

DID GOD DIE ON CALVARY? - by Rev. Professor-Emeritus Dr. F.N. Lee

Did God die when Christ, Who is God, died on the cross? Does God Himself have blood, and did He suffer pain when Christ shed His blood for the expiation of the sins of His elect?

After the decision of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D., explains Berkhof in his book *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Eerdmans, 1959 ed., pp. 111-13), there was "a lengthy and rather unseemly struggle between the different parties.... They were divided into several sects, of which the names alone, says Dr. Orr, 'are enough to give one a cold shiver.' There were the Theopaschitists, who emphasized the fact that God suffered; the Phthartolatrists, who...were said to worship that which is corruptible; and the Aphthartodocetists, who represented...the view...that the human nature of Christ...was endowed with divine attributes and was therefore...incorruptible."

Wesley the Arminian later resurrected Theopaschitism. A few ill-chosen lines in his otherwise great hymn *And can it be?*, reveal this heresy. Here are those lines. (1) "Amazing grace! And can it be - that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"; (2) "'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies"; and (3) "Emptied Himself of all but love."

The fact is, however, it was not God but Wesley who died! God did not die - because He cannot die (First Timothy 1:17 & 6:14-16). To claim with Wesley that "the Immortal dies" - is like claiming that God Who is Light could become darkness (*contra* First John 1:5b). And though Christ indeed 'emptied Himself' (Philippians 2:7), He certainly did not at Calvary - as Wesley claims He did - empty Himself of His immortality and His omnipotence *etc.* and of "all but love."

As with Arianism, heresy gets sung before it gets preached. Arminianism leads to Atheism. For if God died when Christ died, not just "one-third" but rather all "three-thirds" of God then died - so that no God at all could have remained to resurrect Jesus. For Paul infallibly states that in Christ "dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead." Colossians 2:9.

Note, we did not say that Wesley was an Atheist! Indeed, we believe Wesley was a dedicated Christian - because predestinated to be saved in spite of his own atheizing tendencies such as his rejection of divine election! But we do say that Wesley's is an atheizing system. And we certainly call for the rewriting of his influential hymn, by the deletion of the above-mentioned offensive words and their substitution by Calvinistic terminology - such as "that You, my Christ, should die for me"; and "It's mystery all! The Saviour dies"; and "Emptied Himself, in His great love."

Back in the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Lutherans' 1530 *Augsburg Confession* was acceptable to Calvinists. But, after Lutheranism entrenched its militantly Anti-Calvinistic Consubstantiationism over the next decades - the battlelines became marked. This led to the Gnesio-Lutheran view that after His resurrection and especially His ascension, Christ's human nature became omnipresent - and hence present also in the elements at the Lord's Table. This is the erroneous view "that each of Christ's natures permeates the other, and that His humanity participates in the attributes of His divinity" (Neve's *Lutheran Symbolics*, p. 132).

Now this Lutheran-Wesleyan aberration must sharply be distinguished from the Reformed view that the properties of each of Christ's two natures are ascribable to His Person. Thus the *Westminster Confession* 8:7, *cf.* the *Larger Catechism* (37-40 & 48-49 & 54-55).

"Ah," retort the Anti-Calvinists, "but does not Paul himself declare that God bought the Church with His Own blood (Acts 20:28)?" No, Paul does not! Actually, Paul says the Holy Ghost would have Pastors feed God's Church - which He [Christ] purchased with His Own blood." Does the bodiless Holy Ghost have blood? Or is Paul not here trinitarianly teaching the Holy Ghost says the Son in His humanity with His blood purchased the Church of God the Father?

Calvin comments on this verse: "There is **nothing more absurd** than to suppose that **God** is corporeal or **mortal**.... By speaking like this, he [Paul] is commending the unity of the Person of Christ. For in view of the fact that there are separate natures in Christ, Scripture sometimes mentions separately what belongs to each in particular. But when it sets God before us, made manifest in the flesh - it does not separate His human nature from His deity.... In this verse, Paul attributes [human] blood to God, because the **man** Jesus Christ, Who shed His blood for us, was also God. This figure of speech was called the *communicatio idiomatum* by the Fathers, because the property of one nature is applied to the other" within one and the same Person - and **not**, as in extreme later Gnesio-Lutheranism, because one nature is alleged interchanged with the other.

In his *Institutes* II:12:3, Calvin elaborates: "Our Lord came forth very man, adopted the person of Adam, and assumed his name - so that He might in his stead obey the Father; so that He might present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to the just judgment of God.... As **God only**, He **could not suffer**; and as man only, could not overcome death. He united the human nature with the divine, so that He might subject the weakness of the one [the human nature] to **death**, as an expiation of sin - and, by the power of the other [the divine nature], maintain a struggle against death, [and] might gain us the victory.... Clothed with our flesh, He warred to **death** against sin." At II:14:2-6, Calvin further explains: "**God** certainly has **no blood** [and] suffers not.... For we must put far from us the **heresy** of Nestorius who, presuming to dissect rather than distinguish between the two natures, devised a double Christ.... On account of His mother, He is called the son of David; so, on account of His Father, He is the Son of God [*cf.* Romans 1:3-4].... It is no less congruous to refer to His divine nature His being called the Son of God - than to refer to His human nature His being called the son of man."

In Calvin's 1541-45 *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (being a Form of Instruction for children in the doctrine of Christ), the Catechist asks regarding Christ: "But seeing He is God - how could He be seized with any such dread, as if He were forsaken by God?" To which the Catechumen is to reply: "We must hold that it was in respect to the feelings of His human nature that He was reduced to this necessity; and, so that this might be, His divinity for a little while was concealed - that is, did not put forth its might."

