

David R. Maxwell  
27<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions  
Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Indiana  
January 21, 2004

## THEOPASCHITES: ANCIENT AND MODERN

In the annals of the sixth-century historian Timothy Lector, there appears an anecdote about a high-ranking Saracen named Alumandaros who converts to Christianity. By God's providence, the story explains, Alumandaros was baptized by those who accepted the Council of Chalcedon with its declaration that Christ has two natures. When the Monophysite bishop Severus sends two bishops to bring Alumandaros over to their faith that Christ has only one nature, Alumandaros resorts to a ruse. He pretends that he has just received a letter bearing the news that the Archangel Michael is dead. Impossible! respond the Monophysite missionaries. If Christ is does not have two natures, counters Alumandaros, and bare God suffered the cross, why can't an angel suffer or die? The missionaries are put to shame and they go away.<sup>1</sup> This anecdote, despite its overly simplistic representation of both the Chalcedonian and the Monophysite position, demonstrates the power that the notion of divine impassibility held over the ancient mind. It was self-evident to most Christians, both for philosophical and Scriptural reasons, that God cannot suffer or even change. For Platonism, the dominant philosophy of the time, change is a characteristic of the material world. To think that God should be subject to such indignity is to conceive of God in materialistic terms. Unthinkable for any pious Platonic Christian. What

---

<sup>1</sup>Migne, PG 86:203. This incident is discussed in Werner Elert, *Der Ausgang er Altkirchlichen Christologie* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1957), 309-312.

is more, the Scriptures themselves are replete with passages that seem to confirm this view. **AI** the Lord do not change@ (Mal. 3:6); **AE**Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows@ (James 1:17).

Nevertheless, there were many in early church who wanted both to affirm the impassibility of the divine nature and to affirm that God suffered anyway. Such people are often called **A**theopaschites,@ so named because they ascribe suffering to God. They should be distinguished from Patripassianists, who hold that the Father suffered. As I am using the term, theopaschites are those who affirm that the Second Person of the Trinity, not the Father, suffered. This afternoon, I will be exploring the question, why did people in the early church want to say this despite massive cultural and philosophical incentives not to, and why do we want to say it today?

The patristic material I am discussing comes from an incident in the post-Chalcedonian Christological debates. The Council of Chalcedon attempted to settle the Nestorian and the Monophysite controversies in 451 by confessing that Christ has two natures in one person. Debates continued to rage within Chalcedonian orthodoxy, however, over the interpretation of this language. One chapter of this debate, the Theopaschite Convtroversy of the sixth century, arose in Scythia (which is present-day Romania) in the town of Tomi, near the coast of the Black Sea.

A group of monks from there became embroiled in a Christological argument with their bishop. These monks were Goths, part of the Germanic peoples who had been migrating southward throughout Europe since the second century. Although most Goths rejected the Nicene Creed because they held to the Arian position that Christ is not fully God, there were Goths who adhered both to the Nicene Creed and to the Council of Chalcedon. In fact, John Chrysostom had friendly relations with a such a

community in Constantinople in the fourth century and even held services, through a translator, in the Gothic language.<sup>2</sup> The gothic monks in Scythia in the sixth century were cut from the same cloth. They saw themselves as defenders of the Council of Chalcedon, and in this capacity they comported themselves with single-minded intensity, or, as their detractors might say, they were stubborn.

In late 518 or early 519 they traveled to Constantinople under the leadership of John Maxentius to bring their case before the Emperor Justin I. Their position was that although the Chalcedonian Definition was an orthodox expression of the faith, it was susceptible to a Nestorianizing misinterpretation which would in effect split Christ into two persons despite the verbal acknowledgment that Christ has only one person. Particularly problematic was Leo's *Tome*, a treatise against the Monophysite leader Eutyches, which had been endorsed by the council of Chalcedon. The *Tome* states that each nature performs what is proper to itself in communion with the other; the Word, that is, performing what is proper to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what is proper to the flesh. The one of these is brilliant with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries.<sup>3</sup> This could be interpreted to mean that Christ has two independently acting subjects, the divine nature which does the miracles and the human nature which does the suffering. How then, one has to ask, is Leo's view of the two natures in Christ any different than the Nestorian view that Christ has two persons? According to these considerations, the Council of Chalcedon, by endorsing Leo's *Tome*, appears to have sold out to the

---

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire Romain* (Paris:1918), 545.

