

UNIT 5: THE CHALCEDONIAN DEFINITION

Despite the apparent agreement reached at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, the Christological debate continued in the early Church. The key dispute revolved around Christ's divinity and humanity. It seemed that neither could be denied. On the one hand, in order to save, Christ had to be divine. Meanwhile, as St. Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, had so eloquently stated, 'whatever is not assumed is not healed'. So in the incarnation God must also have taken to himself human nature (or a specific human nature?) in order to save humanity. So if Christ is in some sense human, and in some sense divine, how do the two relate? Is not the notion of the incarnation oxymoronic (human-divine), as Arius had suggested?

Two broad schools of thought emerged to answer this question. The first, known as ***Logos-sarx Christology*** (*sarx* being one of the New Testament words for 'flesh'), followed the thought of Origen of Alexandria (c.185-c.254) and is essentially the position of Athanasius of Alexandria (hence it is sometimes referred to as 'Alexandrian' Christology). However, a word of warning: general labels are dangerous in theological study as not every theologian and thinker can be straightforwardly categorised. Nevertheless, what were the main features of this Egyptian Alexandrian Christology?

Most of the Alexandrian theologians placed significant emphasis on soteriology, namely the doctrine of salvation. For Athanasius, a creature cannot save another creature; hence, if Christ is Saviour, he cannot be a mere creature (and if a creature, he would not be worthy of worship). The nature of that salvation is expressed in Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*: Christ was made human that we might be made divine.¹ This is sometimes known as 'deification', or being taken up into the life of God. Alexandrian writers emphasised the importance of the *Logos* **assuming** (rather than merely dwelling in) human nature, so that human nature might share in the life of God. That union of *Logos* and *sarx* existed in one nature. Cyril of Alexandria (c.378-444) put it thus:

In declaring that the Word was made to 'be incarnate' and 'made human', we do not assert that there was any change in the nature of the Word when it became flesh, or that it was transformed into an entire human being, consisting of soul and body; but we say that the Word, in an indescribable and inconceivable manner, united personally to himself

¹ This sentiment is expressed by the priest at the celebration of the Eucharist when, mixing water with wine at the offertory, the priest prays 'by the mystery of this water and wine [a reminder of the miracle of water into wine at Cana] may we come to share in Christ's divinity as he humbled himself to share in our humanity'.

flesh endowed with a rational soul, and thus became a human being and was called the Son of man. And this was not by a mere act of will or favour, nor simply adopting a role or taking to himself a person.

However, this presented further problems for some Alexandrian theologians, notably Apollinaris of Laodicea (d.390). If the Logos was united to the entirety of human nature, would this not expose the Logos to the vicissitudes of humanity, and particularly to sin? Apollinaris therefore proposed that, in the incarnation, only the flesh (*sarx*) was assumed, and the divine mind indwelt Christ. Looking back to Gregory of Nazianzus's teaching, you have probably already spotted the problem with this: if only part of human nature had been assumed, had only part of human nature been redeemed? One possible solution which might appeal to us in a post-Descartes philosophical environment is to suggest that 'the flesh' is an incidental part of human nature, and therefore need not be assumed for the incarnation to have full salvific efficacy. The patristic period, however, is one in which 'the body' is valued, and one in which humanity is not a division of body and soul, but an ensouled body.

The Alexandrian Christology did present a unified Christ with a single nature. There is a proper sharing of attributes or properties (*communicatio idiomatum*). The *communicatio idiomatum* was to become an important aspect of Christological debate, so it is worth pausing at this stage to remind ourselves of its importance. Essentially, the claim is that whatever is true of Christ's divinity must also be true of his humanity. This is a consequence of the claim that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. This view has consequences for theology elsewhere. For example, consider the following: Jesus Christ is God; Mary gave birth to Jesus; therefore Mary is the Mother of God. Many Catholic and Orthodox Christians will be familiar with this argument. However, here is an alternative: Jesus is God; Jesus suffered on the cross; therefore God suffered on the cross. Many Christians would be less than happy with this latter argument. In fact, some theologians, following a line first traced by the Reformer Martin Luther, extended this line of thought to conclude that God was crucified ***and died*** on the cross.

Where is the problem? This is a good example of where precision in theological language is absolutely vital. One of the problems with this kind of reasoning is the phrase 'Jesus is God' – full stop. Jesus is not God. Jesus is God ***incarnate***. To say that Mary is the Mother of God *incarnate* adds a nuance – never truly absent from Catholic and Orthodox Mariology – which avoids huge confusion. So too with the statement 'God ***incarnate*** suffers (or is crucified, or died) on the cross'. The theology of the *communicatio idiomatum* is much debated in the Middle Ages and the Reformation and need not distract us further at this stage, save to point

to the heart of the debate: in what sense is Christ divine, in what sense is Christ human, and how do the two 'communicate' in the one person of Jesus?

