CHAPTER THREE

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF CYRIL

1. REDEMP TIVE DEIFICATION: CYRIL'S PRES UPOSITIONS AND MAJOR CONCERNS

The christology of St. Cyril is the driving force of his entire theological vision. Like Athanasius before him, Cyril understands the church’s christological doctrine to be the central point to which and from which all other comprehensions run. It is the central resolution of all thought about revelation, atonement, and the ascent to the life-giving vision of God. The christological argument is, thus, fundamentally about soteriology and worship, and this is why these aspects feature so strongly in Cyril’s argument with Nestorius. In this profoundly dynamic coherence that characterises Alexandrian thought, something in which Cyril shares in abundance, this great patristic tradition approaches the grandeur of the theology of the Fourth Gospel.

Cyril’s thought shows a remarkable consistency both in its tenor and direction.1 He is a subtle thinker who reacts and adapts to circumstances, especially in the crisis years of the Nestorian argument, when his thought responded to the twin stimuli of criticism from determined theological opponents, as well as a major programme of patristic reading which he imposed on himself as preparation for the battle he knew was to come. In these years, especially 430 to 438, the pace of the political and theological exchange was fast and furious. Clarifications were made on terminology, central issues were established, and compromises reached in appropriate areas. Cyril’s was not a rigid mind. For him the words were less important than the essential theological truth they were attempting to enshrine. Like Athanasius, Cyril was ready enough to be flexible on terms if and when he felt his basic point had been secured. He has attracted criticism for this, as someone who was confused or inconsistent, but the criticism frequently betrays an ignorance of the ‘economic’ nature of most

1 cf. Liebaert (1951) p. 237; De Durand (1964) pp. 149–150; pace those who think that the writings of post 431 demonstrate a radical shift of direction.
patristic writing, as well as sometimes a careless exegesis of Cyril’s texts, and it is also important to keep in mind that one of the central aspects of this whole fifth century controversy was the way that it showed up the church’s universally pressing need for a commonly agreed technical language. It is not entirely apposite, in such circumstances, to accuse Cyril of terminological inconsistency, when he and all his contemporary protagonists are labouring towards this end, none being able to presuppose it. In fact, despite sharing in the common semantic disorganisation of the day (and using some terms at times as inconsistently as any of his contemporaries)2 Cyril does succeed in establishing a terminology which, in the main, was to emerge as having classical and oecumenical status for subsequent Christianity.

Behind the words, however, and in spite of his slightly varying analogies, Cyril’s central ideas and his narrative discourse remained remarkably consistent from beginning to end. It is sufficient proof of this to be able to offer any of Cyril’s main christological writings to random scrutiny, for there one sees the same dominant concerns arising time after time. The extensive body of work in translation offered in this present volume covers a decade of his writings from 429 onwards, the total extent of the Nestorian controversy. Readers can see for themselves, without any difficulty, this essential consistency of argument, and how it transcends a dependence on narrow formulas in the spaciousness of its christological design.

The early works, before 428, are largely exegetical, and his christological ideas are more abstractly presented there than in the specific and apologetical context of the Nestorian debate. Nevertheless, it is still clear that even before 428 Cyril’s mind had already been shaped, formed in the living christological tradition of his church, summarised in the great Athanasius. This Alexandrian tradition, from Clement and Origen, through Alexander, Athanasius, and Didymus, was characterised by its realist and dynamic soteriology. It began its consideration of all theology in terms of the narrative of the eternal Lord’s acts of salvation towards his people. Adopting the biblical and philosophical conception of the divine Logos who communicated the vision of the invisible God to earth,3 the Alexandrians went on

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2 For a good analysis of the various Cyrilline employments of the key term ‘hypostasis’ see Du Manoir (1944) p. 126f.
3 As, for example, in the Sophia figure of the Wisdom literature (Prov. 8.22, Sir.24, and passim) interpreted by Philo as the Logos; or in Jn.1.1–14; or ‘pre-existence’ texts such as Ephes.1.3f; Phil.2.6f; Coloss. 1.15f. The Apologists develop the terms