<sup>3</sup>Leo, *Tome 4* in *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Thomas Bindley ed. and trans., Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980.

Nestorian heresy. This is, in fact, precisely what the Monophysites charged Chalcedon with doing.

The Scythian monks, however, asserted that the *Tome* should not be interpreted this way. Leo made such statements as a way of distinguishing Christ's natures, but he did not intend to suggest that the natures were really separate actors in the way that the above passage may suggest. In support of their contention, the Scythian monks cited other passages in Leo's epistles which more clearly express the unity of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, because the *Tome could* be interpreted to divide Christ, the Scythian monks felt it necessary to find a way to exclude such a Nestorianizing misinterpretation. They did this by advocating what has come to be known as the *theopaschite formula*: "One of the Trinity was crucified in the flesh." They felt that if one confesses this statement along with Chalcedon, then the orthodox interpretation of the council is preserved because the theopaschite formula makes it clear that the Logos is the acting subject not only for the miracles of Christ but also for his suffering. Leo's statement, then, could be taken as an indication that the two natures of Christ remain in tact after the union without pressing the infelicitous wording to the point where there are two independently acting subjects in Christ.

Unfortunately, the Scythian monks' proposal was not well received, in large part because their timing could not have been worse. The monks arrived in Constantinople just as the emperor Justin I was negotiating an end to the Acacian schism. This split between Rome and Constantinople originated some 35 years earlier when Rome excommunicated Acacius, the patriarch of Constantinople, for attempting to side-step the council of Chalcedon in his attempt to bring the Monophysites back into the

---

<sup>4</sup>Maxent. *Libell. fid.* 26.329-334 (CCL 85A).

fold. Acacius had advised the emperor Zeno to issue a statement called the *Henotikon*, which would serve as a Christological confession that both the imperial church and the Monophysites could agree upon. The problem, from a Roman perspective, is that the *Henotikon* fails to insist upon Chalcedon as the standard of orthodoxy. In fact, the *Henotikon* never even mentions Chalcedon. It attempts, rather, to form a Christological confession based on the writings of Cyril of Alexandria while intentionally refraining from saying anything good or bad about the Chalcedonian Definition which was the source of so much contention.

By this time, however, the Council of Chalcedon, because of its endorsement of Pope Leo's *Tome*, had become tied to the prestige of the Roman See. Acacius's attempt to circumvent Chalcedon was seen as an insult against Rome's claim to be the gold standard of orthodoxy. Thirty-five years later, the political landscape changed and the emperor Justin I set his sights more on the West than on the Monophysites in the East. This policy led him, in 519, to accede to Rome's demand that Chalcedon be the official Christological confession of the empire. On Monday of Holy Week in 519, he received the emissaries from Rome in triumphal procession, and on Maundy Thursday, Patriarch John of Constantinople signed documents ending the 35-year schism.

Thus, when the Scythian monks arrive on the scene urging that Chalcedon needed to be supplemented with their Theopaschite formula, no one was in the mood to listen. As is clear from the correspondence between Pope Hormisdas and his legates in Constantinople in 519, the Scythian monks' arguments were interpreted by the legates as an attack on the Council of Chalcedon and thus as a threat to the newly established reunion between Rome and Constantinople.

Failing to convince anyone in Constantinople, some of the Scythian monks set out for Rome to

appeal to Pope Hormisdas. Although Hormisdas initially received them warmly, he was understandably reticent to offer his support to a group of monks who had opposed his legates in Constantinople. The monks burned with indignation because of this lack of response. Despite their loud protests, they got no audience with the pope. Finally, after 14 months, they left Rome. Their behavior in Rome prompted Pope Hormisdas to write a letter criticizing their theology and complaining about their vociferous objections. When presented by their opponents with this unfavorable letter from the Pope, the Scythian monks responded that the pope could not possibly have written it because whoever wrote it was clearly a heretic!

