

Chalcedonian Boundaries

By: David Ervin

Upon witnessing the resurrected Christ after his passion, the profound truth that the eternal God had become flesh and blood confronted the early church. The first Christians professed both the deity of Christ and his humanity (1 Corinthians 2:5-11). From the beginning the dual nature of Christ was central to orthodox worship; nevertheless, it took centuries for the church to develop the language necessary to articulate this concept. This language came to fruition as a result of the first four ecumenical councils beginning with the Council of Nicaea and culminating in the Council of Chalcedon.

Many historians consider Chalcedon to be a “terminal council” in that it represents the furthest boundary of thought concerning the person of Christ. Since that time, the church has not went beyond Chalcedon's borders in its understanding of who Christ is. This is not to say that further development is not theoretically possible, but the Chalcedonian boundaries represent a safeguard against error that Christians of every age would do well to heed.

The road to Chalcedon must be understood in the light of the declarations that proceeded it beginning with the Council of Nicaea in the year 325. The heresy of Arianism had reduced Christ to a created being with a beginning in time. Nicaea declared that Christ is, “Begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” The Christological essence that emerged from Nicaea is summarized in the statement, “Only God can save us.”

In the year 381, the Council of Constantinople affirmed the declarations of Nicaea, and further refined its language to refute the heresy of Apollinarianism. This latest threat to orthodoxy taught that Christ did not possess a human soul, but was simply a body of flesh indwelt by deity. Constantinople shored up the true humanity of Christ, and is summarized with the axiom, “Whatever is not assumed cannot be healed.” It was concluded at Constantinople that every part of humanity needs redemption; therefore, every part of humanity must be taken up by the Savior.

In Acts 20:28, Paul declared that God purchased the church in his own blood. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus convinced the early church that God and humanity had come together in Christ. What remained the subject of much discussion and debate was the exact nature of this union. How could the pre-existent, second person of the Trinity be also the man Jesus? Nestorianism approached the problem by affirming the two nature Christology that had already begun to take shape at Nicaea. Nestorianism however, is so zealous to protect the purity of the two natures that it treats Christ as two separate persons. Under this teaching, the incarnation becomes a partnership of two very different individuals. By keeping the two natures as far apart as possible the person born to Mary is added to the person of the eternal *Logos*.

Provoked by the error of Nestorianism, the Council of Ephesus met in the year 431. Cyril of Alexandria (a leading voice in the third council) clarified that it is truly God the second person of the Trinity that adds to himself the nature of perfect humanity. The personality behind the two natures is none other than the *Logos*. This eternal individual, though united to two distinct natures, remains and acts as a single individual. The divine

person, who is of the same substance with the Father, is nevertheless that same he who is laid in a manger, walked the trails of Galilee, and died on a Roman cross.

In an overreaction to Nestorianism, the fifth century saw the rise of the opposite error of Eutychianism. Whereas Nestorianism divided Christ into two persons, under Eutychianism, the two natures became blended to the point of no distinction at all. This blending renders Christ a hybrid of deity and humanity. Nestorianism did not survive the condemnation of Ephesus, but Eutychianism grew in influence, setting the stage for the Council at Chalcedon.

In the year 451, more than five hundred bishops met at Chalcedon with the goal of reaffirming the Nicene declarations (as interpreted by Constantinople). The council also held the goal of articulating the faith in such a way as to maintain the dual nature of Christ while at the same time affirming a single person. In many ways, Chalcedon represents the culmination of four centuries of thought. "Through the first four councils, the fathers have faced all the hard questions and seen instances of most major mistakes that can be made."¹ The resulting declaration that came forth set the Christological boundaries that have protected the church's understanding of who Christ is for more than 1500 years:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, our 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, without change, without division, without 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 . . .

¹ Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2007), p. 23.

The Chalcedonian formula places boundaries on all sides of Christ. To the North, Arianism is denied and Nicaea affirmed with the declaration that Christ is, “truly God . . . of one substance [or consubstantial] with the Father.” To the South, Constantinople is affirmed against Apollinarianism by proclaiming that Christ is, “complete in manhood . . . truly man, consisting of a reasonable soul and body . . . of one substance with us.” The boundaries to the East and West are marked out by four negatives: without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation. The way to Eutychianism or Apollinarianism is blocked by the declaration that the two natures admit to no confusion or change. Nestorianism is guarded against with the affirmation that the divine Christ and the human Jesus are one person who is without division or separation.

