

God and His Ways

Christianity would not exist if Jesus Christ had never lived. If the biblical Christian faith is true, it excluded all other religions.

Biblical Christianity rests on the *person* and *work* of Jesus Christ. Christ's person is who He is, an Christ's work is what He did (and does).

Chapter Outline

I. The Person of Jesus Christ

II. The Work of Christ

In Matthew 16:20, Jesus warned the disciples that:

- They should tell no one that He was the Christ.

In Matthew 16:21, Jesus began to show his disciples that He must:

- Go to Jerusalem
- Suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes.
- Be killed.
- Be raised up on the third day.

The Person of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ was a historical person who lived during the first years of the era named in His honor, between 5 B.C. and A.D. 35. A.D. is an abbreviation for *anno Domini*, a Latin phrase meaning "in the year of the Lord".

The Bible records both His own claims and abundant testimony that He is more than an ordinary man. He is God.

There are two basic errors people make about the Lord Jesus.

Error No. 1) Jesus Christ was a man who was not entirely God.

Error No. 2) Jesus Christ was God but not fully human.

Christological Controversies

There were four major controversies in the early years of the Church, concerning the person of Christ.

Name	Error	Bible Doctrine
Arianism	Christ is only human.	Christ is fully God.
Apollinarianism	Christ is only God.	Christ is fully human.
Nestorianism	Christ is two persons.	Christ is only one person.
Eutychianism	Christ has only one nature.	Christ has two distinct natures.

Perhaps no one has expressed more eloquently than C. S. Lewis the absurdity of maintaining that Jesus was merely a good man but not God.

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic ... or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman, or something worse."²

First-century false teachers asserted that Christ (a deity) descended on a mortal man (Jesus of Nazareth) and departed from him shortly before he was crucified.

Eutyches was an aged, anti-Nestorian monk. In rejecting this view, the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) finally and fully articulated this statement regarding the fullness of the natures of Christ as well as their relationship one to another: **two distinct natures – one fully god, one fully man – united in one unique person, the God-Man, forever.**

Another great conflicts in the early Church arose over the question of Christ's two wills. The orthodox position was that Christ does indeed have a human will distinct from His divine will on the basis of Luke 22:42.

Christ's Two Natures

A *person* is an independent being with individual intellect and conscience.

A *nature* is the inner essence of a thing that makes it what it is.

Christ fully possessed the nature that makes a creature distinctively human – behavior, diet, body structure, rational communication, and personality.

At the same time, He fully possessed the nature of God – the communicable elements of personality, along with the incommunicable and perfect attributes of Deity.

Christ's two natures are inseparable yet unmixed. He will never cease to be God, and He will never cease to be a man.

Christ's Omniscience

Question Was Christ omniscient or was His knowledge limited? Answer Yes.

His knowledge was remarkable. He knew the past, present, or future to a degree not available to ordinary human beings. For example, He knew: 1) The thoughts of His friends (Luke 9:47) and of His enemies (Luke 6:8); 2) The character of Nathanael (John 1:47-48) and of all the other men (John 2:25); 3) The Samaritan woman's background (John 4:18); 4) That Lazarus was already dead (John 11:14);

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5) Judas would betray Him (Matthew 26:25) and Peter would deny Him (Matthew 26:34); and 6) What would happen to himself (John 18:4)

But this knowledge does not seem to be unlimited. He specifically states that He did not know the hour of the Second Coming (Mark 13:32).

Overview of Christological Heresies

The following list incorporates two controversies in addition to the four major Christological controversies mentioned in the text. One interesting pattern that develops is the pendulum effect, as heresies are corrected then overcorrected till they create new heresies that have to be readjusted in the opposite direction, starting the process all over again.

Docetism

Affirmed: deity of Christ

Denied: real humanity; Christ only appeared (Greek, *dokeo*) to be a man

Note: The first Christological heresy in the early church was *not* a question of His deity (that was apparently the most obvious feature of His life to everyone) but of His humanity. Since Satan evidently could not attack their memory of His perfections and miraculous acts, it was as if Satan meant to cloud their memory by suggesting, “It was all a mirage. An appearance. You thought He was real, but how could He possibly have been?”

Danger: undermines the reality of incarnation and bodily resurrection as well as the validity of the atonement

Ebionism

Affirmed: humanity of Christ

Denied: real and innate deity of Christ; Jesus elected and empowered as Son of God at baptism

Danger: undermines efficaciousness of all Christ’s work

Arianism

Affirmed: humanity of Christ

Denied: eternity and, hence, real innate deity of Christ; similar to God but not same as God

Danger: undermines all Christ’s claims and efficaciousness of work

Apollinarianism

Affirmed: deity of Christ

Confused: full humanity of Christ; Christ had a human body and soul (emotions), but the divine being replaced the human spirit (mind), which dominated human body and soul.

