

The Devil Is in the Details: Clarifying the Trinity and the Person of Christ

Overview

“Orthodox” and “heresy” aren’t words we often use or hear. To many people, these words sound outdated and irrelevant. Nevertheless, the same people still make distinctions over “correct” belief and doctrine. Church history is replete with examples of doctrinal controversy and division. When caught in these spiritual combat zones, Christians often feel hurt and angry. To onlookers, the debates over doctrine and church practice can appear unnecessary and trivial.

While it is true that ugly aspects of human nature can surface during doctrinal debates, the debates are not bad in and of themselves. Rather, they often raise questions that lead to more compelling conclusions. Remember the time you chose the air conditioning repairman who advertised a lower price—but without reading the fine print? . . . Or the time you planned a trip and chose a route that looked good, but left you stuck in traffic for hours because of unanticipated? You probably learned that overlooking certain details can make a big difference in the results.

Believers today, just as those in the third and fourth century, are often confused about the “details” of our faith—particularly those related to the Trinity, the person of Jesus and grace. As the early church increasingly looked to the leadership of the church and in its creeds as the source of correct scriptural interpretation, important questions began to arise:

- Who was Jesus? Was he a man? Was he God? Was he created?
- Is there one God or are there three?
- How do different churches attempt to explain the Trinity and how do these explanations differ?
- Which details or beliefs are essential, and which can be seen as optional?

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Understanding the Setting

300		
	312	Conversion of Constantine
	325	Council of Nicea
	328	Athanasius becomes bishop of Alexandria
	337	Death of Constantine
	381	Council of Constantinople
400		
	431	Council of Ephesus
	451	Council of Chalcedon

Step 1: Grasp the Issue

Sound Bites

“Christianity is not a set of self contained and freestanding ideas: it represents a sustained response to the questions raised by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

– Alister McGrath

“The real staggering claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man . . . and that he took humanity without loss of deity so that Jesus of Nazareth was as fully human as He was divine . . . This is the real stumbling block in Christianity . . . It is from inadequate belief about the incarnation that difficulties at other points in the gospel story usually spring (e.g. Virgin birth, resurrection, miracles) But once the incarnation is grasped as reality, these other difficulties usually dissolve.” – J.I. Packer

“I think God just wants us to love him. He doesn’t care about the details of our beliefs.”

“I’ve heard the Trinity explained a hundred different ways, but it still doesn’t make any sense.”

“The New Testament does not encourage us to puzzle our heads over the physical and psychological problems that it raises, but to worship God for the love that was shown in it.”

– J.I. Packer

Case Studies

You can’t remember the last time you were able to enjoy a leisurely Saturday. As you enjoy the peaceful afternoon, you are disturbed by a knock on the door.

As you greet the two polite young men at the door, they ask if they could have a moment to speak with you. They explain that they are Christians committed to sharing their faith. They refer to the Bible and talk about Jesus, but with a different focus. As they read John 14:28 (just the part where Jesus says, “the father is greater than I”), they explain to you that Jesus understood that he was a god but not Almighty God. In addition, they suggest that Colossians 1:15 means that Jesus was created.

You become more and more uneasy as the conversation progresses. Their claims about Jesus contradict everything you have been taught and believe, but the verses they read seem to support their point.

How do you respond to your guests?

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Honestly, it makes your head hurt. Your teen-age daughter has just come back from church after a discussion of the Trinity. When you ask for her conclusion, she says, “Well, I think it’s kind of like there is one God, but he uses different names when he does different things. As the Father, God created the world. As the Son he died for us. And his spirit lives with us now—the Holy Spirit. But Becky said that I’m nuts. She says there are three different gods, but we just say its one God. Tyrone said he really didn’t care, but he wasn’t sure if we are supposed to pray to Jesus or to God. What do you think?”

You find yourself not completely comfortable with either explanation of the Trinity, and as it pertains to prayer, you find yourself siding with Tyrone.

