

Christ of the Creeds

- I. Introduction. We continue on with the discussion we began last time about the two natures in the one Person of Jesus Christ. We saw plentiful Biblical evidence and proof that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. This confuses some, especially non-Christians in religions that deny the deity of Christ. I wonder if they think that by “fully” we mean in some form of measurement, as though they liken what we are saying to a bowl being full of food and full of dirt at the same time. It isn’t possible for the same space to be filled with two different substances at the same time, so perhaps they think we are saying something that is against reason. But that isn’t what we mean when we say He is fully God and fully man at the same time. We mean that Jesus Christ has a nature that is God in that everything that it takes and means to be God, He has. He also has a nature in His Person that is human in that everything that it takes and means to be human, He has. In order for this to happen, God the Second Person of the Trinity added a human nature to Himself that consists of a true human physical body and a human soul with intellect, will, and emotions. That doesn’t make Him half God and half man; He still is fully God by virtue of having the fully divine nature with all of the attributes of God intact, none missing. He thus is still fully man by virtue of having the fully human nature with all of the attributes of man intact, none missing. But the doctrine of the two natures in the one Person of Christ has indeed brought objections from various opponents of Biblical Christianity throughout church history. It began early in the NT age, so the church was forced to study Scripture and formulate its teaching into a doctrinal statement that is a defining truth of Christianity and both answers and stands against the opponents. We’ll examine the early church controversy, its players, and its resulting creedal formulations.
- II. Early Development of the Controversy.
 - A. The Foundational Doctrine of the Trinity. It is foundational to the later formulation about the Person of Christ as well as foundational to our faith. The doctrine of the Trinity was argued and set forth

authoritatively before the matter of the Person of Christ. So, it is easy to see that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ are closely linked. Both the unity of God, even though 3 Persons, and the Deity of Christ as one of the 3 Persons, even though also human, must both be preserved in orthodox Christian doctrine; they are both very clearly present in the Bible, as are the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. After a great deal of controversy and the defense of the Trinity by men such as Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, these matters of the Triune Being of God and the Deity of Christ finally brought about the calling of a church council to settle the matters and issue the church's statement as to the Bible's doctrine. That was the Council of Nice, or Nicea, in 325 AD, which then issued the Nicene Creed. It is blatantly Trinitarian, as it ought to be. Just check the Creed in the back of the Trinity Hymnal. But although it alludes both to His Deity and His humanity, it doesn't explicitly make those statements, nor does it offer a full statement of that doctrine.

B. The Extent of the Controversy. The church has been particularly plagued by attacks upon the doctrine of the two natures in the one Person of Christ during the 4th, 5th, 19th, and 20th centuries, on into the 21st now. During the 20th century, opposition was exemplified by a gathering of so-called Biblical scholars called The Jesus Seminar. They, and it, were anything and everything other than Biblical as they tried to define Jesus. The 19th century attack came mainly from theological Liberalism born from German Higher Criticism. In the 4th century, the attack came from Arianism, spawned by a teaching elder in the Eastern church named Arius. His false doctrine, which spread far and wide in the church, and was opposed by Athanasius, was the final factor that led to the Council of Nicea. After Nicea, although Arius had died by then, even with the Nicene Creed available to the church, the debate about the Person of Christ continued in the church. It led to a couple of more interim councils that simply didn't answer all the objections. This finally led to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

III. Chalcedon. When dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity earlier, the issue to be defended was that God is one nature in three Persons. But at this point, the issue to be understood and defended was two natures in

one Person. In the debate, besides the Biblical doctrine, emerged...

A. Two Extremes. One extreme was taught and represented by...

1. Eutyches. (Not Eutychus of Acts 20.) He was the leading proponent of the Monophysite heresy. He denied that Christ has two natures, but only one. The question came to him, was Christ's one nature divine or human? His answer: neither. He said it was one theanthropic nature, neither human nor divine, but a mixture in which deity and humanity are confused (fused into one another) together into something neither fully human nor fully divine. It is another instance of a "third way" error, similar to Arius before him. His view would lead either to a deified human nature or a humanized divine nature. In the modern day, a take-off on this kind of thinking is found in Greek Orthodox theology that believes man becomes more deified through repeated attendance upon their worship service. The other extreme was taught and represented by...

2. Nestorius. He asserted that if Christ has two distinct natures, then He must have two distinct personalities; i.e., He must be two persons in one being. This denies the unity of Christ's Person, and the true union of His two natures by dividing the natures from the Person. Now let's see how the church answered these with Biblical truth in...

B. The Chalcedon Formulation. It clarifies the church's proper understanding of the Bible's doctrine of the dual nature of Christ as "True man and true God." This is consistent with Scripture.

1. It affirms that the two natures of Jesus Christ are perfectly united.

2. It defines the union of the two natures negatively: by saying what it is not.

a. "Without mixture or confusion": against Eutyches and the Monophysite heresy. Thus, Christ's human nature is always fully human; it does not lose its limitations, etc. The divine nature is always divine; it does not lose its unlimited qualities. This has the effect of allowing the human nature to suffer. It also has the effect of allowing for the divine nature to communicate knowledge to His human nature

without swallowing up the human nature. Cf. when Jesus “Himself knew what was in man” (John 2:25) (knowledge by divine omniscience communicated to the human nature), while He did not know the day nor hour of His return and the judgment (Matt. 24:36) (knowledge which His divine nature chose not to communicate to the human nature, according to the Father’s will).

b. “Without separation or division”: against the Nestorian heresy. “Each nature retaining its own attributes” is added, but in one Person with the two natures perfectly united. Thus, the divine nature does not lay aside or transfer to the human nature any of the attributes of God. This is absolutely critical to understanding, for example, what Paul meant in Phil. 2 when he wrote of Christ, “but emptied Himself” (“taking the form of a bond-servant”). Nor does the human nature lay aside or transfer to the divine nature any of the attributes of man.

3. The value of the positive and the negative statements. The positive affirmation that Christ is two natures in one Person, fully divine and fully human, is necessary to the Christian faith. The negative statements set boundaries for the mystery of the Incarnation—a mystery in the sense that we cannot fully comprehend the Hypostatic Union or how the Incarnation “works.” The value of the negative statements is to set the borders around the Scriptural doctrine. Those who are outside of the borders by believing that Christ is what He really is not define themselves to be outside of Christianity, outside the borders of true, saving faith.

C. Other Heresies. There were many other heresies both before and after the Chalcedonian formulation. But the two above, along with earlier Arianism, were the most powerful influences to press the church to hold fast to its confession of the Biblical doctrine of Christ.

IV. Applications.

A. Essential to Christian Faith. Believe that Christ is two natures, fully divine and fully human, in one Person, or don’t claim to be a Christian.

- B. Important to Evangelism. This must be the Christ to Whom you introduce others in the gospel.
- C. Important to Apologetics. The Deity of Christ is almost always the second tenet of evangelical Christianity that opponents will attack, whether atheists, garden variety unbelievers, or false religions including the cults. The first is Scripture itself, by the denial that it is inspired, infallible, inerrant.