctrine. They call the Christian faith "a journey". They are keen on relationship building while doctrine is scorned as logical, sterile, and exclusive. Confessions and Creeds are only "conversation guides". Dave Tomlinson, an emergent leader, writes, "Ultimately, our church pedigrees, spiritual experiences, or creedal affirmations do not impress God. St. Peter will not be asking at the pearly gates which church we belonged to or if we believed in the virgin birth." But doctrine does matter. The Christian faith is based, not upon mere feelings, not upon personal experience, not upon social justice programs, not upon good works, but upon the solid foundation of Biblical doctrines.

The Church Fathers lived in a time when truth and essential doctrine mattered. When Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 375-444 A.D.) became bishop, the Roman state became gradually Christianized. In his time there was not one, but several Churches, disagreeing primarily on questions of doctrine, but often divided also by personal, jurisdictional, regional, or even national loyalties. The centre of gravity of the Roman Empire had shifted from west to east, from Rome to Constantinople, the city founded by Emperor Constantine to be his eastern capital. It was a time when Bishops were expected to use every means at their disposal to protect their flocks from wolves (Acts 20:28-30).

### **The Life of Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 375-444 A.D.)**

Cyril came from an important Greek family and was educated in the famous schools of Alexandria. He was an heir to the city's rich intellectual and theological traditions. Although one of the greatest theologians of the early church, a prolific writer and eloquent preacher, he did not have a pleasant character. He has been described as proud, obstinate, jealous, and domineering, impatient and impulsive. But he was courageous and uncompromising when he perceived heresy was undermining the foundations of the faith.

In the Coptic Church tradition, Cyril is the twenty-fourth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (412-444 A.D) and is reckoned as one of the greatest prelates of Christian antiquity. He was summoned to Alexandria by his uncle, the reigning patriarch Theophilus, and was ordained a presbyter. Only three days after Theophilus' death, Cyril was enthroned as archbishop of Alexandria. From the early years of his accession, Cyril proved himself to be a man of strong personality, unusual ability, and profound theological scholarship, a match for the tempestuous events that marked his thirty-two-year reign. From his uncle and predecessor Theophilus "he not only inherited his power and ambitions but also the energy, political ability, toughness over against opponents, and lack of scruples." His zealous stance toward Jews and heretics favoured an atmosphere of fanaticism in Alexandria, venting itself in their persecution. His hostility to the Jewish community was reciprocated by the Jews, who began to plot against Cyril and the church. At one point, rumours circulated that the church of Alexander had been set on fire by Jews. When the Christians hurried to save their sanctuary, the Jewish plotters fell upon them and slew some of their number. Cyril did not let the occurrence pass without response. He and his monastic bodyguard, which force was beefed

up by monks from outside the city, descended one morning on the synagogues in the city, took possession of them, and the Jews were expelled from the capital.

### **Cyril Versus Nestorius (c.381-c.451 A.D.)**

The greatest conflict of Cyril's career was directed toward Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople. At the heart of this controversy was the doctrine of Christ. Cyril accused Nestorius of believing in two sons: the son of God and the son of Mary. Nestorius rejected the term *Theotokos* (God bearer), which had become a mark of orthodoxy, in regard to the Virgin Mary, whom he designated only as Mother of Jesus in the flesh. For Nestorius, Mary was not the Mother of God, she was the mother of Christ. He, therefore, preferred the title *Christotokos* (Christ bearer). He declared that Christ was really two persons, a divine person dwelling in a human person. He famously said, "I hold the natures apart, but unite in worship." He veered very near to saying that the two natures are so distinct in Christ that Christ is a divided person, a human person and a divine person. He would even point to specific instances in the Gospels where the human Jesus was present and to other places where the divine Jesus was present.