In the end, the Scythian monks found support from only two quarters. They obtained a favorable response from Fulgentius of Ruspe, the leader of a group of North African bishops exiled to the island of Sardinia. Justinian, the emperor's nephew, also began to support their position, possibly perceiving that it could make Chalcedon more palatable to Monophysites in the East. After Justinian himself becomes the emperor in 527, his support of the theopaschite formula paves the way for its vindication at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, canon 10 of which reads, **I**f anyone does not confess that our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified in flesh is true God and Lord of glory and one of the holy Trinity, let him be anathema.<sup>5</sup>

So far, I have sketched the events of the Theopaschite formula. Next, I will discuss the

---

<sup>5</sup>Edward R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Lather Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 381.

Christology of the controversy by considering in more detail the theopaschite formula itself: *¶One of the Trinity was crucified in the flesh.*<sup>6</sup>

The Scythian monks designate Christ in this formula by their somewhat idiosyncratic term *¶One of the Trinity* (*unus ex Trinitate*). This term provokes objections from the papal legates in Constantinople who suspect that it is improper to apply number to the Trinity in this way. If Christ is *¶one of the Trinity*,<sup>6</sup> how many Trinities are there? Nevertheless, John Maxentius holds firm on this issue because of what he sees as equivocation on the part of his opponents.

The Christology of the papal legates is difficult to reconstruct with certainty because much of our material comes from John Maxentius who is a hostile source. Nevertheless, the picture seems to be something like this: the Word of God joined himself to an assumed man. The Word and the assumed man are so closely associated with each other that we are entitled to say that the man is God or that God suffered, but such statements are figures of speech which, strictly speaking do not correspond with reality. Because Maxentius suspects the legates of using figures of speech, he is constantly on guard against statements which sound acceptable but on closer analysis leave room for the legates to wiggle out of confessing that God suffered.

For example, Dioscorus, the leader of the papal legates is willing to say that Christ is *¶one person of the Trinity*<sup>6</sup> but not *¶one of the Trinity.*<sup>6</sup> Maxentius is suspicious. He thinks that by the term *¶one person of the Trinity*,<sup>6</sup> Dioscorus is referring not to the Word, but to a second human person of Christ who may be called a person of the Trinity because he is joined to the Word.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the

---

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Maxent. *Libell. fid.* 14.177-179 (CCL 85A).

statement "One person of the Trinity was crucified in the flesh" would mean, in the final analysis, that only the man suffered.

Maxentius is almost certainly casting his opponent's argument in an excessively negative light, but this exchange does indicate the intent behind the rather strange formulation *unus ex Trinitate*. Maxentius is grasping for a way to refer unambiguously to the Word despite what he perceives as constant equivocation on the part of his opponents.

This point needs to be clear because it is shocking to hear that the Word "was crucified," and Maxentius knows that this shock will prompt many to undertake linguistic acrobatics to undermine this confession. The cross proves to be the acid test for any Christology's account of the unity of Christ. If a Christology is going to split Christ in two anywhere, it will be on the cross, where pious notions about God's superiority to the material world intervene to try to protect God against this most degrading and humiliating of human experiences. By advocating the proposition that "One of the Trinity was crucified," the Scythian monks are advocating a thoroughly unified Christology.

What, then, do we make of the qualifier, "in the flesh"? Does the formula, "One of the Trinity was crucified in the flesh" mean that One of the Trinity may be said to have been crucified, but in actuality only his human nature was crucified? The question is critical because this qualifier is not unique to the Scythian monks but is the dominant way theopaschite language is expressed in the tradition as a whole. And as Robert Jenson has pointed out, this language has very often been used in subsequent centuries to sequester God from the experience of suffering.<sup>7</sup> The question is all the more pressing for

---

<sup>7</sup>Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 137.

Lutherans because our own tradition wholeheartedly endorses the qualifier. For example, article 8 of the Formula of Concord, the article on Christology, is peppered with statements that God suffered according to his human nature.<sup>8</sup> What do we mean by that?