How do you respond? Who is God, and what difference does it make?

What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?

Step 2: Study the Scriptures

Matthew 28:19

2 Corinthians 13:14

- What implications can you draw from these passages relative to the persons of the Godhead?

John 1:1, 14

Here, we gain insight into the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

- What implications can you draw from these verses?

Step 3: Consult Other Sources

In the third century, the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. In 313 the Edict of Milan provided religious freedom within the Roman Empire. Within a short period of time Constantine became very interested in the church and as a result it moved from a place of persecution to privilege. When debates arose that threatened the unit of the church and caused division in his empire he called bishops of the church to discuss these issues and reach a consensus. A series of councils would meet and agree on core concepts for Christians around the world. We will review two of these: the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

But why are these arguments and meetings of bishops important to us today? Reading 1 looks at the concept of heresy for a modern world. Reading 2 and Reading 3 look at the question “Is Jesus really God?” Reading 4 and Reading 5 look at a second big set of questions about the nature of the God we serve.

As you read, try to answer these questions: How would I define “heresy”? If someone asked, what are the most important things to understand about who Jesus is? Why would these be so important?

“Rethinking Heresy,” by Timothy Clark.

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“325: The Council of Nicea,” by A. Kenneth Curtis et al.

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“Athanasius’ Distinctions,” by Alister E. McGrath.

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“The Ancient Church and Theology,” by James Eckman.

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The Creed of Chalcedon (451)

Rethinking Heresy by Timothy Clark

From my back porch in our apartment of Tacoma, I could enjoy the magnificent Tacoma narrows, a mile wide stretch of Puget Sound separating the hills of Tacoma and Gig Harbor. Spanning the narrows is a beautiful bridge 180 feet over the water. But this is the second bridge to be built here. The first stood for only 4 months.

Galloping Gertie, as it was known, was opened in July 1940. Almost a mile long, it represented an advance in suspension bridges. It soon became popular for the roller coaster ride it provided as the bridge vibrated in the wind. But on November 7, 1940 cars began to notice increased movement as the bridge vibrated and twisted, battered by 65 mile per hour winds. As it began to move in huge waves, the midsection of the bridge rose 1 and 1/2 feet at the center. Unable to tolerate the strain, it tore itself in two with a 600-foot section breaking out of the suspension span. One sheet of concrete flew 25 feet above bridge level before falling far below into the water. Only one car with a dog as its passenger was lost. Analysis revealed that one detail in its planning had been neglected—that of aerodynamics. Engineers have used this bridge’s failure since then to take into account the movement of air on structures. One Galloping Gertie was enough.

The example of Galloping Gertie is helpful for understanding the energy and debate of early church leaders to distinguish beliefs that were orthodox (i.e. adhering to the accepted and established faith) from heresy (i.e. opinions or doctrines at variance with established faith). But first it may be helpful to look at the concept of heresy more closely.

According to Alister McGrath, a church historian, heresy can be seen in at least two ways.

In a negative view, heresy is about drawing lines to distinguish who is “in” and who is “out”. In this view, early Christian churches appropriately tolerated multiple beliefs and were not focused on a set of doctrines. Their focus instead was on their unity as they followed the same Lord. Heresy became an issue only as church power became more centralized and as bishops began to assert their control. In other words, a heretical belief was any belief rejected by the Roman church. It became a way of defining who was and who was not a true believer. Many believers today still view attempts by church leaders to define correct doctrine as simply a way to assert control and resist change.

But another view sees the church’s struggle to identify what is orthodox or heretical in a more positive light. In this view, church leaders were not trying to draw lines. Rather, they were anticipating consequences. Just as Galloping Gertie fell apart because of basic errors in its design, errors in our core spiritual beliefs can often have devastating consequences no matter how sincere the heart of the believer.

