CHURCH HISTORY (10): Christological Controversies

"Three great doctrinal controversies dominated this period (350-451): the Arian (which related to the divinity of Christ and the Trinity), the Pelagian (which related to sin, grace, and salvation), and the Christological (which had to do with the Person of Christ)" (Fisher).[1] Unlike the Donatist and Pelagian controversies, the Christological controversies arose and largely remained in the East. "The Christological debate stretched over a century and was the primary passion in the churches of the East. Between 350 and 450 heresies arose, each of them forcing the churches to greater clarity in their answer to the question, 'Who is Jesus Christ'" (Shelley)?[2]

I. Christological Controversies

> Assuming that the general doctrine of the incarnation of the eternal Word, as it has been declared by the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople, was generally received in the church, as it certainly was, it might have been expected that the next question which would arise, as that which most naturally and obviously presented itself to the minds of men in the progress of exposition or speculation, would be that which concerned the continued distinctness and entireness or completeness of the two natures—the divine and the human—*after* the incarnation. And this reasonable expectation seems to be contradicted by the fact that the Nestorian heresy, which divided the person, preceded the Eutychian, which confounded the natures. It should be remembered, however, that the heresy of Apollinaris, which preceded that of Nestorius, concerned the completeness of the two natures in Christ; that Nestorius, seems to have been led into error by going into the opposite extreme in opposing Apollinaris.[3]

1. *The Apollinarian controversy*. "Apollinaris was the first to apply the results of the trinitarian discussions of the Nicene age to Christology, and to introduce the long Christological controversies" (Schaff).[4] "Apollinaris (310-390) was bishop of Laodicea and a great defender of the Christian faith as defined by the Nicene Creed. He erred in saying that humans are made up of three parts: a body, an animal soul (which all animals have), and a rational soul (which distinguishes humans from animals), and that in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word took the place of the human spirit" (Hyde).[5] "Adopting the psychological trichotomy, he attributed to Christ a human body, and a human (animal) soul, but not a human spirit or reason; putting the divine Logos in the place of the human spirit" (Schaff).[6] "The divine Word took the place of normal human psychology in Jesus Christ, who did not derive His thoughts, emotions, and will from the human nature but from the divine, nor was His flesh given life by His humanity but by His deity. The result was that Jesus was not human at all" (Hyde).[7] Apollinaris himself said, "It is impossible that two souls, a thinking and a willing, should dwell together in the same person, and the one not contend against the other by reason of its own will and energy. Therefore the Word assumed not a human soul, but only the seed of Abraham."[8] W.G.T Shedd said about Apollinaris' view: "If the rational part be subtracted from man, he becomes either an idiot or a brute."[9] To be truly human, Christ needed a human body and soul.

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[1] George Fisher, *The History of the Christian Church*, 129

[2] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 119

[3] William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:310

[4] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:709

[5] Daniel Hyde, *God With Us*, 69

[6] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:710

[7] Daniel Hyde, *God With Us*, 70

[8] As quoted by Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:245

[9] As quoted by Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 103

Apollinaris had a distinctive view of the person of Christ. Put simply, Apollinaris was rightly concerned to defend the full consubstantiality of the Logos with the Father. He did this so radically that he argued, in the incarnation, the Logos replaced the human soul of Christ. It was a clever resolution to a tricky problem thrown up by Nicene theology: if the Logos is a divine person and unites with human nature, how does one avoid having two persons simply occupying the same space? And if you have two persons in the incarnation, then there really is no incarnation: the divine has not truly united with the human and there can be no salvation. The problem with Apollinaris' solution, of course, is that on his account Jesus Christ is not really fully human: after all, humans have souls; and if Christ lacks one, then He is not fully human. More acutely, to cite the view of one of Apollinaris' contemporaries, Gregory of Nazianzus, what is not assumed is not healed. If Christ did not assume a human soul, then that vital part of humanity was not saved. Thus, Constantinople I (381) rejected Apollinaris' theology.[10]

> If anyone has put his trust in Him as the Man without a human mind, he is really bereft of mind, and quite unworthy of salvation. For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumed and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole.[11]