An alternative to the Alexandrian Christology emerged in modern-day Turkey and is sometimes referred to as **Antiochene Christology**, or **Logos-anthropos** (Word-man) Christology. The emphasis in this school was not so much on salvation *per se*, as on the moral regeneration of disobedient humanity (and hence an emphasis on Christ as the one who battles evil powers and shows us how to be morally victorious). Still concerned that the Alexandrian position allowed for the divinity of the Logos to be compromised by human nature, the Antiochene theologians proposed that, in Christ, there are two natures, one human and one divine. These natures are unmixed. Their union, however, is voluntaristic or moral (*prosopic* rather than *hypostatic*), rather like the union of a husband and wife. This gives rise to the suspicion that in Christ there are two wills and maybe even two centres of consciousness, or two persons. The problem is simple: how does one define the union and unity of the two natures? One of the supposed proponents of this view is Nestorius (386-451), the Archbishop of Constantinople, who gives his name to the attendant heresy of Nestorianism, namely the idea that in Christ can be found two persons. In fact, it is highly unlikely that poor old Nestorius ever held this view.

How was this dispute resolved? In the year 451 the fourth of the authoritative seven ecumenical councils was called at Chalcedon (an area now subsumed within modern-day Istanbul) under the auspices of the Emperor Marcian. The Council of Chalcedon upheld the Nicene definition of Christ as 'consubstantial' with the Father and, building upon the conclusions of the Council of Ephesus in 431, formulated the orthodox definition that Christ is two unmixed natures in one person, forming not just a moral union, but a *hypostatic* union (that is, a union in a single person). Here is the 'Chalcedonian definition':

The Definition of the Council of Chalcedon

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we 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; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being

preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

The Chalcedonian definition is an excellent opportunity to examine the status and meaning of the doctrines formulated by the patristic theologians. What on earth are we to make of the teaching that Christ is two natures in one person? Does this mean that we could crack open Christ's head like a boiled egg and see two unmixed natures inside, hermetically sealed from each other? Is this not just a rather bizarre and eccentric teaching which arises because of ancient pedantic debate? Or is there a real purpose in supposing that Christ is two unmixed natures in one person?

In order to understand why the theologians of Chalcedon decided on their definition, I should like to take a rather dramatic detour to consider the work of the French philosopher and literary theorist Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Derrida is widely read amongst theologians, particularly his writings on language, meaning and interpretation. However, he never wrote on a topic as purely theological as Christology and he always described himself a kind of agnostic (although no label could be straightforwardly applied to Derrida). Just one corner of his work is illuminating regarding the Chalcedonian definition, and it concerns what Derrida calls 'undecidables'.

Christ cannot be an 'undecidable'

Derrida comments that, in both language and culture, we tend to understand the world through a series of binary opposites: good and bad; male and female; ugly and beautiful; heterosexual and homosexual; theist and atheist; Western and Eastern, and so on. The world is not, of course, black and white. These binary opposites establish the extremes on a spectrum.