These leaders were most concerned about the impact of these beliefs on the essential gospel message summarized by Paul in I Corinthians 15. The distinctive essence of the Christian faith is that God has redeemed us through the love and grace of Jesus Christ alone. Heresy is any belief that distorts fundamentally this gospel message. As McGrath states:

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“Heresy is not a form of unbelief; it is something that arises within the context of faith itself. . . . Heresy is fundamentally an inadequate or inauthentic form of Christian faith. Heresy arises through accepting the basic principle, but interpreting its terms in such a way that internal inconsistency results. In other words, the principle is granted, but it is inadequately understood” (Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 148).

In this light, it becomes more understandable why Christians have argued

over the details about our beliefs. Our understanding of the trinity, the person of Christ, human nature, and God’s plan of salvation all become very important. The details become critical not because the Church wants to define what is acceptable or to assert its authority. Rather, the details become important because inadequate beliefs undermine the essential message of justification by faith in Jesus Christ.



325: The Council of Nicea

by A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, and Randy Peterson

Though Tertullian had provided the church with the formula that God is one substance, consisting in three persons, he had by no means given the world a complete understanding of the Trinity. Indeed, this doctrine has puzzled the greatest theologians.

Early in the fourth century a pastor of Alexandria, Egypt—Arius—called himself a Christian. But Arius also accepted Greek theology, which taught that God is unique and unknowable. According to such thought, He is so radically different that He cannot share His substance with anything: Only God can be God. In his book *Thalia* Arius proclaimed that Jesus was divine, but not god. Only God the Father, Arius said, could be immortal, so the Son had to be a created being. He was *like* the Father, but not truly God.

Many former pagans felt comfortable with Arius's views, because they could preserve the familiar idea of an unknowable God and see Jesus as a kind of divine superhero, not much different from the divine-human heroes of Greek mythology.

An eloquent preacher, Arius knew how to make the most of this appeal and even put some of his propositions into jingles, which the common folk sang.

Why would anyone make a fuss about Arius's ideas? Many wondered. But Arius's bishop, Alexander, saw that in order to save sinful humanity Jesus had to be truly God. Alexander had Arius condemned by the synod, but the popular pastor had many supporters. Soon riots erupted in Alexandria over this ticklish theological contest and other clergymen began to take sides.

Once the riots had erupted, Emperor Constantine could not afford to see the debate as “just a religious issue.” This “religious issue” threatened the security of his empire. To deal with the problem, Constantine called an empirewide council at the city of Nicea, in Asia Minor.

Dressed in jewel-encrusted, multicolored robes, Constantine opened the council. He told the more that three hundred bishops attending that they must resolve the issue. Division in the church, he said, was worse than war, because it involved eternal souls.

The emperor let the bishops debate. Called before them, Arius plainly proclaimed that the Son of God was a created being, and unlike the Father, He was capable of change.

The assembly denounced and condemned Arius's view—but they needed to go beyond that. Making their own view plain required a creed.

So they formulated some statements about God the Father and God the Son. In it they described the Son as “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the father.”

That “of one substance” was critical. The Greek word they used was *homoousios*. *Homo* meant “same”; *ousios* meant “substance.” The Arian party wanted to add one more letter to that party: *Homoiousios* meant “of like [similar] substance.”

All but two bishops signed the statement of faith. Those two and Arius were exiled. Constantine seemed pleased with the results of his work, but it did not last.

Though Arius was temporarily out of the picture, his theology would remain for

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decades. A deacon of Alexandria, Athanasius, became one of Arianism's most capable foes. In 328 Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria and continued the fight with that flock.

But the battle was hotly waged throughout the Eastern church until another council, held in Constantinople in 381, reaffirmed the Council of Nicea. Even so, traces of Arius's thoughts have remained within the church.

The Council of Nicea both began to settle a

theological issue and set precedents for church and state. In later years, when thorny issues arose in the church, it would consult the collective wisdom of its bishops. Constantine had also begun the practice of uniting an empire and church in decision making; it would have many baneful consequences in the centuries to come.



