

Catechetical Lecture XI

Cyril of Jerusalem

Early Church (pre-Nicene) · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Catechesis

STROMATA 47

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INTRODUCTION

Delivered in the mid-fourth century to candidates preparing for Easter baptism in Jerusalem, this lecture forms part of a sequence walking catechumens line by line through the creed they would soon profess. Cyril, who became bishop of the city around 350 and spent much of his episcopate exiled by Arian opponents, here defends the eternal generation of the Son against those who would reduce Christ to one anointed figure among many. The argument moves through Scripture and analogy with the patience of a teacher who knows his hearers will stake their lives on these distinctions. Read it as instruction overheard, the cadence is pastoral, the stakes doctrinal, the audience standing on the threshold of the font.

On the Words, the Only-Begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father Very God Before All Ages, by Whom All Things Were Made.

Hebrews 1:1

God, who at sundry times and in various manners spoke in times past unto the Fathers by the Prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.

That we have hope in Jesus Christ has been sufficiently shown, according to our ability, in what we delivered to you yesterday. But we must not simply believe in Christ Jesus nor receive Him as one of the many who are improperly called Christs. For they were figurative Christs, but He is the true Christ; not having risen by advancement from among men to the Priesthood, but ever having the dignity of the Priesthood from the Father. And for this cause the Faith guarding us beforehand lest we should suppose Him to be one of the ordinary Christs, adds to the profession of the Faith, that we believe In One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God.

And again on hearing of a Son, think not of an adopted son but a Son by nature, an Only-begotten Son, having no brother. For this is the reason why He is called Only-begotten, because in the dignity of the Godhead, and His generation from the Father, He has no brother. But we call Him the Son of God, not of ourselves, but because the Father Himself named Christ His Son: and a true name is that which is set by fathers upon their children.

Our Lord Jesus Christ erewhile became Man, but by the many He was unknown. Wishing, therefore, to teach that which was not known, He called together His disciples, and asked them, _Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am_ Matthew 16:13? — not from vain-glory, but wishing to show them the truth, lest dwelling with God, the Only-begotten of God, they should think lightly of Him as if He were some mere man. And when they answered that some said Elias, and some Jeremias, He said to them, They may be excused for not knowing, but you, My Apostles, who in My name cleanse lepers, and cast out devils, and raise the dead, ought not to be ignorant of Him, through whom you do these wondrous works. And when they all became silent (for the matter was too high for man to learn), Peter, the foremost of the Apostles and chief herald of the Church, neither aided by cunning invention, nor persuaded by human reasoning, but enlightened in his mind from the Father, says to Him, _You are the Christ_, not only so, but _the Son of the living God_. And there follows a blessing upon his speech (for in truth it was above man), and as a seal upon what he had said, that it was the Father who had revealed it to him. For the Saviour says, _Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but My Father which is in heaven_. Matthew 16:17 He therefore who acknowledges our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, partakes of this blessedness; but he who denies the Son of God is a poor and miserable man.

Again, I say, on hearing of a Son, understand it not merely in an improper sense, but as a Son in truth, a Son by nature, without beginning; not as having come out of bondage into a higher state of adoption, but a Son eternally begotten by an inscrutable and incomprehensible generation. And in like manner on hearing of the First-born, think not that this is after the manner of men; for the first-born among men have other brothers also. And it is somewhere written, _Israel is My son, My first-born_. Exodus 4:22 But Israel is, as Reuben was, a first-born son rejected: for Reuben went up to his father's couch; and Israel cast his Father's Son out of the vineyard, and crucified Him.

To others also the Scripture says, _You are the sons of the Lord your God_ Deuteronomy 14:1: and in another place, _I have said, You are gods, and you are all sons of the Most High_. _I have said_, not, I have begotten. They, when God so _said_, received the sonship, which before they had not: but He was not begotten to be other than He was before; but was begotten from the beginning Son of the Father, being above all beginning and all ages, Son of the Father, in all things like to Him who begot Him, eternal of a Father eternal, Life of Life begotten, and Light of Light, and Truth of Truth, and Wisdom of the Wise, and King of King, and God of God, and Power of Power.

