

Six Heresies About Christ and the Chalcedonian Creed

We are looking at the early creeds because we want to know what the early church leaders were concerned about, and what they agreed was truth and what was error. It is good for us to know what roused them, and what they needed to guard against. We have seen from the start that at the center was the Lord Jesus Christ, and what people believed about him.

Three weeks ago we looked at twelve short dense truth summaries from the New Testament. They weren't creeds, but they were the beginning of creeds. And every one of those was mostly about Christ. Then we looked at the Apostles Creed, and again in the Apostles Creed, the section about Christ was longer than the rest.

Last week we looked at the Nicene Creed. The real reason for the Nicene Creed was to state what Christians believe about the deity of Christ. The Nicene council wanted to say as boldly as possible that Christ was fully and truly God, and to rule out any other view of Christ.

This is the last Sunday we'll go through creeds. Today we will look at the Chalcedonian Creed, which the early leaders composed in the year 451. This creed also was entirely about who Jesus was, and what we believe about him.

The story of these creeds is not tidy. When these early church leaders found out that some other leader was teaching things that were wrong, or at least the first leaders thought they were wrong, they blasted each other. They were direct about their disagreements, and sometimes willing to condemn the other side.

Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, and he was emperor during the years that Arius boldly taught that Jesus was not fully God. The church leaders were strongly opposed to Arius and his followers. Constantine cared about the church, and was tired of the quarreling, so Constantine told the church leaders, "You are all going to meet in Nicaea, and you're going to write down the truth about Christ that you can all agree to, and then everyone of you is going to sign it." That's how we got the Nicene Creed. The Arians could not sign it, so they were on the outside.

The Chalcedonian council met 120 years later, so it was a different Roman emperor, but he was a believer too, and he got them together to promote unity in the church. In the years leading up to Chalcedon, church leaders debated two things. They all agreed with the Nicene Creed, which said that Jesus was fully God. But one side pressed the deity of Jesus so hard that they barely left room for Jesus to be human, and least that's what humanity side thought.

And the humanity side was so firm that Jesus was fully and truly human that the deity side was not sure they believed that Jesus was fully God. So the two sides were suspicious of each other on those lines, even though they all agreed with the Nicene Creed.

The other debate was about how the Lord's deity and the Lord's humanity fit with each other. Was he two separate minds and spirits in one body? Did he have the mind of a man *and* the mind of God? Or was he some kind of hybrid, half of each? They had different views on these things, and they were all passionate.

And again, the Christian emperor said, "you are going to write this together, and then you are all going to sign it, because this squabble is not good for the church." So they got together at Chalcedon to write something they could all live with. And in hindsight, as with the Nicene creed, the Chalcedonian Creed over the years has been confirmed. It does not answer all the questions, but what it says is how the Bible reads, and both sides could agree.

Before we read the Chalcedonian Creed, I want to explain this chart that's called, "Six basic heresies about Christ." The church faced all of these in the first 400 years of the church, they all began inside the church, and none of them have gone away. These six should sharpen our thinking about who Christ was.

1 Ebionism – Jesus was not God

The Ebionites were a Jewish Christian group, Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But they thought that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, and that the Holy Spirit was not a part of his birth. They believed that the Spirit came on him only when he was baptized, not before. But he was not God, not at all, said Ebionite believers.