In its Articles XIV & XV, the 1559 *French Confession of Faith* of Calvin (and his student Chandieu) declares: "We believe that Jesus Christ, being the Wisdom of God and His eternal Son,

has put on our flesh so as to be God and man in one Person; man, like unto us, capable of suffering in body and soul.... In one Person - that is, Jesus Christ - the two natures are actually and inseparably joined and united; and yet each remains in its proper character.... The human nature remained finite, having its form.... We do not despoil Him of His humanity!"

In Article 19 of the *Belgic Confession*, we profess together with its author the Calvinist Guido de Brés that "these two natures are so closely united in one Person, that they were not separated even by His death.... The divine nature always remained united with the human, even when He lay in the grave.... We confess that He is very God and very man: very God, by His power to conquer [not to succumb to] death; and very man, so that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh."

In the 1563 Calvinistic *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 16 asks about Christ: "Why must He be a true and sinless man?" The answer is: "Because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned, should make satisfaction for sin; but no [mere] man, being himself a sinner, could satisfy for others." Question 17 asks: "Why must He be at the same time true God?" The answer is: "So that by the power of His Godhead, He might bear in His manhood the burden of God's wrath, and so obtain for and restore to us righteousness and life."

Especially in chapter XI of Bullinger's *Second Helvetic Confession* is this great Reformed Truth stated. "We detest the heresy of Nestorius, which makes two Christs of one and dissolves the union of the Person.... We do not teach that the divine nature in Christ did suffer.... We do neither think nor teach that the body of Christ ceased to be a true body after His glorifying, or that it was deified and...put off its properties as touching body and soul.... Our Lord Jesus Christ did truly suffer and die for us in the flesh, as Peter says (First Peter 4:1).... He did not rise up another flesh, but retained a true body. Therefore, while His disciples thought that they did see the spirit of their Lord Christ, He showed them His hands and feet!... Luke 24:39."

Consider, however, the Anti-Calvinism in Article VIII of the 1576 Gnesio-Lutheran *Formula of Concord*: "From the above-mentioned controversy...between the sincere [Lutheran] divines of the *Augsburg Confession* and the [insincere?] Calvinists who had...unsettled certain other theologians..., the[y]...have affirmed that the divine and human natures are in such wise personally united in Christ that neither communicates to the other really.... The union, say they, makes only the names common..., yet so that God has nothing common with humanity and...humanity has nothing really...common with Divinity.... We [Gnesio-Lutherans] believe, teach and confess [like incipient Pantheists?!] that God is man and man is God.... We believe, teach and confess that it is not a mere man only that has suffered...but a man such that His human nature has with the Son of God a union.... Wherefore the Son of God has truly suffered for us.... Now, not only as God but also as man He knows all things, can do all things, is present to all creatures.... Most easily can He, being present, impart His true body and His blood in the Holy Supper.... We repudiate therefore and condemn all the erroneous [*viz.* Calvinistic] articles...that the humanity [of Christ] alone suffered for us...; that the Son of God is present to us on earth...only by His divinity...; that, according to the humanity, He is not at all capable of omnipotence and other properties of the divine nature."

Worse yet are the Gnesio-Lutheran Hunnius s 1592 *Saxon Visitation Articles*. These reject "the false and erroneous doctrine of the Calvinists on the Person of Christ" which denies "that God is man, and man God" - and teaches "that it is...idolatry to place...faith...in Christ...according to His human nature."

No wonder the 1647 *Westminster Confession* rejects these Gnesio-Lutheran distinctives! II:1 insists that "God...is...without body...or passions" and is "immutable"- and therefore not mortalizable even at the death of Christ. Also VIII:2-7 states: "The Son of God...did...take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof.... The Lord Jesus in His human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified.... The Lord Jesus...endured most grievous torments immediately in His soul and most painful sufferings in His body [but not in His divinity]..., **each** nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the Person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the [same] Person denominated by the other nature" - yet never attributed also to the other nature itself!

Finally, this is fleshed out yet more fully in the 1648 *Westminster Larger Catechism*. 37-40 state that "the Son of God became man by taking to Himself a true body.... It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, [so] that He might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God and the power of death.... It was requisite that the Mediator should be man, that He might advance our [human] nature, perform obedience to the Law, suffer, and make intercession for us in our nature.... It was requisite that the Mediator Who was to reconcile God and man, should Himself be both God and man...in one Person, [so] that the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us and relied on by us as the works of the whole Person."

48-49 state that "Christ humbled Himself in His life by subjecting Himself to the Law which He perfectly fulfilled, and by conflicting with the...infirmities in His flesh, whether common to the nature of man or particularly accompanying...**His** low [human] condition.... Christ humbled Himself in His death, in that...He laid down His [human] life an offering for sin - enduring [in His human nature] the painful, shameful and cursed death of the cross." And 54-55 state that "Christ is exalted..., in that as God-man He is advanced to the highest favour with God.... Christ maketh intercession by His appearing in our nature continually before the Father...in the merit of His obedience and sacrifice [when formerly] on earth."

So, then, against Gnesio-Lutheranism and Wesleyan Methodism, we must say with the ***Reformed Confessions*** that God cannot and did not either suffer or die. For those Reformed Confessions are based on the infallible Word of God which in First Timothy 1:17 & 6:16 tells us that God is "the King...**immortal**" and "He **alone** has **immortality**" alias unlosable life both from all eternity past and unto all eternity future.

The above is no quibble. None of the world's billion Muslims will ever see the logic of either Lutheranism or Arminianism. Calvinism alone can make the cross intelligible to them (or for that matter also to *Torah*-believing Judaists). In fact, the sooner Wesley's theopaschitic hymn *And can it be?* gets replaced by the singing of Psalm 90 - the better for the health of Christ's Church!