If then thou hear the Gospel saying, _The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham_ Matthew 1:1, understand according to the flesh. For He is the Son of David _at the end of the ages_ Hebrews 9:26, but the Son of God Before All Ages, without beginning. The one, which before He had not, He received; but the other, which He has, He has eternally as begotten of the Father. Two fathers He has: one, David, according to the flesh, and one, God, His Father in a Divine manner. As the Son of David, He is subject to time, and to handling, and to genealogical descent: but as Son according to the Godhead, He is subject neither to time nor to place, nor to genealogical descent: for _His generation who shall declare_? _God is a Spirit_ John 4:24; He who is a Spirit has spiritually begotten, as being incorporeal, an inscrutable and incomprehensible generation. The Son Himself says of the Father, _The Lord said to Me, You are My Son, today have I begotten You_. Now this _today_

is not recent, but eternal: a timeless today, before all ages. _From the womb, before the morning star, have I begotten You_.

Believe thou therefore on Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, and a Son Only-Begotten, according to the Gospel which says, _For God so loved the world, that He gave His Only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life_. John 3:16 And again, _He that believes in the Son is not judged, but has passed out of death into life_. _But he that believes not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him_. And John testified concerning Him, saying, _And we beheld His glory, glory as of the only-begotten from the father — full of grace and truth_ : at whom the devils trembled and said, _Ah! What have we to do with You, Jesus, Thou Son of the living God_ Luke 4:34 .

He is then the Son of God by nature and not by adoption , begotten of the Father. _And he that loves Him that begot, loves Him also that is begotten of Him_ 1 John 5:1; but he that despises Him that is begotten casts back the insult upon Him who begot. And whenever thou hear of God begetting, sink not down in thought to bodily things, nor think of a corruptible generation, lest you be guilty of impiety. _God is a Spirit_ , His generation is spiritual: for bodies beget bodies, and for the generation of bodies time needs must intervene; but time intervenes not in the generation of the Son from the Father. And in our case what is begotten is begotten imperfect: but the Son of God was begotten perfect; for what He is now, that is He also from the beginning , begotten without beginning. We are begotten so as to pass from infantile ignorance to a state of reason: your generation, O man, is imperfect, for your growth is progressive. But think not that it is thus in His case, nor impute infirmity to Him who has begotten. For if that which He begot was imperfect, and acquired its perfection in time, you are imputing infirmity to Him who has begotten; if so be, the Father did not bestow from the beginning that which, as you say, time bestowed afterwards.

Think not therefore that this generation is human, nor as Abraham begot Isaac. For in begetting Isaac, Abraham begot not what he would, but what another granted. But in God the Father's begetting there is neither ignorance nor intermediate deliberation. For to say that He knew not what He was begetting is the greatest impiety; and it is no less impious to say, that after deliberation in time He then became a Father. For God was not previously without a Son, and afterwards in time became a Father; but has the Son eternally, having begotten Him not as men beget men, but as Himself only knows, who begot Him before all ages Very God.

For the Father being Very God begot the Son like Himself, Very God ; not as teachers beget disciples, not as Paul says to some, _For in Christ Jesus I begot you through the Gospel_. 1 Corinthians 4:15 For in this case he who was not a son by nature became a son by discipleship, but in the former case He was a Son by nature, a true Son. Not as you, who are to be illuminated, are now becoming sons of God: for you also become sons, but by adoption of grace, as it is written, _But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe in His name: which were begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God_. John 1:12-13 And we indeed are begotten of water and of the Spirit, but not thus was Christ begotten of the Father. For at the time of His Baptism addressing Him, and saying, _This is My Son_ Matthew 3:17, He did

not say, This has now become My Son, but, _This is My Son;_ that He might make manifest, that even before the operation of Baptism He was a Son.

The Father begot the Son, not as among men mind begets word. For the mind is substantially existent in us; but the word when spoken is dispersed into the air and comes to an end. But we know Christ to have been begotten not as a word pronounced, but as a Word substantially existing and living; not spoken by the lips, and dispersed, but begotten of the Father eternally and ineffably, in substance. For, _In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God_ John 1:1, sitting at God's right hand — the Word understanding the Father's will, and creating all things at His bidding: the Word, which came down and went up; for the word of utterance when spoken comes not down, nor goes up; the Word speaking and saying, _The things which I have seen with My Father, these I speak_ John 8:38: the Word possessed of power, and reigning over all things: for _the Father has committed all things unto the Son_.