2. *The Nestorian controversy*. Nestorius (386-450) became bishop of Constantinople in 428. He was a strong opponent of Arianism (which denied Christ's divinity and distorted His relation to the Father). Nestorianism, was an overreaction to Arianism, as it sought to clarify "how divinity and humanity are joined in Jesus Christ" (Gonzalez).[12] In 428, Nestorius refused to call Mary "God-bearer (*theotokos*)." This was an orthodox term which underscored Christ's divinity and unity of person from conception. "God-bearer (*theotokos*) was not used as a title of worship for Mary, but to make a statement about the Child she bore. The focus was not that Christ received His divine nature from Mary, but that the Child in Mary's womb was fully divine, that Jesus is God. For this reason, all orthodox Christian writers agree with the Reformed theologian Wollebius, who said, 'Mary ought not only be called mother of Christ (as the Nestorians admitted), but also the mother of God'" (Hyde).[13] "Opposition to this word (God-bearer) meant denial of the mystery of the incarnation, or of the true union of the divine and human natures in Christ" (Schaff).[14] Nestorius overly separated the two natures. He viewed Christ as two persons. The divine person indwelt the human as a garment. "The Holy Ghost conceived not the Logos, but formed for him, out of the virgin, a temple which he might inhabit, out of the virgin. This garment, which he used, I honor on account of the God which was covered therein and inseparable therefrom" (Nestorius).[15]

> In seeking to defend the complete humanity of our Lord, Nestorius expressed his disapproval of the phrase 'Mother of God' as applied to the virgin Mary, insisting that she had given birth to Christ, but not to God. He was able to make this distinction because he believed that the divine and the human natures of Christ ought to be distinctly separated. Our Lord's personality was twofold and the two natures were distinct in such a way that

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[10] Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 98
[11] Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus, 7:440
[12] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:252
[13] Daniel Hyde, *God With Us*, 79
[14] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:717
[15] Nestorius's First Sermon Against the *Theotokos*, as found in, *The Christological Controversy*, 123-131

> He was virtually regarded by Nestorius as two persons, the one divine and the other human, rather than as one person in two natures. His deity indwelt His humanity, but the two were in no way joined.[16]

Cyril of Alexandria (376-444), also called Cyril the Great, vigorously opposed Nestorius. To describe how the two natures were united within the single Christ (from conception), Cryil used the phrase "hypostatic union." The word "hypostatic" comes from the Greek word *hypostasis* which largely means person. Thus, by "hypostatic union" Cyril taught that in Christ, the Logos was united to human flesh in one person (hypostatically). "Cyril summed up his position by using the formula 'union in hypostasis' or 'hypostatic union'" (Norris).[17] There is in Christ a personal union between the two natures. He is one person in two natures.

> Since the Logos was born of a woman after He had united human reality hypostatically to Himself, He is said on this ground to have a fleshly birth. It is not the case that first of all an ordinary human being was born of the holy Virgin and that the Logos descended upon Him subsequently. On the contrary, since the union took place in the very womb, He is said to have undergone a fleshly birth by making His own the birth of the flesh which belonged to Him.[18]

The views of Nestorius were condemned in 431 at the Council of Ephesus. Nestorius arrived with 16 bishops, and Cyril with 50 Egyptian bishops. The Council eventually adopted the second letter of Cyril to Nestorius, as representing the orthodox position. At the end of the letter, Cyril added twelve anathemas. The first two of twelve anathemas were: (1) "If anyone will not confess that the Emmanuel is very God, and that therefore the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (*theotokos*), inasmuch as in the flesh she bore the Word of God made flesh (as it is written, 'The Word was made flesh'): let him be anathema."[19] (2) "If anyone shall not confess that the Word of God the Father is united hypostatically to flesh, and that with that flesh of His own, He is one only Christ both God and man at the same time: let him be anathema."[20]

3. *The Eutychian controversy.* "Soon after the Council at Ephesus (431), the third heresy arose. Eutyches (380-456), defended the one nature in Christ. He combined the two natures so intimately that the human nature appeared completely absorbed by the divine one" (Shelley).[21] Eutyches was a presbyter in Constantinople, where Flavian was patriarch (highest ranking bishop). In his zeal to correct Nestorius (two natures in two persons), Eutyches fell prey to the opposite error (one nature in one person). He mixed the two natures of Christ into a single nature. This single nature was neither divine nor human. It was a new nature. For example, yellow and blue make green. Green in neither yellow nor blue, it's a new color. Likewise, Christ's single nature is neither purely divine nor human, it's new. "The teaching of Eutyches so over-emphasized the divine nature of Christ that it inevitably made Christ to be one person with one nature. He taught that the eternal Son of God either absorbed a human nature at the incarnation or that these two natures fused into a 'third thing'. Later in church history, those who held this point of view made their theology more concise and came to be known as the *Monophysites*, for they confessed Christ to have one (*mono*) nature (*phusis*)." (Hyde).[22]

