



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

# Christological Heresies in the Early Church

*Or*

## Heresy: The Sequel!

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### I. The Person of Christ and the Church's Debt to Heresy

Doctrine grows out of the life and worship of the church, often as the church faces challenges from without and within—attacks on the faith from unbelievers/the world, and inadequate conceptions of the faith championed by Christians themselves.

Heresy concerns the latter, in that heresy, by definition, comes from within the church. For heresy is some crucial aspect of the faith propagated by certain Christians that the church deems so profoundly inadequate as to distort—even denature—the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. In other words, heresy is an undermining of the Christian faith from *inside* the Christian church.

When the church is faced with conceptions of the faith suspected of being heretical, she is prompted to reexamine:

- Holy Scripture, the canon (measuring stick/straight edge) of the church's faith and life (the *norma normans*, or the norm that norms).
- The inner connection between doctrine and doctrine.
- The connection between right doctrine and right worship, between the faith and faithful living, or between true knowledge of God and godliness, which are inseparable.

Thus, deficient conceptions of the faith *should* sanctify the church by forcing her to think better, clearer, and with more conviction/courage about what she does believe and confess. Ironically, then, the church owes a rather large debt to heresy. We have seen this is true with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, and now we will see it is also true regarding the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ.



## II. Three Affirmations about the Mystery of Our Incarnate Savior

- Jesus Christ is truly and fully human.
- Jesus Christ is truly and fully God.
- The deity and humanity of Jesus Christ are truly and fully united in his one person.

Christians have believed and confessed these three affirmations from the inception of the church—this is apostolic teaching, after all! Yet the following three heresies in particular spurred the church to think better, clearer, and with more conviction about these three affirmations and their immense theological/pastoral (gospel!) implications.

## III. Apollinarianism

- Heresy named after Apollinaris (died ca. 392), bishop of Laodicea, a town southwest of Antioch in Asia Minor.
- According to Apollinaris, the human *nous* (mind) is the seat of sin. What did Apollinaris find this to mean with respect to the person of Christ?
- Apollinaris maintained that the eternal Son of God assumed a human body and a “sensitive spirit.” But the “rational spirit” (mind) of Jesus was not at all human, only divine. For this reason, people have referred to Apollinarianism as “God in a ‘bod’” Christology.
- What did the church find so problematic with Apollinaris’ understanding of the person of Christ?
- If Christ is only partly human, then are we only partly saved?
- The church recognized that it is not just our body that needs redemption, but our entire person. Therefore, Christ must be fully and truly human, as “that which is not assumed is not healed.”
- Do you find that Christians sometimes think it honors Christ to minimize his humanness?

## IV. Nestorianism

- Heresy named after Nestorius (died ca. 451), bishop of Constantinople.
- Nestorius was accused of teaching that Christ was fully human and fully divine, but that there could be no true personal union between Christ’s human and divine natures.



- Nestorius seemed to suggest that Christ has two natures with only a functional union—or a union of the will—between them.
- Why did the church find his understanding of the person of Christ profoundly inadequate?
- The church recognized that to deny a true personal union of Christ’s two natures is to hint that Christ is, in effect, two persons—that Christ is not two “whats” and one “who,” but two “whats” and two “whos.”
- Do you find that Christians sometimes think and talk about Christ as if he were two persons, or as if he had a split personality—at times human, at other times divine?

## V. Monophysitism, or Eutychianism

- This doctrine is sometimes called Eutychianism, after Eutyches (died ca. 454), who was a leader of a monastery (abbot) at Constantinople and one of monophysitism’s leading advocates.
- Monophysitism is a compound Greek word, which is derived from *monos* (“single”) and *physis* (“nature”).
- Monophysitism is a doctrine that says the incarnate Christ has but one nature—a divine(ish) nature, clad in human(ish) flesh.
- What happened to the human nature of Christ, according to monophysites? It has been taken up and absorbed into Christ’s divine nature like a raindrop in the ocean.
- The church recognized that the monophysite doctrine of the incarnation renders Christ neither fully divine nor fully human. He would be, therefore, a *“tertium quid,”* a third something!

## VI. The Church’s Response: The “Definition” of Chalcedon

Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and historic Protestant Christians are of one accord in their acceptance of this Chalcedonian Definition, which they regard as the biblical, orthodox teaching on the union of the human and divine natures in the person of Jesus Christ. It reads:

*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, 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 been handed down to us.*

## VII. Summary of the Chalcedonian “Definition”

- Christ has two natures, a perfect human nature and a perfect divine nature.
- Christ’s divine nature is consubstantial (*homoousia*) with that of the Father, and Christ’s human nature is consubstantial (*homoousia*) with that of humanity, excepting sin.
- Christ’s two natures retain their distinctive characteristics, which is to say, they are not put in a blender, as it were.
- Christ’s two natures are eternally and inextricably united in one *hypostasis*, or person—the person of Jesus Christ. *Hypostatic* comes from the Greek word often translated as “person.” Thus, the ***hypostatic union*** is the personal union of Christ’s two natures.
- Christ’s two natures are united “inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.” These four adverbs constitute what are known as “***the four fences of Chalcedon***.” We have here yet another example of how orthodox theology seeks to *articulate mystery*—that is, how the church defines and circumscribes orthodox doctrine with the intent of safeguarding mystery, rather than solving or eradicating mystery.