Fortunately, there is a way to understand *in the flesh* which does not subvert everything the Scythian monks were trying to accomplish. In John Maxentius's longest work, the *Dialogue Against the Nestorians* (in which the *Nestorians* are actually the papal legates), he thoroughly explores the ambiguities of the qualifier *in the flesh*. I have laid out this discussion in a forthcoming article in *Pro Ecclesia*. But let me summarize here. The key is that the term functions adverbially, not as a noun. If *One of the Trinity was crucified in the flesh* really means *Only the flesh was crucified*, then *in the flesh* functions awkwardly as a noun, designating the true subject of the sentence. This is the Nestorian reading of the phrase because it implies that the flesh is a human subject in Christ which acts independently from the Word. This is how Maxentius charges the papal legates understood the term, and this is how many later theologians understood the term as well. However, if one pays closer attention to the grammar, one notes that *in the flesh* translates the word *carne*, a noun in the ablative. As such, it does not designate the subject of the sentence, but it specifies *how* the action takes place. Because it answers the question *how?* I am calling it adverbial. Note that this usage corresponds to other similar qualifiers such as *secundem humanitatem*, in which the preposition *secundem* renders the entire phrase adverbial. When *in the flesh* is taken adverbially as it reads, then *One of the Trinity*, that is the Word, remains the true subject of the sentence.

---

<sup>8</sup>E.g., FC 8.20, 42, 72.

So far I have addressed the question of what *in the flesh* does not mean, but what does it mean? After all, if the Scythian monks want to be clear that One of the Trinity was crucified, why not just omit *in the flesh* altogether? Though it may sound paradoxical, the Scythian monks include the qualifier because, although they wish to confess that the Word suffered and was crucified, they remain committed to divine impassibility. In order to understand this commitment, we need to move beyond easy generalizations, such as the ones I made at the beginning of this paper, that the ancient mind was held captive to Platonism. Platonism was certainly a powerful influence, but there is more going on.

One presupposition of both the Scythian monks and their opponents the papal legates is that whatever happens by nature happens by necessity. For example, it is characteristic of human nature to become hungry or thirsty or to go to sleep. We have no choice in the matter. We are subject to the necessity of hunger, thirst and sleep. In the mind of the Scythian monks, if one simply states that God suffered without qualification, that would imply that suffering is a characteristic of the divine nature, which, in turn, would imply that God has no choice in the matter. He would be subject to the necessity of suffering.

If suffering is not a characteristic of the divine nature, however, how can the Word truly undergo it? The Scythian monks consistently answer, *Because he became incarnate.* The fact that the Word took on a human nature enables him, so to speak, to undergo experiences which are not characteristic of the divine nature. This is what the qualifier *in the flesh* is intended to make clear. One of the Trinity was crucified *in the flesh*, that is, not because suffering is an attribute of his divine nature, but because he took on human nature.

John Maxentius, then, intends the theopaschite formula to shore up certain ambiguities in the

Council of Chalcedon, especially in Leo's *Tome*, by making clear that "One of the Trinity," that is the Word, is the subject of all Christ's actions, even his most degrading experience: the crucifixion.

This does not yet tell us, however, why this point is so important that it would move a Germanic monk to oppose both the emperor and the pope at a time when the empire was facing an external military threat. The simple answer is: salvation is at stake in the question. The Theopaschite controversy is an ideal arena to explore the soteriological consequences of a Christological controversy because not only is it a chapter in the Post-Chalcedonian Christological debates, it is simultaneously a chapter in the Semi-Pelagian controversy. The Semi-Pelagians were those who taught that the sinner can will to believe in God by his own natural powers and afterwards the grace of God comes to assist. A bishop from North Africa named Possessor, who was in Constantinople at the same time as the Scythian monks opposed their Christological position by citing Faustus of Riez, a fifth-century Semi-Pelagian writer in Gaul. It is not completely clear which passage from Faustus Possessor employed, but there is good reason to suspect that he cited a passage from book 1 of Faustus's *De Gratia*, which claims that you can steer between opposing errors "if you render to each part its property and believe and assert that Christ is God and man at the same time just as if you join grace with labor and you do not remove human striving from the help of God."<sup>9</sup>

Note that Faustus attempts to associate his views on grace and works with Chalcedonian Christology. Just as Christ has two natures, divine and human, so also in Christians, there is a divine

---

<sup>9</sup>Faustus of Riez, *De gratia* 1.1 (CSEL 21, 8).

and a human component. The divine component is grace, the human component is works. Faustus, in this passage, is implicitly associating Augustine with the Monophysites because, just as the Monophysites, in Faustus's view, believe that Christ is only divine, so also Augustine, in Faustus's view, believes that only grace, the divine component, is present in the performance of good works. Thus, the question of grace is injected into the controversy, a turn of events which prompts the participants to spell out in more detail than they might have otherwise how they understand Christology and grace to be related.

