

**HEROES AND HERETICS:**  
**An 8-Week Course on Early Church History**

**WEEK 9**           **April 24, 2016**  
**Teacher:**       **Pastor Pickens**

**Leo – Encouragement in Christ**

**Life:**

We know very little about Leo's early life or family life. He was probably born around 400 AD in Tuscany, Italy. What we know of him is restricted almost exclusively to his time as the bishop of Rome.

As Leo is ministering and rising in the ranks of the church, the debate over Nestorianism was taking place. The primary opponent of Nestorius (381-451) is Cyril of Alexandria, who would be influential in Leo's own thinking. Nestorianism argues that there is a division in the person of Christ. You could actually speak of two Christs (his human nature and his divine nature). In 431 AD Nestorius is condemned at the Council of Ephesus. For the next 20 years he's sent into exile.

In 440 AD Leo was named bishop of Rome. 4 years later he would be named the head of the Roman Church in the West. At this point the Roman Empire had two Emperors, one in the west (Valentinian III) and one in the east (Theodosius II). Throughout his time serving as bishop Leo had a strong working relationship with Valentinian III. This political situation would also impact the ecumenical decisions that were made at the time.

In 446 Flavian was appointed bishop in Constantinople. At that point the heresy of Eutychianism came into prominence. Eutyches (378-454) went in the opposite direction as Nestorius. He argued that Christ was one person; however, he went so far in the opposite direction so as to say that Christ only has one nature. In his understanding Christ was not man and/or God but something in between the two.

Flavian saw the errors and dangers of Eutychianism and convened a Synod at Constantinople in 448. At that synod Eutyches and his followers were condemn as heretics. Unfortunately the matter wasn't settled then and there. Eutyches was on favorable terms with the Emperor in the east, Theodosius. In 449 Eutyches and Theodosius convened what is now known as the 'robber council'. Leo sent Flavian an incredibly encouraging and theologically rich letter which has now become known as Leo's Tome. This document would be the primary resource for the creed composed two years later at Chalcedon.

In addition, Leo sent two Presbyters to attend the council to support Flavian in his effort to proclaim an orthodox Christology. The council voted in favor of Eutyches though. Afterward Flavian and the two presbyters sent from Leo were beaten for not agreeing with the outcome. Flavian was beaten so severely that it led to his death.

The next year a new Emperor took reign in the East (Marcian). In 451 a new Council convened at Chalcedon. Leo was unable to attend but he again sent two presbyters in his place. 520 bishops attended the council. After several days the council put forth a creed. All 520 bishops voted in the affirmative to accept the creed as an authoritative statement of orthodoxy on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 451 AD. By his Spirit God led his people to truth and to proclaim to the generations to come the blessed news of our great Savior. "We should know of Leo and his wisdom and courage. We should know of Flavian and his sacrifice of his very life. Not because Leo and Flavian should be exalted, but because they so well articulated Christ and his sacrifice for us and for our salvation."<sup>1</sup>

"We, then, following the holy fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word,

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<sup>1</sup> Nichols, 117

the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us.”<sup>2</sup>

451 AD was a key date for the Church’s declaration of an orthodox Christology. After the vote a cry rang out: “St. Peter has spoken through Leo!” Clearly some of the groundwork toward the bishop of Rome being viewed as the Pope was being laid.

Sun-worship continued in the Roman Empire. Leo rebuked those who would bow down to the sun and then turn around and enter into the church to worship. A proper Christology is intimately connected to proper worship and actually expels idolatry.

In 452 AD Leo met with Attila the Hun who was at the time advancing toward Rome. Attila had already invaded Italy. After the meeting, Attila turned his army around and went back across the Danube River.

In 455 AD Rome was captured by the Vandal leader Gaiseric. During that time Leo sought to minimize the damage done to the city and her inhabitants. Again we see a very political role express itself in Leo’s work; however, we shouldn’t neglect to see way in which mercy expresses itself in this act.

Leo passed away on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 461 AD.

**Thought:**

As you think over Leo’s position in Rome you see that it is religious yet it is also significantly political. Leo didn’t try to push against that in any way. He was a gifted preacher, theologian and pastor, yet he was also an administrative and political genius. He knew how to navigate bureaucracy so as to accomplish tasks. There is a strong movement of power to the Bishop of Rome and Leo accepts this and even seems to acknowledge it as appropriate.