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[16] Stuart Olyott, *Jesus is both God and Man*, 150

[17] Richard Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, 27

[18] Cyril of Alexandria's Second Letter to Nestorius, as found in, *The Christological Controversy*, 131-135

[19] Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 14:206

[20] Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 14:210

[21] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 122

[22] Daniel Hyde, *God With Us*, 34-35

Flavian opposed Eutyches, which resulted in a Council called by Emperor Theodosius II, in Ephesus in 449. The emperor appointed Dioscorus, who succeeded Cyril as patriarch of Alexandria, as president of the assembly. He took the views of Cyril to an extreme, and largely sided with Eutyches. "When this council gathered, it was clear that Dioscorus and his supporters had taken all the necessary steps to predetermine the outcome. The doctrine that there are in Christ 'two natures' was declared heretical. Furthermore, it was decreed that any who disagreed with these decisions could not be ordained" (Gonzalez).[23]

4. *The Council of Chalcedon*. Leo (400-461) was patriarch in Rome, and referred to the 449 Council in Ephesus as a "robbers synod." He appealed to Theodosius II to reconsider the issues. "Theodosius and his court, who apparently had received large amounts of gold from Alexandria, considered the matter ended" (Gonzalez).[24] Then the unexpected happened. "Theodosius' horse stumbled, and the emperor fell and broke his neck. He was succeeded by his sister and her husband Marcian. At Leo's request, Emperor Marcian (450-457) called a new council, which met at Chalcedon in 451. This council condemned Dioscorus and Eutyches" (Gonzalez).[25] Leo sent a letter to Flavian in 449 to be read at the Council in Ephesus. But this letter, commonly called the *Tome* of Leo, was never read. The letter contains every truth later affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon and served as the backbone to the Definition of Chalcedon. For example, on the person of Christ he said: "Without detriment therefore to the properties of either nature and substance which then came together in one Person, majesty took on humility, strength weakness, eternity mortality." On the concept of Mary as the God-bearer he said: "Thus in the whole and perfect nature of true man was true God born, complete in what was His own, complete in what was ours." On the communion of properties he said: "For He who is true God is also true man: and in this union there is no lie, since the humility of manhood and the loftiness of the Godhead both meet there. For as God is not changed by the showing of pity, so man is not swallowed up by the dignity. For each nature does what is proper to it with the co-operation of the other; that is the Word performing what appertains to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what appertains to the flesh."[26]

Thus, in 451, from October to November, 630 bishops met in Chalcedon (a small town near Constantinople on the Black Sea). "In number of bishops it far exceeded all other councils of the ancient Church, and in doctrinal importance is second only to the council of Nicea" (Schaff).[27] "The Council of Chalcedon overthrew the decisions of Ephesus taken two years previously. It deposed and banished Dioscorus of Alexandria. It restored to office most of those the Council of Ephesus had deposed. It sanctioned a new standard of orthodoxy, made up of the Nicene Creed, two letters of Cyril of Alexandria, and Leo's *Tome*, the doctrinal statement which Leo had sent to patriarch Flavian in 449" (Needham).[28] "The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, in 451, followed the suggestions of a letter of Leo to Flavian, and framed a creed, parallel in importance, as regards the subject, with the Nicene Creed" (Fisher).[29]

> In composing and accepting this formula, and also sanctioning the *Tome* of Leo and the doctrinal epistles of Cyril, the bishops gathered at Chalcedon did not believe that they were violating the Ephesian canon that prohibited the teaching of a different faith from that of Nicea. On the contrary, the *Definition of Faith* of Chalcedon seemed to them a

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[23] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:255

[24] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:255

[25] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:256

[26] Leo's Letter to Flavian (Leo's Tome), as found in, *The Christological Controversy*, 145-154

[27] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:742

[28] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:305-306

[29] George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 134

commentary on the faith of Nicea, although relating that faith with the controversies that had developed after the Council of Nicea. The creed of the church would still be that of Nicea, although it was now to be interpreted as was proposed by the *Definition* of Chalcedon, which condemned not only those who, like Eutyches, 'confused' the natures of the Savior, but also those who, like Nestorius, 'separated' them. Likewise, although the phrase 'in two natures' is accepted, the manner in which it was thought that Nestorius used it is explicitly rejected.[30]