The Father then begot Him not in such wise as any man could understand, but as Himself only knows. For we profess not to tell in what manner He begot Him, but we insist that it was not in this manner. And not we only are ignorant of the generation of the Son from the Father, but so is every created nature. _Speak to the earth, if perchance it may teach you_ Job 12:8: and though thou inquire of all things which are upon the earth, they shall not be able to tell you. For the earth cannot tell the substance of Him who is its own potter and fashioner. Nor is the earth alone ignorant, but the sun also : for the sun was created on the fourth day, without knowing what had been made in the three days before him; and he who knows not the things made in the three days before him, cannot tell forth the Maker Himself. Heaven will not declare this: for at the Father's bidding _the heaven also was like smoke established_ by Christ. Nor shall _the heaven of heavens_ declare this, _nor the waters which are above the heavens_. Why then art thou cast down, O man, at being ignorant of that which even the heavens know not? Nay, not only are the heavens ignorant of this generation, but also every angelic nature. For if any one should ascend, were it possible, into the first heaven, and perceiving the ranks of the Angels there should approach and ask them how God begot His own Son, they would say perhaps, We have above us beings greater and higher; ask them. Go up to the second heaven and the third; attain, if you can, to Thrones, and Dominions, and Principalities, and Powers: and even if any one should reach them, which is impossible, they also would decline the explanation, for they know it not.

For my part, I have ever wondered at the curiosity of the bold men, who by their imagined reverence fall into impiety. For though they know nothing of Thrones, and Dominions, and Principalities, and Powers, the workmanship of Christ, they attempt to scrutinise their Creator Himself. Tell me first, O most daring man, wherein does Throne differ from Dominion, and then scrutinise what pertains to Christ. Tell me what is a Principality, and what a Power, and what a Virtue, and what an Angel: and then search out their Creator, _for all things were made by Him_. John 1:3 But you will not, or you can not ask Thrones or Dominions. What else is there that _knows the deep things of God 1 Corinthians 2:10-11_ , save only the Holy Ghost, who spoke the Divine Scriptures? But not even the Holy Ghost Himself has spoken in the Scriptures concerning the generation of the Son from the Father. Why then do you busy yourself about things which not even the Holy Ghost has written in the Scriptures? Thou that know not the things which are written, busiest thou yourself about the things which are not written? There are many questions in the Divine Scriptures; what is written we comprehend not, why do we busy ourselves about what is not written? It is sufficient for us to know that God has begotten One Only Son.

Be not ashamed to confess your ignorance, since you share ignorance with Angels. Only He who begot knows Him who was begotten, and He who is begotten of Him knows Him who begot. He who begot knows what He begot: and the Scriptures also testify that He who was begotten is God. For _as the Father has life in Himself, so also has He given to the Son to have life in Himself_ John 5:26; and, _that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father_ ; and, _as the Father quickens_ whom He will, even so the Son quickens whom He will. Neither He who begot suffered any loss, nor is anything lacking to Him who was begotten (I know that I have said these things many times, but it is for your safety that they are said so often): neither has He who begot, a Father, nor He who was begotten, a brother. Neither was He who begot changed into the Son , nor did He who was begotten become the Father. Of One Only Father there is One Only-begotten Son: neither two Unbegotten ,

nor two Only-begotten; but One Father, Unbegotten (for He is Unbegotten who has no father); and One Son, eternally begotten of the Father; begotten not in time, but before all ages; not increased by advancement, but begotten that which He now is.

We believe then In the Only-Begotten Son of God, Who Was Begotten of the Father Very God. For the True God begets not a false god, as we have said, nor did He deliberate and afterwards beget ; but He begot eternally, and much more swiftly than our words or thoughts: for we speaking in time, consume time; but in the case of the Divine Power, the generation is timeless. And as I have often said, He did not bring forth the Son from non-existence into being, nor take the non-existent into sonship : but the Father, being Eternal, eternally and ineffably begot One Only Son, who has no brother. Nor are there two first principles; but the Father is _the head of the Son_ 1 Corinthians 11:3; the beginning is One. For the Father begot the Son Very God, called Emmanuel; and Emmanuel _being interpreted is, God with us_ Matthew 1:23 .

And would you know that He who was begotten of the Father, and afterwards became man, is God? Hear the Prophet saying, _This is our God, none other shall be accounted of in comparison with Him. He has found out every way of knowledge, and given it to Jacob His servant, and to Israel His beloved. Afterwards He was seen on earth, and conversed among men_. Do you see herein God become man, after the giving of the law by Moses? Hear also a second testimony to Christ's Deity, that which has just now been read, _Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever_. Hebrews 1:8 For lest, because of His presence here in the flesh, He should be thought to have been advanced after this to the Godhead, the Scripture says plainly, _Therefore God, even Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your fellows_. Do you see Christ as God anointed by God the Father?

