

The Creeds of the Church

Session 4—The History of the Definition of Chalcedon

I. The History of the Definition

A. 3 Christological errors

As has been the case with other creeds, the Chalcedonian Creed (or Definition of Chalcedon) grew out of a need to clarify doctrine with regards to several misunderstandings regarding the nature of Jesus Christ. The Nicene Creed had helped the church get clear the fact that Jesus was God, but many still struggled with the question of how Jesus' divine identity was to be understood along with his human identity. This confusion led to several heretical teachings, of various degrees of severity.

1. Nestorianism

Nestorius of Constantinople taught that the man, Jesus of Nazareth was distinct from the person of the Son of God. The precise nature of the relationship between Jesus and God the Son is unclear in Nestorius' teaching. He generally seems to have insisted that Jesus' nature was human alone, not divine, but that the divine Son somehow *united* himself to Jesus. Particularly repellent to Nestorius was the idea that God would allow himself to become human to the extent of actually growing as a fetus in a woman's womb and participating in the birth process. He didn't believe this to be worthy of the dignity of God.

NB: Islam teaches a similar idea concerning Jesus, saying the Spirit of Allah rested on Jesus (as he did on all prophets) during his earthly ministry, but whisked Jesus away before the crucifixion, substituting Judas in his place, since crucifixion would have been unbecoming of a prophet.

2. Apollinarianism

Apollinaris of Laodicea attempted to find a more biblical solution to the divine-human mystery of Jesus than did Nestorius. Apollinaris taught that Jesus had a human body (and soul—which he equated with emotional life) but that his *mind* was divine. So, in this sense, Apollinarianism taught that Jesus was kind of half-God, half-human. Apollinarianism thus created a *tertium quid* (“third thing”)—i.e., Apollinaris' view of Jesus created a third thing that was neither really God nor really human.

3. Eutychianism

Eutyches of Constantinople also taught a subtly unbiblical view of Jesus, in his attempt to understand the Bible's teachings about him. He said that Jesus had a human nature, but that it was subsumed in the divine nature of

the Son. The result was that Jesus was not really human but only divine. Jesus was God pretending to be human.

B. Why is it important to understand these errors?

We can observe that these doctrinal errors have varying degrees of severity. Most Christians will arrive at one or another of these conclusions as they think about Jesus, unless they receive better teaching, or are just very careful students of the Bible. **NB:** Believing these errors does *not* mean a person is not really a Christian, but they *are* errors and must be corrected.

1. Nestorius said that Jesus was not really the Son, but only mysteriously united to him. But the Bible says,

Luke 1:35 The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”

Matthew 1:20–23 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.”

The child born to Mary, Jesus of Nazareth, was God.

2. Apollinaris said that Jesus had a human body but a divine mind, that he was half-human, half-God, as it were. But the Bible says,

Luke 2:52 And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Matthew 24:36 But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

There is some sense in which the mind of Jesus can grow and also be ignorant of certain facts, indicating its humanity, not divinity.

3. Eutychus said that Jesus’ humanity was absorbed entirely into his divinity, to such a degree that he was not really human in the same way we are. But the Bible says,

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

He was human as well as divine.

Conclusion: the Bible insists that Jesus was entirely human in the same way that we are human *and* that he was entirely God.

The Definition of Chalcedon seeks to clarify this doctrine. The Council of Chalcedon was held in 451 AD and it addressed these errors by issuing what has come to be known as the Definition of Chalcedon.

II. The Council of Chalcedon

In the years following Nicaea and the defeat of the Arians and Pelagians, the church continued to evolve in its bureaucratic structure and political nature. Many of the debates about the identity of Christ carry heavy political nuance, with bishops on both sides excommunicating each other and currying favor with the secular government in order to bring political power to bear on their theological squabbles. This debate also developed along an East-West divide, with the heresies mentioned above developing and finding reception primarily in Eastern churches and being vilified and contradicted in Western churches. (**NB:** to this day, some Eastern Orthodox churches embrace forms of Nestorianism, such as the Coptic Church in Egypt.)

Nevertheless, the issue of the precise nature of the humanity of Jesus is a serious one and it was seen as serious by those who were arguing about it. While we can fault them for not treating each other with enough grace, they could rightly fault us for not thinking carefully enough about the nature of our Lord and/or not caring enough to take the Bible's teachings very seriously.

The council was held in Chalcedon, which was situated directly across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, symbolizing the unity that they hoped to achieve between the East and the West. It was attended by 600 bishops.