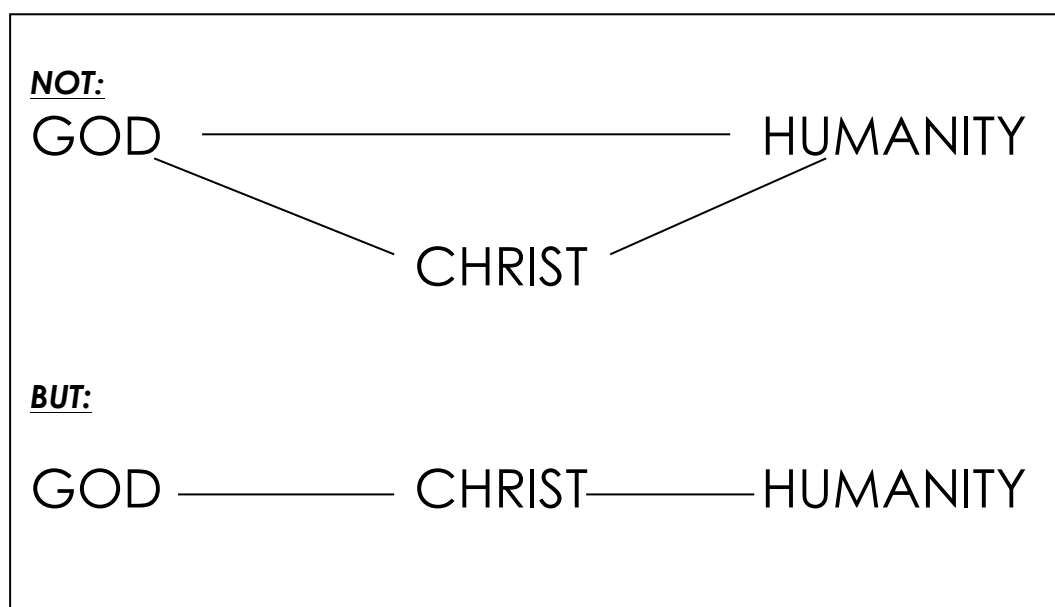
A very good example of a cultural phenomenon which is pleasing because it operates through a very clear and obvious set of binary opposites is the Bond films. For example, we have the following binaries: male and female (Bond and the Bond-girl); beauty (Bond) and ugliness (the villain, who is often scarred or deformed in some way); authority (M) and impetuous genius (Bond); East and West; good and bad; the mundane (Moneypenny) and the exciting and adventurous (the Bond-girl).

Derrida further remarks that there are certain phenomena in language and culture which are unnerving because they subvert our binary oppositions: the

zombie (neither dead nor alive); the transvestite (neither male nor female); the cyborg (neither human nor machine). Derrida calls these 'undecideables' because we cannot decide how they should be classified.

Undecideables are, if you like, hybrids. An important characteristic of hybrids and undecideables is that they are **neither one thing nor another**. It is not simply that they are a mixture of two different things. Rather, in being a hybrid or undecidable, they generate something quite new and different – a third thing, if you like. A clear instance of a hybrid which is genuinely not just a mixture but also something new is a mule. A mule is a cross between a male donkey and female horse. Mules are almost always sterile. The point is, however, that a mule is neither a horse nor a donkey; it is a new 'third thing'. Similarly, a cyborg is neither a human nor a machine; it is a new 'third thing', the status of which we cannot **decide** (see the film Robocop!).

Now, let us go back 1500 or so years to Chalcedon. The point for the Chalcedonian theologians is that Christ cannot be an undecidable or a kind of hybrid of human and divine. Why not? Because then Christ would be **neither human nor divine**, but a kind of new 'third thing'. Then we would be back to Arius and the idea that Christ is some kind of 'buffer' between God and creation rather than that which salvifically reunites humanity to God. Instead, Christ must be both human and divine, and fully both. The only way of preserving the full divinity and humanity of Christ was to avoid any implication that Christ is a hybrid or 'undecidable', hence Chalcedonians are forced to maintain the view that Christ has two UNMIXED natures. Nevertheless, Christ is ONE person. So the picture we have looks like this:



In the upper diagram, Christ, understood as an undecidable – neither human nor divine, but a ‘third thing’ – lies outside the divine-human relation. In the lower diagram, Christ is the conduit between human and divine precisely because he is fully both.

Of course, this does not solve all the problems. The difficulties of describing the hypostatic union remain and many have questioned its coherence. Nevertheless, the Chalcedonian definition does point to an important aspect of Christian doctrine. The purpose of the definition is NOT to provide substantial information about God in himself and the mystery of the incarnation. It is not an empirical claim, as if we could go out and observe two natures in Christ (although we might think of it as properly an ontological claim – a claim about Christ’s being). Rather, the Chalcedonian theologians have bequeathed to us what we might call ‘the least bad way of referring to Christ’. Ambiguities remain and Christological debate continues. The Council of Chalcedon nevertheless says, ‘there are some inadequate ways of talking about God and Christ, and there are some which are so inadequate that they lead us to say things about God and Christ that we probably should not say (e.g. that Christ is a mixture or hybrid of human and divine) because they lead us into difficulties elsewhere in our theologizing. So it is probably better that we talk about God in the following way ...’ In other words, the Chalcedonian definition is not simply providing a marker to decide who is in and who is out of the Church. It is providing the Church with a better – a truer – way of talking about God and Christ than it might otherwise have. It is doing what doctrine properly ought to do: it helps people to worship in spirit and in truth. This is what the Cambridge theologian Nicholas Lash has called ‘doctrine as protocol’. The Chalcedonian definition, as minimal as it is, combines elements of Alexandrian and Antiochene Christology. It remains standard orthodoxy in every Christian denomination.