

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 10 – CHRIST INCARNATE DECONSTRUCTED

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nearly 2000 years of history of the church, Christians have believed that Christ is truly man and truly God, and He is the Son of God, who is our Savior and our King. But that belief did not remain untested or tried. In fact most of the debates and controversies in the early Church were about the person of Christ – his deity and humanity, and the relationship of the two. The whole issue was how to understand how He was truly man and truly God at the same time in one person. It wasn't until the mid-5th Century that a firm resolution was made but that didn't mean that the heresies went away.

The doctrine about the person of Christ is still much relevant today, as we are still facing many unorthodox and heretical teachings about the person of Christ.

In this presentation I intend to briefly summarize the various heretical thoughts and then show where we see these false ideas emerge in today's Church. I also intend to discuss briefly the texts of Scripture often used to support these false ideas.

EARLY CHRISTOLOGICAL DOCTRINES AND HERESIES

Gnosticism and Others (2nd and 3rd Centuries)

We already discussed Gnosticism that perverted the person and natures of Christ. Other movements that were around in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries included a group called the Ebionites who denied both the divinity of Christ and at least some of them denied His virgin birth. They believed that Jesus was mere man, who became the Messiah only by his good works and strict maintaining of the law. He became conscious of his Messiah identity and received the Holy Spirit when he was baptized. This was also called Adoptionism or Ebionism.

There were also the Docetists who refused to acknowledge Christ's humanity and only believed in His divinity. They taught that Jesus was some kind of "phantom" and that Christ only "suffered in mere appearance" but did not suffer.

So, we have groups that denied Christ's divinity while emphasizing Jesus' human nature, and the others that denied His full humanity while emphasizing His divine nature.

Apollinarians and Nestorian Controversies (4th and 5th Centuries)

Apollinarians taught that Jesus was only 2/3rd human. Jesus had a full human body and soul, but no human reason. Instead, the divine Logos was Jesus' rationality. Apollinaris, Bishop of Laodicea, could not

understand the union of two very different natures, human and divine. As the historian, Stephen Nichols summarizes Apollinaris's view, "In order to preserve Christ's deity, Apollinaris was unwilling to grant that Christ has a human will, which for him could be nothing but sinful, and therefore Christ did not have a human rational soul."¹

To put this differently, Apollinaris taught that when the incarnation took place, Jesus was not completely human. Where we understand humanity to include a mind and a will, Apollinaris taught that that part remained divine in the humanity of Christ. The end result is that Jesus as a Person was 2/3rd human and 1/3 God.

The Nestorian Controversy came to the forefront that disputed the term that the Church used about Mary. The Church taught that Mary was "*theotokos*" – the mother of God. Nestorius recoiled at that thinking that God cannot have a mother. He whom Mary conceived is not God, but could only be a man.

"Nestorius attempted to explain Jesus' incarnation by suggesting that Jesus has two separate natures: a human and a divine nature. However, the separation is so extreme that it would appear that Jesus had both two natures and two persons: a divine nature for one "person" and a human one for another "person."² So, contrary to the orthodox view of Christ, i.e., two natures in one person, Nestorius taught that Jesus was 2 natures in 2 persons.

Finally, an extreme form of the nature debate emerged through a man named Eutyches. "Whereas the heretic Nestorius was guilty of overemphasizing the distinct natures of Christ and thereby positing two persons (one human and one divine), Eutyches was guilty of so emphasizing the unity of the one person that he blurred the distinction between the divine and human natures."³ This idea is also called a monophysite.

To Eutyches, the human nature and divine nature both assimilated in Christ, resulting in a single new nature — a third kind of nature, in which categories were blurred. To him, Christ was a third type – one new and different person. One way of understanding it might be to think like the blending of colors. Yellow plus blue makes green. The result is that Christ as a person is not like us at all. He's a different kind of human.

THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (451 AD)

All these perversions ended up being condemned and the orthodox doctrine of Christology was affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon was held in 451 AD. Just as the Council of Nicaea attempted to settle the issue of the Trinity, Chalcedon attempted to resolve the issue of Christ's nature. Dr. Keith Mathison writes,

¹ Stephen Nichols, *For Us and for Our Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 103.

² Rose Publishing. *Creeds and Heresies*. Rose Publishing. Kindle Edition.

³ Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2)* (p. 123). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

“The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) is a landmark in the history of theology in the same way that the Council of Nicaea was a landmark. The definition produced by the council has been the standard of orthodox Christology ever since, not only in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches but in the Protestant churches as well. It was at this council that the church established a way of talking about the being of Christ that took into account all of the biblical revelation.”⁴

The ecumenical Council of Chalcedon issued its famous statement of the doctrine of the Person of Christ in its definition of faith:

“So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself instructed us, and as the creed of the fathers handed it down to us.”⁵

The Council of Chalcedon used the four negatives (“no confusion, no change, no division, no separation”) to explain the relationship of Christ’ divinity and humanity, which was a great theological accomplishment that not only pointed out the doctrinal errors before the Council, but also set a clear boundary by clarifying what is out of the range and thus forbidden.