Cyril argued that Nestorius' view was in conflict with the orthodox position that Christ is one Person with two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man; that He is really and completely God and really and completely man, yet completely and inseparably one. He is both God and man. Cyril insisted on the full and complete unity of the person of Christ, "the Word made flesh", teaching that the union of the divinity and humanity was at the most fundamental of Christ's being, and favouring the theological formula "the one nature of the incarnate Word." For support, both parties turned to the See in Rome in 430. At the Synod in Rome, Pope Celestine gave entire approval to Cyril's side and ordered Nestorius to retract the heresy within ten days or be excommunicated. Cyril forwarded the papal decree to Nestorius, accompanied by a letter and twelve anathemas presenting Cyril's Christology in such radical form that it was unacceptable for Nestorius and his followers. Cyril called upon Nestorius to accept the verdict. But Nestorius absolutely refused to sign the document. Consequently, he addressed himself directly to Theodosius II, Empress Eudoxia, and the emperor's sister, Pulcheria, whose interest in religious matters was well known. The imperial family was, on the whole, disenchanted with these quarrels within the church and began to contemplate the possibility of holding an ecumenical council to settle the disputes and restore order and unity within the empire. The imperial decision was made to hold that council at Ephesus in 431 A.D., and the summons to attend was issued jointly by Theodosius II in the East and Valentinian III in the West. This was the third ecumenical council, the other two being Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381. The council affirmed Mary's title of *Theotokos*, God-bearer, Mother of God. Nestorius was officially opposed and excommunicated. He was forced into exile to the Great Oasis Egypt, where he died in the year 451 A.D.

Followers of Nestorius formed a separate Church. Today there still exist the "Assyrian Christians" who claim to be the continuation of the Nestorian Church. They still forbid the use of *Theotokos*, and they treat Nestorius as a saint.

### **Cyril's Writings**

The emphasis is usually placed on his role as an ardent defender of the orthodox view of Christ. What often is overlooked is his deep commitment to the Bible. He was a prolific commentator on the Word of God. In all his reflection on Scripture, he always found a way to uncover the mystery of Christ. Bryan M. Litfen points out that in his zeal for the Lord, Cyril sometimes needed to be reminded that God's revelation to the Jews was more than just types and shadows of things to come. His environment tempted him to overlook the fact that the real-world, historical Jesus came to earth as the Jewish Messiah.

Although a meticulous theologian, he seems to have devoted more attention to the essence of his arguments than to eloquence of style. All he wanted was the truth in plain language that could not be misunderstood, and as time went on his true worth came to be appreciated much more than in his own day. Today his exegesis fills seven bulky volumes of a modern edition with tiny, dense Greek print. In biblical commentaries that often went verse-by-verse, he lavished loving care on the Pentateuch, Isaiah, the Minor Prophets, Luke, and John. His commentaries were a rich theological resource for the Reformers. Cyril, like the other church fathers, pointed them to the Scriptures. His commentary on the Gospel of John was such a brilliant exposition of orthodox Christology that when the first generation of Reformers read it, it greatly impacted their thinking about the wonder of the Incarnation. Cyril's eighty-eight Letters are important documents on church history and ecclesiastical doctrine and law. Some of his other writings are a treatise against those who do not acknowledge that Mary is the Mother of God, and a history of Nestorian blasphemies (five tomes).

## **Conclusion**

Cyril was the last of the remarkable group of Church Fathers that began with Athanasius. He was never greatly loved, but he was admired and respected even by those who disliked him. His violent arguments and quarrels often threatened the unity of the early Church. Yet he was the author of the orthodox doctrine of Christ. On the whole, for generations his theology was regarded as the key to orthodoxy, though some theologians tend to differ on its interpretation. Someone commented that this doctrine which owes so much to a man of such unscrupulous ambition and easily provoked character is an abiding paradox in the history of Christian thought.

Cyril's fame spread during his lifetime and after his death. His contemporary, Pope Celestine I of Rome, described him on several occasions as "defender of the faith", "apostolic man", and "upright priest". After his death, he became renowned in the Eastern churches as the ultimate authority in all Christological subjects. He was called the "Seal of the Fathers" by the seventh-century ecclesiastical authority Anastasius Sinaita. In 1882, Pope Leo XIII made Cyril a "Doctor of the Church", and in 1944, Pope Pius XII, in an encyclical on the Eastern Church, called him "the light of Christian wisdom and a valiant hero of the apostolate." And to this day he is considered the "Pillar of the Faith" in the Coptic church.