The Scythian monks draw their own connection between Christology and grace. Many of their writings have a consistent structure. In part one, they put forward a Christology which draws heavily on Cyril of Alexandria, emphasizing the unity of Christ. In part two, they advocate an Augustinian doctrine of grace, emphasizing the role of grace and eliminating independent human effort from the performance of good works and salvation. And they connect these two parts of their writings with transitions such as "Since these things are so..." or "From these things it follows that,"<sup>10</sup> thus suggesting that Augustine's doctrine of grace follows from Cyril of Alexandria's Christology.

This claim may seem startling to those who are used to thinking in air-tight categories of East vs. West, as if the Eastern church and the Western church were hermetically sealed from each other. But the very existence of the Scythian monks challenges such an assumption. They were from the East—Scythia was historically under the jurisdiction of Constantinople. Yet they wrote in Latin, and they were enthusiastic supporters of Augustine as well as Cyril of Alexandria. The existence of such liminal

---

<sup>10</sup>Maxent. *Libell. fid.* 9.94, 29.361 (CCL 85A), *Ep. ad episc.* 14.197-199 (CCL 85A).

figures ought to be congenial to Lutherans, as the two most often cited patristic sources in the Lutheran Confessions are Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria.

Let me be more specific about how Cyril and Augustine might be related. My claim is not that one of them historically derived his doctrine from the other, but rather that both share a fundamental conviction about God and humanity which manifests itself in different ways in their theologies. One might summarize the conviction as, "God is the one who acts for human salvation." This conviction plays out in Cyril's Christology when he identifies the person of Christ as the Word, an identification which excludes the existence of a human person or assumed man in Christ who acts independently from the Word. His human nature plays an instrumental role, but it in no way contributes as an actor, thus leaving the Word as the sole acting subject of all Christ's actions. In Augustine, the same conviction plays out in his emphasis on grace and his exclusion, at least in his later writings, of any antecedent merit which prompts grace, or indeed any independent human cooperation whatsoever in salvation. Here the focus is not so much on God's action in Christ but on God's action in the Christian. Nevertheless, the concern to keep God the subject of the sentence is the same.

We can push this conviction further by exploring the soteriological consequences of a unitive Christology like Cyril's or that of the Scythian monks. One implication of the fact that Christ has only one person is what we call the "communication of attributes." Both divine and human characteristics are predicated of the Word. In patristic writers, this communication of attributes serves not only to describe the relation between the divine and the human natures in the person of Christ, but it also serves as a pattern which describes the relation between God and man in salvation as well. You might say that patristic authors believed in a kind of "salvation by communication of attributes."

Depending on which attributes are in question, this salvation can be described in different ways. One classic expression of this is theosis, Athanasius's famous dictum that God became man that man might become God. This statement ascribes soteriological significance to the incarnation, and what is more, it uses the incarnation as a pattern which provides the categories in which salvation is described. The implication is that the human race is connected with or even identified with Christ's human nature so that what happens to Christ's human nature happens to us as well. Though it has become commonplace to describe theosis as *the* soteriology of the patristic period, especially in the East, I would suggest that theosis is only one species of salvation by communication of attributes.

In fact, patristic authors are very rich in their description of salvation and quite varied in what they say is exchanged. In order to illustrate this, I will turn to Fulgentius of Ruspe. As I mentioned earlier, the Scythian monks wrote to Fulgentius describing their Christological and soteriological concerns. Fulgentius responded, expressing agreement with their theology. The following examples are taken from Fulgentius's *Epistle 17*, his answer to the Scythian monks.