Leo’s greatest contribution to the church comes by means of his thoughts about Christology. Especially significant given the time period is the emphasis that Leo places on Christ being one person having two natures. The phrase hypostatic union is held forth by Leo (Acts 20:28; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:3). “Chalcedon recognized that when you’re dealing with the person of Christ, you’re dealing with a mystery.”<sup>3</sup>

Leo recognized that if we compromise anything about the person or nature of our Savior then we compromise the salvation that he’s accomplished. If we take Christ in any other way than he offers himself to and for us in the gospel then we have no hope of salvation. He is our perfect Savior. “Any compromise in Christ’s full humanity threatened Christ’s work of redemption. Leo put it pointedly: “We should not be able to make use of the Conqueror’s victory, if it had been won outside our nature.”<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter Nichols writes: “In Leo’s thinking, a proper view of the incarnation leads to a proper view of the atonement. The reverse also happens to be true. “Estimate this atonement at its right worth,” Leo warns. Failing to see Christ as the God-man diminishes the worth of the atonement.”<sup>5</sup>

Leo was a powerful and purposeful theologian. His theology though was never separate from his living or his pastoral intentions for his people. Christ and the atonement that he’s accomplished have everything to do with how we understand ourselves and how we live. In him we have our life, identity, and are enabled for living. “For we should not now be able to overcome the author of sin and death unless He took our nature on Him and made it His own, whom neither sin could pollute nor death retain.”<sup>6</sup> If we fail to preach Christ as he offers himself to us in the gospel, then we fail to be of any benefit to the pains and miseries of ourselves or others. In another letter Leo writes: “But if in spite of the truth being so clear, their persistence in heresy will not abandon their position in the darkness, let them show whence they promise themselves the hope of eternal life, which no one can attain to, save through the mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.” In another sermon he announces “A Victim had to be offered for our atonement Who should be both a partner of our race and free from our contamination, so that this design of God whereby it pleased Him to take away the sin of the world in the Nativity and passion of Jesus Christ, might reach to all generations: and that we should not be disturbed but rather strengthened by these mysteries, which vary with the character of the times, since the Faith, whereby we live, has at no time suffered variation.”

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Nichols, 141

<sup>3</sup> Nichols, 113

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 115

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 115

<sup>6</sup> Leo’s Tome

Leo writes that Christ “with the purpose of delivering man from eternal death, became man: so bending himself to take on Him our humility without decrease in his own majesty, that remaining what he was and assuming what he was not, he might unite the true form of a slave to that form in which he is equal to God the Father, and join both natures together in such a compact that the lower should not be swallowed up in its exaltation nor the higher impaired by its new associate...Without detriment therefore to the properties of either substance which then came together in one person, majesty took on humility, strength weakness, eternity mortality; and for the paying off of the debt belonging to our condition, inviolable nature was united with passible nature, and true God and true man were combined to form one Lord, so that, as suits the needs of our case, one and the same Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, could both die with the one and rise again with the other.”<sup>7</sup>

**Take Away:**

We should be conscious that God uses us in the lives of others and uses us in their lives as well (Eph. 4:1-16; Prov. 27; James 5:19-20; Phil. 1:25-26; 4:14-23). John Newton is best remembered now for the most famous hymn that Americans know. However, those who knew him were more impressed and ministered to by his letters. He wrote copious amounts of letters that were rich in theology (especially Christology) and intimately concerned with their readers.

There is great mystery in the gospel. How Christ can have two natures in one person forever is beyond our comprehension in some ways (Heb. 1-2; Col. 1-2). Incomprehensibility is not incompatible with faith nor is it incompatible with true and intimate knowledge (Rom. 11). Knowledge and be true and intimate without necessarily being exhaustive (John 17).

Our faith in Christ extends to every area of our lives. Compartmentalization does not accord with Christianity. Our faith impacts our vocation, our friendships, our political stances, our dreams and aspirations (Titus 2-3; 1 Peter 2; Eph. 5-6). Leo lived in a time when his position in the church was far more political than it would be now. We should understand his interaction with Attila as more than just political though. Here was a believer who extended himself for the good of those around him. You see aspects of justice and mercy displayed in him as he goes before Attila on behalf of Rome. We must be careful that we don't make Christianity about social-justice, being green, being republican, being pro-life, etc. (C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*). Christianity is about the praise of God's glorious grace, whereby he's reconciled us to himself in Christ Jesus. However, it's a message that has implications and filters into everything that we do. To be found in Christ is a change in identity with implications for all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do.

**For Further Reading:**

Dowley, Tim. *The History of Christianity*. Minneapolis: Lion Publishing, 1990.

Nichols, Stephen J. *For Us and for Our Salvation*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007.

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<sup>7</sup> Leo's Tome