Danger: Even though Apollinarius’s concerns were soteriological, the full and sympathetic priesthood of Christ rests upon the foundation of His full humanity.

Note 1: “Less infamous” than other heresies, this was an overreaction to the dualism implied in previous heresies. “Throughout [Apollinarius’s] concern was soteriological. A Christ less than totally divine cannot save. The death of a mere man has no redeeming efficacy. But if Christ is totally divine his human nature must somehow be ‘taken up’ into his divinity and so become a right object of worship.” He wrote, “There are not 2 natures (in Christ), one to be worshiped and one not to be worshiped. There is one nature in the Word of God incarnate.” This was accomplished “by the deifying of the human element through union with the divine *logos*.” Since sin arises and is consummated by a choice of the mind, “a powerful motive in Apollinarius was to exempt Christ from the possibility of sinning.” Thus he described Christ as a ‘co-mixture’ of the *logos* and “abridged human nature” (H. D. McDonald, “Apollinarianism,” *New Dictionary of Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988], 35-36).

Note 2: Here a shift in emphasis and focus is evident. Early controversies focused on “the genuineness and completeness of the two natures of Christ. Once the church had settled these questions at the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381)” attention shifted to “the precise relationship between the two natures” (Erickson, *CT*, 726).

Nestorianism

Affirmed: real humanity and real deity

Denied: an organic union between the man Jesus and the indwelling divine *logos*, preferring to describe it as a conjunction of two natures (implying two persons)

Danger: Any actual division would threaten the unity of the person and hence either the efficaciousness or the validity of His work.

Note 1: Seems to have arisen out of an objection to the increasing use of the term *theotokos* (God-bearer) with reference to Mary; Nestorius (Patriarch of Constantinople) objected to this term as denying the real humanity of Christ and leading to Maryolatry (worshiping Mary as deity). Nestorius substituted *anthropotokos* or *Christotokos* (“man-bearer” or “Christ-bearer”). Thus, Mary gave birth to the manhood of Jesus or to the personhood of Christ, but not to his Godhood. Nestorius insisted that the only way to account for the true deity and humanity of Christ is to acknowledge their separate presence in a common *prosopon* (appearance) of union: Christ is one, like eyesight, but He is two distinct entities as each eye is a separate entity.

References

¹ “Overview of Christological Heresies”, *God and His Ways Teacher’s Edition*, by Layton Talbert, Ph.D., BJU Press 2001.

² *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis, page 52, 2001 printing.

Note 2: The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned Nestorianism, but did not handle the issues well. The controversy surfaced during “a period of intense political rivalry in the church. Consequently, it is not always clear whether the church rejected a view because of its ideas or because of opposition between its chief proponent and someone with superior ecclesiastical influence. Further, the language used by Nestorius himself was somewhat ambiguous and inconsistent. . . . It is the judgment of leading scholars, however, that Nestorius himself was not a ‘Nestorian,’ but that some poorly chosen terminology, coupled with the opposition of an aggressive opponent, led to an unjust condemnation of [him and] his views” (Erickson, 726-727).

Nestorius does not seem to have actually taught a split into two persons, but what he said seems to imply—or could be used to infer—such a split. “If Nestorius himself was not a Nestorian, his views logically led to it and would have been adopted by many if the church had made no statement on the matter” (Erickson, 727).

The problem was that Cyril of Alexandria’s arguments against Nestorianism contained the seeds of a new heresy, in an overreaction to Nestorianism. So the pendulum swung back too far. This new heresy, again focusing on the precise relationship between the two natures of Christ, is called Monophysitism or Eutychianism.

Eutychianism

Affirmed: humanity and divinity

Denied: the distinction of the two natures, seeing them as so mingled and blended that the human was assimilated by the divine as a drop of honey is by an ocean. Thus this is a shift back toward an Apollinarian view, where the deity must overshadow the humanity; but the focal point is still on the relationship of the natures.

Danger: threatens both full humanity and full deity all over again.

Note 1: Eutyches was an aged, anti-Nestorian monk who articulated Monophysitism.

Note 2: This view was rejected at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Chalcedon finally and fully articulated this statement regarding the fullness of the natures of Christ as well as their relationship one to another: *two distinct natures—one fully god, one fully man—united in one unique person, the God-Man, forever.*

Here is the actual conclusion of the Council of Chalcedon:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body, of one substance with the Father as regards His Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards His manhood; like us in all respects apart from sin; as regards His Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards His manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion [i.e., without mixture], without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics being preserved and coming together to form one Person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two Persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of Him, and our Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has been handed down to us.