Are the boundaries of Chalcedon purely academic? The church may not have possessed the precise language to describe Christ prior to Chalcedon, but it has always *believed* in the Christ of Chalcedon. If the church has always believed these things, is it helpful to describe the person of Christ in such a technical way? The simple declaration of faith that, “God died for me” summarizes the very heart of high Christology. What value then is gained by the boundaries of Chalcedon?

The first answer is protection against error. The heresies that prompted the formation of the councils demonstrate the need to guard against error by a clearly defined understanding of Christ. But secondly, (on an even more practical level) carefully defined Christology helps to explain a host of behaviors recorded in the Gospels. Jesus appears ignorant, yet he is omniscient. He appears weak, yet he is almighty over all. Thirdly, (and perhaps most important of all) the Chalcedonian formula guards the way of salvation.

The primary concern of the bishops that met at Chalcedon was not Christology, but Soteriology. "An axiom for Christological study is that, 'All doctrine should be intimately and clearly connected to Soteriology.'"² The Christ of Chalcedon is *required* for salvation because he is the only person that possess the qualities necessary to save sinners.

Truly God

Maintaining the deity of Christ is important if only because this is the Jesus that emerges from Scripture. But in addition, Christ's possession of true deity is necessary for fallen men to be saved. Only a divine person can shoulder the weight of salvation; no lesser being could bear the strain of God's eternal wrath for sin. Furthermore, Christ hung on the cross for only a few hours, and yet paid the penalty of an eternal hell for his people. This was possible because it was not the duration of suffering that secured salvation, but the quality of the Sufferer. Only a person of *infinite worth* could pay the infinite price that holy justice demanded for the trampling of God's glory. Truly, only God can save us.

Truly Man

The Savior must be perfectly human in order to be an adequate substitute for humans. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death"³ (Hebrews 2:14).³ If Christ had come to be the substitute for angels, it would have been necessary for him to take on the nature of angels. The human race required a human savior. "For surely it is

² Sanders and Klaus Issler, *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, p.81.

³ All Scripture is from the New International Version (Zondervan Publishing Company, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984).

not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way" (Hebrew 2:16-17).

Furthermore, the Savior must be perfectly human in order to succeed in obedience where the human Adam failed. The Covenant of Works is a covenant between God and a human representative. Therefore, only another human representative could succeed Adam in entering into that covenant to keep its obligations on behalf of his people. As Calvin writes, "Our Lord came as truly man, adopted the nature of Adam and took his name, so that he might, in his place, obey the Father."⁴

Christ was completely and perfectly human in the most ordinary sense of the word. He was not super human. He did not possess abnormal genius. He was wondrously, gloriously ordinary. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). In the incarnation, the person of Christ obtained everything that is essential to being human. The only necessary quality that differentiated his humanity from every other child of Adam is the absence of sin (Hebrews 4:15). Having no sin did not make Christ *less* human but *more* human. Sin is not part of the essence of humanity, but rather intruded upon it in the fall.

Not only did Christ take upon himself a perfect human nature, but he also experienced the human condition in the same way as any other man. He grew and developed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He learned obedience, and increased in wisdom over time (Luke 2:52).

Jesus' gradual development of learning, experiential obedience, and consciousness reveals the presence of a truly human mind and a truly human will. The

⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Tony Lane, and Hilary Osborne (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), p. 126.

divine *Logos* did not assume the shell of a man, but real humanity with a center of consciousness and volition. This poses no conflict with the affirmation that Christ is one person. The will of the human is in total unity to the will of the divine, so that the two act functionally as one. When Jesus says to the Father, “Not *my will*, but yours be done” (emphasis added, Luke 22:42), a singular act of unified volition is expressed from the God-man. Furthermore, the singular person of the *Logos* possesses an omniscient, divine mind which fully encapsulates a limited, human mind without destroying it. The divine mind has unlimited access to the human mind; whereas, the human mind is limited in its access to the divine mind by the qualities of human nature. This “two mind” Christology is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