First, Fulgentius can speak of an exchange of divine and human births. "God was born of man," he says, "that men might be born of God."<sup>11</sup> In fact, Fulgentius lays out an extended chiasmic comparison to make the point that Christ underwent two births so that we could also undergo two births. Christ's first birth was a spiritual birth from his Father from eternity. His second birth was a physical birth from his mother. We, on the other hand, have a first birth which is physical and a second

---

<sup>11</sup>Fulg. *Ep. 17* 14.334-337 (CCL 91A): "Et quia in ipsa nativitate carnis nostrae, mortis vinculo tenebamur obstricti, a quo solius beneficio spiritalis nativitatis possemus absolvi, Deus natus est ex homine, ut ex Deo homines nascerentur."

spiritual birth which takes place in baptism. In other words, Christ takes on our physical birth to give us a spiritual birth.<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere in *Epistle 17*, Fulgentius casts the exchange in the categories of life and death. He states, "The same Son of God himself was born by grace in the nature of the flesh in order to die for the dead so that we, after the death of our first birth which we have in the flesh, might be reborn in the grace of the Spirit for life."<sup>13</sup> The pattern is similar to his discussion of the two births. Christ has life from eternity, but he is born to die so that we who are born dead might be reborn to live. In other words, Christ takes our death and gives us his life.

What all of these passages have in common is that they employ the Christological communication of attributes as a pattern which structures their description of salvation. This results in a language of exchange. In theosis, the exchange pertains to humanity and divinity. Christ takes our humanity to make us divine (in a qualified sense). However, as we have seen, the exchange can be cast in other categories as well. Christ takes our human birth to give us a divine birth. Christ takes our death to give us his life.

There is one other set of categories that I want to discuss because they seem to come from the Semi-Pelagian controversy. Semi-Pelagian writers and their Augustinian opponents are not concerned primarily with the categories of humanity and divinity or divine and human birth or even life and death,

---

<sup>12</sup>Fulgentius, *Ep. 17* 15.343-352 (CCL 91A).

<sup>13</sup>Fulg. *Ep. 17* 16.371-374 (CCL 91A): "Idem ipse Dei Filius in natura carnis per gratiam pro mortuis natus est ad mortem, ut nos post mortem primae nativitatis quam habemus ex carne, in gratia Spiritus renasceremur ad vitam."

but sin and righteousness. Therefore, it is not surprising that Fulgentius can describe the exchange in the categories of righteousness and punishment for sin which is death. He states,

Here in his human nature in which he was made the mediator of God and men, he had righteousness from his Father and death from his mother so that through him we might be freed from all sin . . . and from him we might receive righteousness through which we are loosed from the bond of eternal death that we might be able to be righteous in this life and immortal in the next.<sup>14</sup>

With this we are approaching familiar territory for Lutherans. What could be more natural to our ears than to hear that Christ took our sin (or at least the punishment for our sin in this passage) and gave us his righteousness? What I am suggesting today is that this blessed exchange language assumes a theopaschite Christology like that of the Scythian monks and Fulgentius and, ultimately, Cyril of Alexandria. And what is more, this particular articulation of salvation is elicited when Cyril of Alexandria's Christology meets the concerns and categories of the Pelagian controversy.

Salvation is at stake, then, in the Theopaschite controversy because salvation because if none of the Trinity was not crucified, then God did not take on our birth, our death, or the punishment for our sin, and so the saving exchange did not occur.

---

<sup>14</sup>Fulg. *Ep. 17* 27.742-748 (CCL 91A): *Hic in humana natura, in qua mediator Dei et hominum factus est, iustitiam habuit ex Patre, mortem ex matre; ut per ipsum liberaremur ab omni peccato, qui peccatum nec nascendo nec vivendo contraxit, et ab ipso acciperemus iustitiam, per quam mortis aeternae vinculo solveremur, ut per eum et in hac vita iusti, et post hanc vitam immortales esse possemus.*

The title of my talk suggests that I will also discuss modern theopaschites. I am going to stretch the definition of modern back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. That may seem strange, but when you work in the sixteenth century, any century with more than one digit seems modern to you. There is a lot that could be said about Luther in this regard, or Martin Chemnitz. But I am going to focus today on the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Lutheran dogmatician Johann Gerhard because Gerhard thinks in detail in the patterns I have been describing.