Athanasius' Distinctions

by Alister E. McGrath

Athanasius had little time for Arius' subtle distinctions. If the Son is a creature, then the Son is a creature like any other creature, including human beings. After all, what other kind of creaturehood is there? For Athanasius, the affirmation of the creaturehood of the Son had two decisive consequences, each of which had uniformly negative implications for Arianism.

First, Athanasius makes the point that it is only God who can save. God, and God alone, can break the power of sin, and bring us to eternal life. An essential feature of being a creature is that one requires to be redeemed. No creature can save another creature. Only the creator can redeem the creation. Having emphasized that it is God alone who can save, Athanasius then makes the logical move which the Arians found difficult to counter. The New Testament and the Christian liturgical tradition alike regard Jesus Christ as Savior. Yet, as Athanasius emphasized, only God can save. So how are we to make sense of this?

The only possible solution, Athanasius argues, is to accept that Jesus is God incarnate. The logic of his argument at times goes something like this:

1. No creature can redeem another creature.
2. According to Arius, Jesus Christ is a creature.
3. Therefore, according to Arius, Jesus Christ cannot redeem humanity.

At times, a slightly different style of argument can be discerned resting upon the

statements of Scripture and the Christian liturgical tradition.

1. Only God can save.
2. Jesus Christ saves.
3. Therefore Jesus Christ is God.

Salvation, for Athanasius, involves divine intervention. Athanasius thus draws out the meaning of John: 1:14 by arguing that the "Word became flesh": in other words, God entered into our human situation, in order to change it.

The second point that Athanasius makes is that Christians worship and pray to Jesus Christ. This represents an excellent case study of the importance of Christian practices of worship and prayer for Christian theology. By the fourth century, prayer to and adoration of Christ were standard features of the way in which public worship took place. Athanasius argues that if Jesus Christ were a creature, then Christians were guilty of worshipping a creature instead of God – in other words, they had lapsed into idolatry. Christians, Athanasius stresses, are totally forbidden to worship anyone or anything except God alone. Athanasius thus argued that Arius seemed to be guilty of making nonsense of the way in which Christians prayed and worshipped. Athanasius argued that Christians were right to worship and adore Jesus Christ, because by doing so, they were recognizing him for what he was – God incarnate.



The Ancient Church and Theology

by James Eckman

About the year 300, the winds of theological change were blowing through the church. Theological disputes over the nature of the Godhead, the nature of Jesus, and the doctrine of salvation caused the church to systematize its beliefs and reach consensus on what the Scriptures taught. Spiritual giants such as Athanasius and Augustine dominated this period and solidified the theology of Christianity. This period is profoundly important for our understanding of church history.

The Preincarnate Nature of Jesus Christ

Controversy erupted in the early 300s over the teachings of a North African priest named Arius. Influenced by Greek rationalism, Arius argued for an absolute monotheism that denied the deity of Jesus and claimed that He was a created being. Similar to modern Jehovah's Witnesses, Arius contended that "there was a time when he was not" (Kelly, 228). Jesus was, therefore, of a different essence than the Father. Arius's commitment to Greek thought demanded that God, who is spirit and absolutely indivisible, could never truly identify with humanity, which is basically material. The two were forever irreconcilable. Thus only a creature, created within time, could possibly bridge that gap. That creature was Jesus Christ.

The Roman Emperor Constantine, himself a Christian who had ended the persecution of the church in A.D. 313, called the Council of Nicea in 325 to deal with the uproar. Three positions were represented at Nicea: 1) Jesus

was of a *different* essence from the Father (Arius); 2) Jesus was of the *same* essence as the Father (Athanasius); 3) Jesus was of a like essence to the Father (a compromise position).

The debate was heated and often bitter. But the creed that Nicea produced forthrightly condemned Arius as a heretic. Arguing that Jesus was of the *same* essence as the Father, the Nicene Creed declared Jesus to be "true God from true God" (Leith, 30). And denying one of the central tenets of Arianism, the council proclaimed Jesus as "begotten, not created" (Leith, 31).