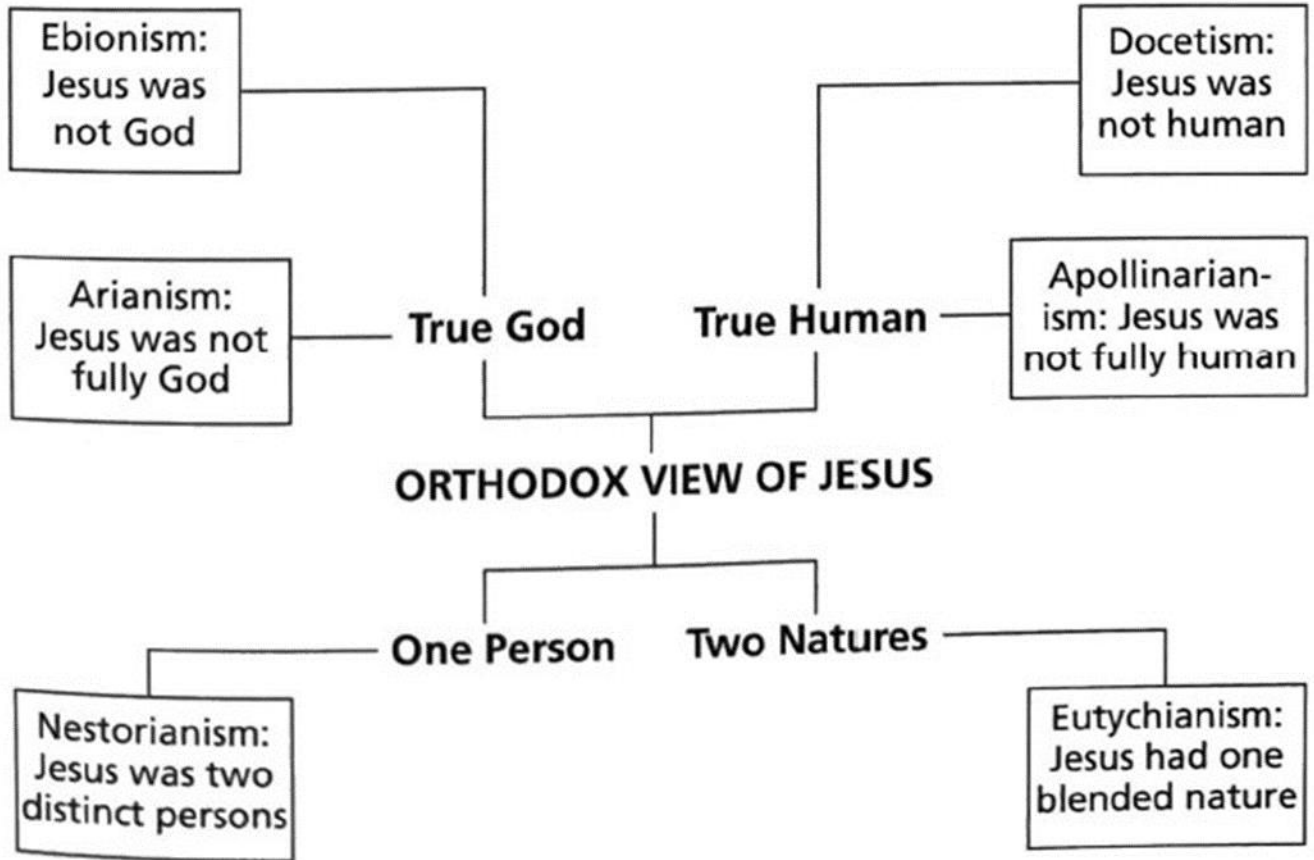
But the Gospel of John says, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Colossians 1:19 "*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son.*" There are many Ebionites around, although they do not go by that name.

2 Docetism – Jesus was not human

By this view, Jesus only seemed to be human, in the way that an angel might appear as a human, or something like that. He was a higher spiritual being, a divine being of some kind, that made himself look like a human. There was a fair amount of this in the first two centuries.

1 John is the most direct. "*Many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.*" I don't know of this one in our time, but it could be.

SIX BASIC HERESIES ABOUT CHRIST



3 Arianism – Jesus was not fully God

Arius was clear: Jesus was sort of God, but not really. There is lots of this still around, not under that name. But we covered this last Sunday with the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was written to correct Arianism. We'll not go over that again.

4 Apollinarianism – Jesus was not fully human

Apollinarius said Jesus did not have a human soul. The mind of the eternal Son took over the human soul of Jesus. Of the six heresies that we're looking at today, I think devout conservative churches are closest to this. We lean toward being Apollinarian. Hebrews 2 says that Jesus was made in every way as we are. Hebrews 4 says that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, without sin. We can hardly imagine Jesus having the same humanity we have, and the same temptations, and not sinning.