The Chalcedon Definition put together a clear statement about the issue with several important elements:

- (1) Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, in one person, with two natures.
- (2) Jesus Christ is the real incarnation. There was no alteration between the divinity and the humanity of Christ. There was neither the deification of man, nor humanization of God.
- (3) Christ is not a temporary association with God and man. He is fully God and fully man but does not have two persons.
- (4) Christ has two natures (God and man) forever but has the perfect hypostatical union of divine and human.

These established the essential foundations for orthodox Christology.

MODERN EVIDENCE OF THESE EARLY HERESIES

⁴ <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/the-basics-of-chalcedonian-christology-2019-11/>

⁵ <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/the-basics-of-chalcedonian-christology-2019-11/>

The confusion and complication over the natures and person of Christ did not go away at Chalcedon. What is known as modern liberalism is known for emphasizing the humanity of Christ and minimizing or even eliminating His deity.

Many proponents of what is known as the Word of Faith movement teach distorted views of Christ. For example, Kenneth Copeland states that the incarnate Christ “had no innate supernatural powers. He had no ability to perform miracles until after He was anointed by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Joyce Meyer believes as Copeland does when he teaches “See, you have to realize that He [Jesus] died; you have to realize that He went into the pit of hell as a mortal man made sin. But He didn’t stay there, thank God. He was reborn in the pit of hell and resurrected.”⁷

At the Cross, Meyer teaches that Jesus stopped being the Son of God. ““He could have helped himself up until the point where he said I commend my spirit into your hands, at that point he couldn’t do nothing for himself anymore. He had become sin, he was no longer the Son of God. He was sin.”⁸

Bill Johnson the leader of Bethel Church writes,

“While Jesus is eternally God, He emptied Himself of His divine powers and became a man (see Phil. 2:7). It’s vital to note that He did all His miracles as a man, not as God. If He did them as God, I would still be impressed. But because He did them as a man yielded to God, I am now unsatisfied with my life, being compelled to follow the example He has given us. Jesus is the only model for us to follow.”⁹

THE PROBLEM OF THE KENOSIS

Many of these Word of Faith teachers teach that Christ divested His divinity in the incarnation or at the Cross and regained it upon His ascension. They claim as Johnson does support from Philippians 2:7 and also from the times where Jesus didn’t seem to know something. So let me just wrap this lesson up by looking at this issue. First let’s look at Philippians 2:5–8 (ESV),

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The word “kenosis” means to “empty”. False teachers claim that Christ emptied Himself of His divinity. The text is abundantly clear. “He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” He empties himself by addition, not subtraction, by adding his human nature with all that that entails, not by abandoning his deity.”

⁶ <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/copeland/>

⁷ <https://rootedinchrist.org/2008/01/01/kenneth-copeland%E2%80%99s-false-teachings-and-false-gospel-message/>

⁸ <https://carm.org/joyce-meyer>

⁹ <https://murraycampbell.net/2018/10/01/did-jesus-empty-himself-of-his-divine-powers/>

This is precisely what we find when reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. Jesus repeatedly identifies himself as God and his actions reveal that he is God. The incarnate Christ identified himself as God, not as somehow less than God or partially God, but God. He didn't deny his humanity nor his Divinity but expressly affirmed both.

But what about when it seems that Jesus didn't know something. God is omniscient. On one hand, He knew people's thoughts (Mark 2:8). He knew "from the beginning" Judas would betray Him (John 6:64). On the other hand, He "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52) and did not know the day or hour of His second coming (Mark 13:32). How do we put these statements together?

The answer lies in a resolution of the Council of Chalcedon. Jesus possess "two natures . . . the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons." In other words, Jesus possessed (and continues to possess) both a divine nature and a human nature. But He doesn't somehow have a split personality or, like the Trinity, possess distinct persons who interact with one another within the same essence. No, the single, unified person of Jesus is both fully God and fully human.

Theologian Wayne Grudem explained it this way:

"On the one hand, with respect to his human nature, he had limited knowledge (Mark 13:32; Luke 2:52). On the other hand, Jesus clearly knew all things (John 2:25; 16:30; 21:17). Now this is only understandable if Jesus learned things and had limited knowledge with respect to his human nature but was always omniscient with respect to his divine nature, and therefore he was able any time to "call to mind" whatever information would be needed for his ministry. In this way we can understand Jesus' statement concerning the time of his return: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). This ignorance of the time of his return was true of Jesus' human nature and human consciousness only, for in his divine nature he was certainly omniscient and certainly knew the time when he would return to the earth."¹⁰

In respect to His humanity, Jesus grew in wisdom. In respect to His deity, He is omniscient.

CONCLUSION

All the Councils, formulas, illustration and mental gymnastics of human reason can never offer a clear, compelling answer to the mystery of the Incarnation. In the end we rely on the clarity and the sufficiency of Scripture.

First, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is completely God, that in reality "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" in him (Colossians 2:9).

¹⁰ Grudem, W. A. (2004). [*Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine*](#) (p. 561). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

Second, Jesus Christ is completely human.

Third, those two “natures” do not exist beside one another in an unconnected way but, rather, are joined in him in a personal unity that is inexplicable.

Q & A.