In particular I would like to consider his *Loci theologici*. At first glance the *loci* may not seem to be a promising place to start because they are organized, as the name implies, according to distinct theological topics. When one does theology this way, the connection between different *loci*, such as Christology and grace, tends to be obscured. This is a phenomenon not only in Lutheranism, but in other traditions as well, and I believe that it has resulted in a widespread assumption among scholars of church history that there is in fact no connection between Christology and soteriology. A number of scholars, for instance, find it odd or arbitrary that in the sixteenth century a controversy about grace arose in the midst of a Christological controversy!<sup>15</sup>

The first nine volumes of Gerhard's *Loci* would seem to confirm our suspicions on this matter. He treats Christology and soteriology in separate *loci*, but there is no obvious connection between the

---

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, North American Patristic Society Patristic Monograph Series 15 (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996), 181; Henri Rondet, S.J., *The Grace of Christ: A Brief History of the Theology of Grace*, ed. & trans. Tad W. Guzie, S.J (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1966), 156.

two. This is not the case, however, in his supplementary tenth volume of the *Loci*, in which he treats Christology again more fully. In this volume he is particularly concerned to bring out the *usus practicus*, or practical use, of Christology. In other words, he wants to show how each point he makes about Christology brings comfort to the sinner. As a result, he constantly draws connections between Christology and soteriology, even in his most technical discussions of Christological language.

And so we arrive at that favorite topic in seminary education: the three *genera* of communication of attributes: the *genus idiomaticum*, the *genus maiestaticum*, and the *genus apotelesmaticum*. I realize that for some this is the pinnacle of arcane theological discourse, but in Gerhard's hands, these categories become practical. Let us begin with the *genus maiestaticum*. In this kind of Christological statement, divine attributes are ascribed to Christ's human nature. We say that the flesh of Christ is life-giving and that the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. Normal flesh is not life-giving and normal blood does not purify from sin because these are things that only God can do. Why, then, does the Scripture make divine claims about human flesh and blood? Because of the incarnation. It has divine qualities because this is the flesh and blood of the Word.

Next Gerhard turns our attention to the claims Lutherans make about faith. Faith rescues from the devil, conquers death, and saves us. These are all things only God can do. How can we make such statements about faith? Gerhard argues that just as the personal union of Christ produces a personal change (*μεταποιία*), so also between Christ and the church there arises a spiritual change (*μεταποιία*) on account of which divine works are predicated of faith and of Christians.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the second *genus* of

---

<sup>16</sup>Johann Gerhard, *Exegesis*, 521A.

communication of attributes provides a Christological precedent for the claims Gerhard makes for faith. Christ's divine attributes are communicated to his human nature. In a similar way, his divine attributes are communicated to the faith of Christians, in effect making *Afaith* and *AChrist* interchangeable terms, one might say.<sup>17</sup> Justification by faith alone assumes this communication of attributes.

Gerhard goes on to correlate sanctification with the third *genus* of communication of attributes. This is the so-called *genus apotelesmaticum* which states that both natures are involved in every action of Christ. Just as Christ's personal union produces a personal common working (*koinopoiā*), Gerhard argues, so there arises a spiritual common working (*koinopoiā*) between God and the faithful soul or the church. Therefore, God and the believer both concur in producing the end product (*apotelesma*) of every good work. That is the reason, according to Gerhard, that believers are called *synergoi* in 1 Cor. 3:9. Thus, the *genus apotelesmaticum* provides a pattern by which Gerhard is able to discuss the sense in which God and the believer work together in the performance of good works.

This does not mean, however, that God and the Christian are on equal footing in the performance of good works like two horses drawing a cart. In his discussion of good works in *locus* 20 of vol. 4, Gerhard makes the point that the human will which cooperates in good works is itself created and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the terms I have been using, it would be incorrect to say that the human will is an independently acting subject in sanctification.

---

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Richard Schröder, *Johann Gerhards lutherische Christologie und die aristotelische Metaphysik*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 67, ed. Johannes Wallmann (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), 72.

This discussion of Gerhard is intended to give you a taste of some of the ways in which the Lutheran tradition uses the communication of attributes as a pattern for describing salvation. There are many more examples that could be cited from Gerhard and also from Luther and Chemnitz. Such examples are reminders to us that theology is not a simply list of propositions or isolated theological topics but the whole of it is bound up in the person of Christ. When Lutherans become dismissive of everything that came before us, giving the impression that no one after Paul understood the Gospel until Luther, I believe that what we are doing is reading patristic and medieval material through the lens of later dogmatic categories. When we look for what patristic authors have to say, for instance, about the locus of justification and the role of faith, we find that they are not the same as Luther. But this is an atomistic approach which misses the deeper resonance between Lutheran soteriology and patristic Christology, especially that Christology which confesses that **One of the Trinity was crucified in the flesh.**