Arius's arch opponent was Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, whose personal secretary was Athanasius. Athanasius played a small but important role at Nicea. But for the next forty-five years, he defended the Nicene formula. He taught that the members of the Trinity are coequal, coessential, and coeternal. He powerfully linked the doctrines of the Trinity and salvation. From Scripture he argued that God created humanity in His image, but through sin, humanity abandoned Him and His image. Thus a new creation was necessary, and only God could be the Savior of fallen humanity. No man could possibly provide this needed redemption. For Athanasius, then, the deity of Jesus Christ and the salvation of fallen humanity were inextricably linked. This Apologist was willing to suffer any punishment or persecution to defend that crucial bond, for to deny the deity of Jesus was to emasculate the Gospel.

The Three Cappadocians—Defending the Trinity

One of the most profound truths of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Trinity. It separates Christianity from all other world religions.

The Bible teaches in Deuteronomy 6:4 that God is one; yet from the New Testament it is clear that this one God consists of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church has always affirmed this doctrine as orthodox, but wrestling with its theological and philosophical implications has been difficult. Especially in the early church, this struggle often produced heresy.

The ancient church of the third and fourth centuries was plagued with false teaching that challenged the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Whether it was the teachings of Arius or a group called the Pneumatomachians, the Son and the Spirit were regarded as subordinate to the Father. In order to preserve the oneness of God, others argued that Jesus was a man who was adopted as the Son of God; thus He was not eternally the Son.

Others contended that there was one God who revealed Himself in one of three modes—Father, Son, or Spirit. To decide the issue, the early church asked, “Is this what the Scriptures teach?” More specifically, what precise, descriptive words could guard against heresy when it comes to explaining the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit? Even into the fifth century the church labored over these questions.

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was a product of a series of debates and councils, sparked in large part by heretical teaching from within the church. It was the collaboration of three friends, the Three Cappadocians—Basil of Caesarea (circa 330-379), Gregory of Nazianzus (circa 329-389),

and Gregory of Nyssa (circa 330-394)—that produced the victory over many of these heresies. God clearly used them in a mighty way to formulate the truth about the relationship between the members of the Godhead. Until modern religious liberalism emerged in the nineteenth century their work provided the definitive framework for thinking and speaking about the Trinitarian God we worship.

Brief biographical sketches place all three as key leaders in the Eastern church. Basil was born into a wealthy Christian family in what would be modern Turkey. Well educated in the schools of Greece, he was appointed bishop of Caesarea. His influence in the development of monasticism was enormous.

His brother, Gregory of Nyssa, became a teacher of rhetoric and was appointed bishop of Nyssa. While the Arians were in resurgence in the Eastern empire, he was deposed and sent into exile for five years. Their mutual friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, was also educated at the universities at Alexandria and Athens, where he met Basil. To one degree or another, each was philosophical, mystical, and monastic. But they shared a deep commitment to orthodox Nicene Christianity. Passionately, each defended the members of the Trinity as coequal, coessential, and coeternal.

Perhaps Basil made the most significant contribution in championing the orthodox view of the Trinity. The language used by theologians of the early church often depicted the Son as subordinate to the Father; He was thus in some way inferior. When it came to the Holy Spirit, there was very little discussion at all.

Basil showed that when we think of the Trinitarian God, we must always separate the terms “essence” and “person”; they are not synonyms. “Essence” is what makes God, God. Attributes such as omnipotence,

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omnipresence, and omniscience are involved here. “Person” is a term that defines the distinctions within that one essence. Thus we can correctly say “God the Father,” “God the Son,” and “God the Spirit,” while maintaining that they are one and inseparable in being. Basil was also the first theologian to write a major treatise on the Holy Spirit in which he offered proofs for the deity of the Spirit.