I was taught in classes that Jesus had a different humanity than you and I have. You and I come from the root of Adam and Eve, and that root is stained and damaged. Jesus, I was taught, came from a pure human root, not from Adam and Eve's humanity. But those lines in Hebrews say Jesus was made in every way as we are. He was tempted in every way as we are. He was weak in his temptation.

I asked different theologians about this, and one of them put me onto a book that surveyed early church fathers in the years we are talking about, the first four or five hundred years of the church. Almost all of those fathers assumed that the humanity of Jesus was exactly like ours, from the same root of Adam as ours. They were fighting Docetists, people who did not think Jesus was human, and these fathers taught a completely human Jesus.

Those early church leaders knew that Adam and Eve's line was blemished by sin. They knew that every son of Adam and daughter of Eve has the birthmark and stain of sin. And that was exactly the humanity of Jesus. One of them writes, "Mary was not just a channel that the eternal Son passed through. He received his humanity from her in the same way that he lived off her milk." Jesus had the same humanity as everyone who's been born of a woman. (Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, 1995, pp 16–39. I've a scan if you're interested.)

The theologian from whom I copied this chart said that Apollinarians do not think Jesus was fully human. He's a good theologian, I have read him before. On the same page as the chart he had a long paragraph explaining how Jesus had a pure humanity, not the kind of humanity you and I get from Adam and Eve. If he is not Apollinarian himself, he's mighty close.

We all lean this way. There is nothing in the New Testament to say that Jesus has a different humanity than you and I have. Everything in the New Testament assumes he as the same humanity we have. Let's not invent two kinds of humanity. There's only one kind, our kind, period. Hebrews means just what it says.

5 Nestorianism – Jesus was two distinct persons

Nestorius believed that Jesus was truly God and truly human, and that if we understand any kind of union between Jesus' deity and humanity, then both deity and humanity have been watered down. So we need to have two separate natures in Christ.

I have heard a few preachers get close to this. They will say, "this was Jesus in his humanity" and "that was Jesus in his deity." Or something like that. As if Jesus had two hats, one said "human" and the other said "God," and he put on whichever one he needed at that time.

Let's not think like that. Jesus the God-man was always the same person. Jesus was always the same person. That's what the Chalcedonian Creed makes clear.

6 Eutychianism – Jesus had one blended nature

This view says that Jesus was sort of a hybrid, half God and half human. That won't work. That's what Nestorius feared. We can say Jesus was the God-man, but not that he was half God and half human. Let's be careful here. He was entirely God and entirely human, in one person.

7 Divine-Human Compatibility – The Image and Likeness of God

All humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Genesis 5 tells us that even after Adam and Eve had sinned, humans were still in the image and likeness of God. So in some sense, that God and human should be united in one person should not be so startling. Divine and human at some level are the same shape. There is a basic compatibility between Divine and human, because humans were made in the image of God. I don't know how to take it any farther than that, but it is something to keep in mind, because in Jesus they come together.

8 The Mother of God – About the Baby Not the Mother

"Mother of God" probably caught your attention. The early church fathers who put this in the creed were not thinking about worshipping Mary or praying to Mary. It never crossed their mind. They asked, "was Mary's child God?" Their answer: "yes, that baby was already God." When they called Mary "the Mother of God," they were talking about the baby, not about the mother.

Not all the fathers were happy with "Mother of God" in there, because they thought it reduced Jesus' humanity. But it got into the creed. The way the creed means it, it is true. Later, others used this as a reason to exalt Mary, but at this start this was entirely about the baby.

9 The Chalcedonian Creed.

I can state the message of this creed in four words: "two natures, one person." Jesus was fully God and fully human, in one single unified person. Let's read:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent,
teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood;
truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and body;
co-essential 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;
one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten,
to be acknowledged in two natures,
inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably;
the distinction of natures 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,
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 beginning 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 Nicene Creed).

Two natures, one person. Jesus was fully God and fully human, in one single unified person.

To Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth; to Jesus Christ who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Revelation 1)

PRAYER: Father, thank you for these early leaders that had so much energy to think rightly about your Son. Thank you for how concerned they were about error. We have been standing on their shoulders and didn't even know it. Guide us in our minds and in our worship. May your Holy Spirit keep leading us into all truth. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.