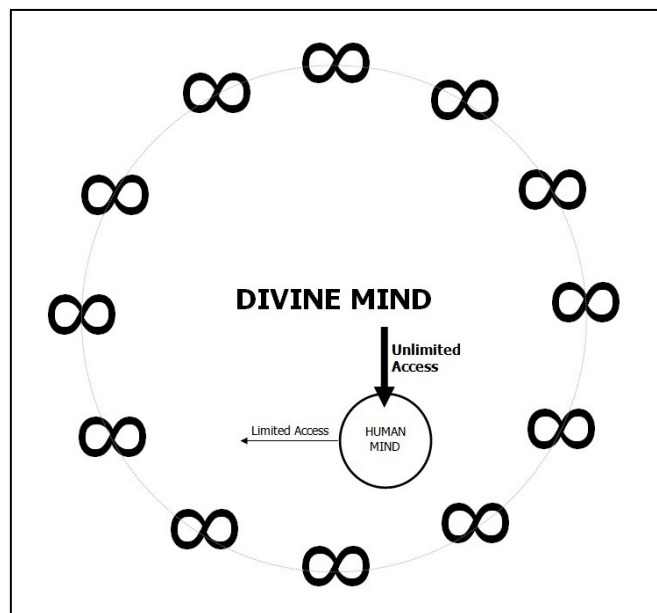


Figure 1. Two Mind Christology.

Just as in the case of the two wills, the human and divine mind are perfectly unified in a singular person without conflict. That Christ has assumed a human mind and will (distinct but not separate from the divine mind and will) is necessary for a savior of

men. Jesus overcame temptation, and chose in every instance to be obedient on behalf of his people through the faculty of a human mind and human volition.

In order to avoid the charge of Nestorianism, it is necessary to clarify that a nature is not a person. A nature represents the essential qualities of a particular class of being, but it possesses no individual personhood. At a particular point in history, God the Son added to himself a human nature, not a human person. The two natures find their singular personhood and personality in the Son.

Every necessary quality of humanity is present in the person of Christ. However, to qualify as a savior of men there is one human attribute which must be assumed that is the most necessary quality of all. The Savior must be mortal. Only God can shoulder the wrath of God for a fallen people, but the eternal God cannot die. By the very nature of who he is, God cannot stop being God. In order to be a savior of men, it was necessary that the self-existent and the eternal become mortal and killable. Without the assumption of true humanity, God could not die for the sins of his people.

Without Confusion or Change

Since it is clear that the only qualified savior of men must be perfectly God and perfectly human; it should be equally clear that these two natures cannot suffer contamination. Any communication between the attributes would destroy their purity. If the deity of Christ knew suffering, ignorance, or thirst, then it is something less than deity. If the humanity of Christ took a share of omniscience or other divine prerogative, then it is something more than humanity. Just as the Persons of the Trinity mutually interpenetrate each other in glorious *perichoresis* without loss of individuality, so too do

the natures of Christ. Any attempt to add incommunicable attributes of Christ's deity (such as omnipresence) to his humanity would defy what it means to be a human being.

Nowhere does the separation of the natures becomes more important than at Calvary. At the cross, it was the human nature of Christ that suffered and died. On Good Friday, the divine nature of Christ remained eternally alive. Failing to distinguish the natures at Golgotha does great harm to the church's understanding of God himself. The product of such confusion is a temporary, contingent deity who can be harmed by his own creation. As R. C. Sproul explains, "At death, the divine nature was united to a human corpse. The unity was still there, but the change that had taken place was within the human nature, not the divine nature."⁵ Whether it be as he taught the multitudes, walked upon the sea, or lay dead in a grave, Christ the God-man holds his equality with God and his equality with man in perfect distinction.

United in One, Undivided Person

Distinction in the natures of Christ must not allow a separation of his person. In this final Chalcedonian boundary, all the qualities required of a savior of men come together in *hypostatic* union. Deity and humanity are bound together under one person so that what is true of either nature is true of the person of Christ. As Ryrie notes:

The person does whatever he does, revealing whatever attribute or whichever nature he reveals. The person thirsted; the person knew all things; the person does not know the day nor the hour; and (probably the hardest one) the person died.⁶

It is in this mystical union of two natures, bound together in one glorious person, that the simplest creed becomes possible, "God died on a cross for me."

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *What Is the Trinity?* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2011), p. 36.

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), p. 289.

The mystery of the incarnation runs deep, and the waters are ultimately beyond the ability of the human mind to tread. To know at least where the banks of the river stop is perhaps the best that finite minds can hope to attain. The boundaries of Chalcedon remain today as a barrier of truth. They guard the Christ that emerges from the pages of Scripture. It is the very salvation of men that sets these boundaries. For no other can save men, but he who is both God and man.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Calvin, John. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by Tony Lane, and Hilary Osborne. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998.
- Crisp, Oliver D. "Problems With Perichoresis." *Tyndale Bulletin* 56.1 (2005): 119-140.
- Morris, Thomas. *The Logic of God Incarnate*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999.
- Sanders, Fred, and Issler, Klaus. *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007.
- Sproul, R. C. *What is the Trinity?* Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2011.