The Chalcedonian Formula effectively puts into place four boundaries for future Christological discussion, boundaries which theologians must not transgress in order to remain orthodox: Christ must be fully God; Christ must be fully human: the two natures must not be so mixed together that either disappears into the other or that a third, hybrid nature is produced; and the two natures must not be separated so as to undermine the unity of the one person.[31]

At last, in the year 451 a council was held in Chalcedon near Nicaea. This was the fourth ecumenical council. Some six hundred bishops were present. In the creed formulated by this council, which stands on the same level of importance as the Creed of Nicea, the Church reasserted its belief in the full and complete deity of Christ, but now also confessed its belief in His equally full and complete humanity. Furthermore the Church confessed the existence of two natures in Christ: the human and the divine. Concerning the relation of these two natures to each other the Church confessed that they exist in Christ without confusion, change, division, or separation. Finally the Church confessed that while Christ has two natures, He is one person, not two persons.[32]

(1) Christ has two natures. "We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesu Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and body; coessential 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."

(2) Each nature retains its own properties. "[Who] is to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; 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." Though united in one person, each nature retains its own distinctness. His human nature is not deified, nor is His divine nature humanized. The natures are neither changed nor confused (mixed). "The incarnation is neither a conversion of God into a man, nor a conversion of a man into God; neither a humanizing of the divine, nor a deification of the human; nor on the other hand is it a mere outward, transitory connection of the two factors; but an actual and abiding union of the two in one personal life" (Schaff).[33] It's for this reason Christ was both all-knowing, and yet not knowing; He was impassible, and yet passible; He was immortal, and yet mortal. He was truly man, and truly God.

(3) The two natures make a single person. "[He is] 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

[30] Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1:379-380
[31] Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 100
[32] B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 76
[33] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:750

beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us." "The personality in Christ resided in His divinity, not in His humanity" (Schaff).[34] This doesn't deny that Christ's human soul possessed all that a human soul possesses. Consciousness, intellect, will, and affections. "No essential quality necessary for man's existence as man was missing. Consciousness and will are attributes which belong to that list of essential qualities which make up human nature. Christ could not have existed as man without them. His possession of a complete human nature means that He was in possession of these two features too. And yet, the personality of Christ is that of the eternal Son of God" (Olyott).[35] "Personality is not an essential and integral part of a nature, but is, as it were, the terminus to which it tends. A person is a nature with something added, namely, independent subsistence, individuality. Now the Logos assumed a human nature that was not personalized, that did not exist by itself" (Berkhof).[36]

> The Church doctrine distinguishes in the Holy Trinity three persons (though not in the ordinary human sense of the word) in one divine nature or substance which they have in common; in its Christology it teaches, conversely, two natures in one person (in the usual sense of person) which pervades both. Therefore it cannot be said: The Logos assumed a human *person*, or united Himself with a definite human individual: for then the God-Man would consist of two persons; but He took upon Himself the human *nature*, which is common to all men; and therefore He redeemed not a particular man, but all men, as partakers of the same nature or substance.[37]

(4) The two natures share properties with the one person. "The property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence." This does not mean the two natures share properties with each other, but that each nature shares properties with the person. This was called "the communication of properties (*communicatio idiomatum*)." "The two natures are here considered as joined in the person, and the interchange of attributes is understood as taking place at the level of the person and not between the natures" (Muller).[38] The 2LBC says: "Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself, yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture, attributed to the person denominated by the other nature."[39]

> The whole work of Christ is to be referred to His person, and not to be attributed to the one or the other nature exclusively. It is the one divine-human Christ, who wrought miracles of almighty power—by virtue of the divine nature dwelling in Him—and who suffered and was buried—according to His passible, human nature. The person was the subject, the human nature the seat and the sensorium, of the passion. It is by this hypostatical union of the divine and the human natures in all the stages of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, that His work and His merits acquire an infinite and at the same time a genuinely human and exemplary significance for us. Because the God-Man suffered, His death is the reconciliation of the world with God; and because He suffered as Man, He has left us an example, that we should follow His steps.[40]

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[34] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:751

[35] Stuart Olyott, *Jesus is Both God and Man*, 130

[36] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1:321-322

[37] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:751-752

[38] Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 72

[39] 2LBC, 8:7

[40] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:756