Gregory of Nazianzus took the argument a step further. Agreeing with his friend Basil’s contention of the difference between essence and person, Gregory showed that the difference between the three persons is relational. This relationship is delineated as eternally the Father, eternally the Son, and eternally the Spirit. Eternally there has been love and communion between the persons of one essence that constitute the Trinity.

Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa, also showed that the difference between the members of the Godhead is not one of essence or of substance. The difference can be grounded only on the inner relations and functions of each. Any language that results in the Son’s being subordinate to the Father or of the Spirit’s being subordinate to the Son is simply unacceptable.

Thus the Trinity is one God of three persons whose difference is relational and functional, not essential. We do not have three gods or three modes of God; we have one God. Ephesians 1:1-14 illustrates the point quite well—the Father chooses, the Son redeems, the Spirit seals (see also 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2). Each member of the Godhead is intimately involved in the drama of salvation. We thus can follow Paul and praise the Trinitarian God of grace!

It is difficult for us in the modern church to imagine how much the early church struggled with choosing the proper words when discussing the nature of the Godhead.

But in each generation God raised up individuals to protect the church from error. The Three Cappadocians teach us the importance of precise thinking when it comes to the Trinity. Their precision won the day at the Council of Constantinople in 381 where the forces of heretical thinking were defeated.

Defining the Doctrine of the God-Man

The touchstone of theological orthodoxy is the person of Christ. Both His deity and His humanity must be affirmed, or the entire doctrine of salvation is affected. Only a Jesus who is truly God and truly man can provide a complete salvation for humanity.

A problem in the early church was explaining how Jesus’ deity and His humanity related. At any given point in His earthly life, how did His two natures blend? Was He more God or more man? How should we view the union of these two natures in the one person? The debate over Jesus’ two natures troubled the church for more than 300 years, at least until 451 at the Council of Chalcedon, when the definitive statement about Jesus’ two natures was written.

As one studies the early church, it becomes clear that the emergence of error usually prompted the church to seek a more satisfactory explanation of a theological question. This was true of the doctrine of Christ. Throughout the period from 325 to 451, major interpretations emerged, often heretical, that challenged the church to think more precisely about defining the relationship of Jesus’ two natures.

The Alexandrian School

Two schools of theology, one in Antioch and the other in Alexandria, Egypt, framed the debate on the nature of Christ. The

Alexandrian school claimed such luminaries as Athanasius and the great Origen. Influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Plato, the Alexandrians tended to elevate the spiritual—Christ’s deity—at the expense of His humanity.

Following logically from the Alexandrian position came the heresy propagated by Apollinarius. He was a friend of Athanasius and Basil the Great as well as a teacher of the great Jerome. However, he taught that Jesus was fully God but that His “rational soul” was supplanted by the divine *Logos*. This meant that Jesus was not completely human.

The Council of Constantinople in 381 condemned Apollinarius as a heretic because his view affected the doctrine of salvation. How could Christ sufficiently die for humans if He was not totally a man Himself? The council thus concluded that Jesus had to be completely human and completely divine.

The Antiochene School

The second major school of theology, in Antioch, was influenced by Aristotle, who saw man as a unity of soul and body, not a dichotomy. This school gave far more importance to the unique distinction of Jesus’ two natures than did the Alexandrians. The Antiochene emphasis logically produced the heresy Nestorianism, named after Nestorius, who further challenged the church’s thinking about Jesus.

As Patriarch in Constantinople in 428, Nestorius held a powerful position in the early church. For several reasons he was uncomfortable with the way the Alexandrians were using certain phrases about Jesus, all of which he thought amounted to a dangerous mixing of the human and divine natures of Christ. His solution was to maintain an absolute distinction of the two natures to such

an extent that the only connection between them was the will.