Would you receive yet a third testimony to Christ's Godhead? Hear Esaias saying, _Egypt has laboured, and the merchandise of Ethiopia:_ and soon after, _In You shall they make supplication, because God is in You, and there is no God save You. For You are God, and we knew it not, the God of Israel, the Saviour_. You see that the Son is God, having in Himself God the Father: saying almost the very same which He has said in the Gospels: _The Father is in Me, and I am in the Father_. John 14:11 He says not, I am the Father, but _the Father is in Me, and I am in the Father_. And again He said not, I and the Father am one, but, _I and the Father are one_, that we should neither separate them, nor make a confusion of Son-Father. One they are because of the dignity pertaining to the Godhead, since God begot God. One in respect of their kingdom; for the Father reigns not over these, and the Son over those, lifting Himself up against His Father like Absalom: but the kingdom of the Father is likewise the kingdom of the Son. One they are, because there is no discord nor division between them: for what things the Father wills, the Son wills the same. One, because the creative works of Christ are no other than the Father's; for the creation of all things is one, the Father having made them through the Son: _For He spoke, and they were made; He commanded, and they were created_, says the Psalmist. For He who speaks, speaks to one who hears: and He who commands, gives His commandment to one who is present with Him.

The Son then is Very God, having the Father in Himself, not changed into the Father; for the Father was not made man, but the Son. For let the truth be freely spoken. The Father suffered not for us, but

the Father sent Him who suffered. Neither let us say, There was a time when the Son was not; nor let us admit a Son who is the Father : but let us walk in the king's highway; let us turn aside neither on the left hand nor on the right. Neither from thinking to honour the Son, let us call Him the Father; nor from thinking to honour the Father, imagine the Son to be some one of the creatures. But let One Father be worshipped through One Son, and let not their worship be separated. Let One Son be proclaimed, sitting at the right hand of the Father before all ages: sharing His throne not by advancement in time after His Passion, but by eternal possession.

He who has seen the Son, has seen the Father John 14:9: for in all things the Son is like to Him who begot Him ; begotten Life of Life and Light of Light, Power of Power, God of God; and the characteristics of the Godhead are unchangeable in the Son; and he who is counted worthy to behold Godhead in the Son, attains to the fruition of the Father. This is not my word, but that of the Only-begotten: _Have I been so long time with you, and have you not known Me, Philip? He that has seen Me, has seen the Father_. John 14:9 And to be brief, let us neither separate them, nor make a confusion : neither say thou ever that the Son is foreign to the Father, nor admit those who say that the Father is at one time Father, and at another Son: for these are strange and impious statements, and not the doctrines of the Church. But the Father having begotten the Son, remained the Father and is not changed. He begot Wisdom, yet lost not wisdom Himself; and begot Power, yet became not weak: He begot God, but lost not His own Godhead: and neither did He lose anything Himself by diminution or change; nor has He who was begotten anything wanting. Perfect is He who begot, Perfect that which was begotten: God was He who begot, God He who was begotten; God of all Himself, yet entitling the Father His own God. For He is not ashamed to say, I _ascend unto My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God_ John 20:17 .

But lest you should think that He is in a like sense Father of the Son and of the creatures, Christ drew a distinction in what follows. For He said not, I ascend to our Father, lest the creatures should be made fellows of the Only-begotten; but He said, _My Father and your Father_; in one way Mine, by nature; in another yours, by adoption. And again, _to my God and your God_, in one way Mine, as His true and Only-begotten Son, and in another way yours, as His workmanship. The Son of God then is Very God, ineffably begotten before all ages (for I say the same things often to you, that it may be graven upon your mind). This also believe, that God has a Son: but about the manner be not curious, for by searching you will not find. Exalt not yourself, lest you fall: _think upon those things only which have been commanded you_. Sirach 3:22 Tell me first what He is who begot, and then learn that which He begot; but if you can not conceive the nature of Him who has begotten, search not curiously into the manner of that which is begotten.