The best analogy of how Nestorius viewed Christ was as a Siamese twin. Because the patriarch could not imagine deity being involved in human suffering or change, he insisted that the two natures were artificially joined. Even though some modern scholarship doubts whether Nestorius actually taught this, this teaching was condemned as heresy at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

It was clear that neither the rigid two-nature model of Nestorius nor the careless one-nature theory of Apollinarius corresponded with the biblical data. In Jesus’ confrontation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, His two natures seemed to be in perfect communion. At any given moment in time, He was both God and man. Thus a position was needed that would combine the strength of both proposals.

A monk from Constantinople named Eutyches proposed a model for understanding Christ that attempted to reconcile Apollinarius and Nestorius. He refused to maintain a clear distinction between the two natures of Jesus; instead, he argued for a mixture of the natures such that a third confused mingling was the result. The analogy of dropping a few drops of oil into a pail of water illustrates the point—both the oil and the water are present, but the distinction between the two is not clear. The result of Eutyches’ teaching was a confused mixture, not fully God or man.

The Council of Chalcedon

To settle this critical matter of how to view the two natures of Jesus, a major council of more than 400 church leaders was called at Chalcedon in 451. After much debate, these leaders affirmed a statement rooted in Scripture that has singularly remained the

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most important declaration about Jesus Christ in the history of the church.

The statement proclaimed Jesus to be both God and man in one person. It declared that both natures are joined in a miraculous way so neither nature is damaged, diminished, or impaired. His two natures are joined “unconfusedly, unchangeably indivisibly, and inseparably” (Leith, 36). Salvation is thus secured for those who profess faith in Jesus because His sacrifice was as both saving God and identifying man.

From Chalcedon, then, the church taught that Jesus is undiminished deity plus perfect humanity united in one person, without any confusion of the two natures. In the absolute sense of the term, He is the God-man!

We live in a world where religious cults are threatening orthodox truth at every turn. If church history teaches us anything, it is this—precision of language in doctrinal matters is imperative. Any choice of words when describing Jesus that diminishes His deity or His humanity is incorrect and heretical.

The miracle of the Incarnation stretches our finite minds to the limit. The great legacy of the Council of Chalcedon reflects a consensus on the language that preserves both the complete deity and humanity of Jesus in His person. A complete salvation demands it; faith in the Godman, Jesus Christ, procures it.



The Creed of Chalcedon (451)

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and also in human-ness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we are ourselves as far as his human-ness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these “last days,” for us and on behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his human-ness.

[We also teach] that we apprehend this one and only Christ—Son, Lord, only-begotten—in two natures; [and we do this] without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one “person” and in one hypostasis. They are not divided or cut into two, but are together the one and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of the Fathers has handed down to us.



Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. What kind of reactions do you have to the concept of “heresy”? What connotations does the term have for you?
2. Define heresy. What elements must be included in this definition?
3. How well do you think that Jesus’ incarnation and the trinity have been explained to you in your Christian experience? Did you find the explanation satisfying or unhelpful? Explain.
4. What are the implications of rejecting the full deity of Christ? How does rejecting Christ’s deity affect our understanding of God’s plan for redemption?
5. What are the implications of rejecting the full humanity of Christ? How does rejecting Christ’s humanity affect our understanding of God’s plan for redemption?
6. Are you familiar with any modern religions or variations of Christianity that question core ideas about Jesus nature?
7. In his book, *Your God is Too Small*, J. B. Phillips explains that an inadequate understanding of God limits our ability to live dynamic lives. Do you feel your understanding of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit has grown through this issue? Explain.

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Step 6: Take Steps to Obey

Jesus was fully God and fully man. Reflect on what this means to your spiritual life. It might be helpful to list your thoughts in the form of a prayer list. For example:

“Thank you that you really know what it means to feel vulnerable and scared.”

“Thank you...

“Thank you...

“Thank you...

“Thank you...

Issue Evaluation Form

Name: _____

Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:

Sound Bites and Case Studies (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

Study the Scriptures (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

Consult Other Sources (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

Discuss the Issue (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

Overall Impression of this Issue (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1 2 3 4 5

Corrections (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):