For godliness it suffices you to know, as we have said, that God has One Only Son, One naturally begotten; who began not His being when He was born in Bethlehem, but Before All Ages. For hear the Prophet Micah saying, _And thou, Bethlehem, house of Ephrata, art little to be among the thousands of Judah. Out of you shall come forth unto Me a Ruler, who shall feed My people Israel: and His goings forth are from the beginning, from days of eternity_. Think not then of Him who is now come forth out of Bethlehem, but worship Him who was eternally begotten of the Father. Suffer none to speak of a beginning of the Son in time, but as a timeless Beginning acknowledge the Father. For the Father is the Beginning of the Son, timeless, incomprehensible, without beginning. The fountain of the river of righteousness, even of the Only-begotten, is the Father, who begot Him as Himself only knows. And would you know that our Lord Jesus Christ is King Eternal? Hear Him again saying, _Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it, and was glad_. John 8:56 And then, when the Jews received this hardly, He says what to them was still harder, _Before Abraham was, I am_. And again He says to the Father, _And now, Father, glorify Thou Me with Your own self, with the glory which I had with You before the world was_. He says plainly, before the world was, I had the glory which is with You. And again when He says, _For You loved Me before the foundation of the world_ John 17:24, He plainly declares, The glory which I have with you is from eternity.

We believe then In One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, Begotten of His Father Very God Before All Worlds, by Whom All Things Were Made. For _whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers, all things were made through Him_ Colossians 1:16, and of things created none is exempted from His authority. Silenced be every heresy which brings in different creators and makers of the world; silenced the tongue which blasphemes the Christ the Son of God; let them be silenced who say that the sun is the Christ, for He is the sun's Creator, not the sun which we see. Silenced be they who say that the world is the workmanship of Angels, who wish to steal away the dignity of the Only-begotten. For whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or anything that is named, all things were made by Christ. He reigns over the things which have been made by Him, not having seized another's spoils, but reigning over His own workmanship, even as the Evangelist John has said, _All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made_. John 1:3 All things were made by Him, the Father working by the Son.

I wish to give also a certain illustration of what I am saying, but I know that it is feeble; for of things visible what can be an exact illustration of the Divine Power? But nevertheless as feeble be it spoken by the feeble to the feeble. For just as any king, whose son was a king, if he wished to form a city, might suggest to his son, his partner in the kingdom, the form of the city, and he having received the pattern, brings the design to completion; so, when the Father wished to form all things, the Son created all things at the Father's bidding, that the act of bidding might secure to the Father His absolute authority, and yet the Son in turn might have authority over His own workmanship, and neither the Father be separated from the lordship over His own works, nor the Son rule over things created by others, but by Himself. For, as I have said, Angels did not create the world, but the Only-begotten Son, begotten, as I have said, before all ages, By Whom All Things Were Made, nothing having been excepted from His creation. And let this suffice to have been spoken by us so far, by the grace of Christ.

But let us now recur to our profession of the Faith, and so for the present finish our discourse. Christ made all things, whether thou speak of Angels, or Archangels, of Dominions, or Thrones. Not that the Father wanted strength to create the works Himself, but because He willed that the Son should reign over His own workmanship, God Himself giving Him the design of the things to be made. For honouring His own Father the Only-begotten says, _The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever things He does, these also does the Son likewise_. John 5:19 And again, _My Father works hitherto, and I work_, there being no opposition in those who work. _For all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine_, says the Lord in the Gospels. And this we may certainly know from the Old and New Testaments. For He who said, _Let us make man in our image and after our likeness_ Genesis 1:26, was certainly speaking to some one present. But clearest of all are the Psalmist's words, _He spoke and they were made; He commanded, and they were created_, as if the Father commanded and spoke, and the Son made all things at the Father's bidding. And this Job said mystically, _Which alone spread out the heaven, and walks upon the sea as on firm ground_ Job 9:8; signifying to those who understand that He who when present here walked upon the sea is also He who aforetime made the heavens. And again the Lord says, _Or did Thou take earth, and fashion clay into a living being_ ? Then afterwards, _Are the gates of death opened to You through fear, and did the door-keepers of hell shudder at sight of You_ ? Thus signifying that He who through loving-kindness descended into hell, also in the beginning made man out of clay.

Christ then is the Only-begotten Son of God, and Maker of the world. For _He was in the world, and the world was made by Him;_ and _He came unto His own_, as the Gospel teaches us. John 1:10-11 And not only of the things which are seen, but also of the things which are not seen, is Christ the Maker at the Father's bidding. For _in Him_, according to the Apostle, _were all things created that are in the heavens, and that are upon the earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things have been created by Him and for Him; and He is before all, and_ _in Him all things consist_. Colossians 1:16-17 Even if you speak of the worlds, of these also Jesus Christ is the Maker by the Father's bidding. For _in these last days God spoke unto us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds Hebrews 1:2_. To whom be the glory, honour, might, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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