



Christology

How God became Jesus, and how Jesus became God. This dossier takes you through the development of Christology from the Bible through to the year AD451 - the Council of Chalcedon. You will meet the early Christian theologians as well as heretical thinkers wrestling with the question of how Jesus of Nazareth - who was born as a human being in time and history, could also be the God of Israel who created the universe and existed eternally before time and history even began!

WHAT IS CHRISTOLOGY?

“Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15)

For Christians, this might be the most important question anyone could ever be asked, and many answers have been given over the centuries. Was a Jewish rabbi, a moral teacher, a prophet, and a luminary, as some would have it? Or was he a religious agitator, a social revolutionary, or even a charlatan? All these point to a story about a 1st-century human born in the Roman Empire, who was, undoubtedly, a towering figure in human history. Almost everybody in the world agrees that Jesus of Nazareth was an important figure regardless of their background, religion, or culture.

However, for over two billion people in the world, there is *another* equally important story about Jesus – one that seems, at first, completely at odds with the story of Jesus the man. It is the story of Jesus, the son of God – who came down from heaven on his own terms and strode across the face of the earth. From the very earliest years of Christianity, Jesus was not just seen as an inspirational teacher but someone to be worshipped ‘as a God.’ (Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.)

This is what makes the Christian perspective on Jesus uniquely Christian. Christianity is centered on Jesus, as everyone knows. But he is the center in a very specific way. When the first followers of Jesus encountered Him, and began to write about Him, one thing they were quickly convinced of was that, somehow, in the person of Jesus, *God was truly and fully with us*. In this human being, God was right there. That’s the name the angel Gabriel gives him at the beginning of the gospel of Matthew: Emmanuel – God-with-us (Matt. 1:23).

And so, Christian theology emerged at the intersection of those two stories – that Jesus is both the human carpenter of Nazareth as well as the infinite creator God. This is the central question of the theological study of ‘Christology’. Just as sociology is the study of society, Christology is the study of Jesus Christ. However, it is not simply a study of Jesus Christ in the generic sense of studying a historical figure like Napoleon or Julius Caesar. It is the study of precisely how these two contradictory stories can converge. How is it that Jesus could, in fact, be two things at once? What might this mean for us and the world? And, crucially, how does it change our view of God and the meaning of life itself?

This dossier will cover the first four centuries of Christians wrestling with these questions, which is how long it took for Christians to come to a broadly stable understanding. Eventually, they formalized this understanding in short, concise articulations of their faith – Creeds. The debates became heated, philosophical, and incredibly intellectual; however, at the heart of it, what Christians wanted to preserve and protect was the original, monumental sense that the person of Jesus was indeed God, and that this God was truly *with us*.

THE FIRST STAGE: THE RADICAL EXPERIENCE OF JESUS AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

In the Bible, we find the two stories of Jesus interwoven. The human story is well represented and emphasized in the Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke (although it is also crucial in John). Jesus was the baby born in a manger in Bethlehem (Lk 1-2), with a clear Israelite ancestry (Matthew 1), who had a childhood (Lk 2:39-40), grew up and worked as a tradesman in the town of Nazareth (Mark 6), before entering into a period of Rabbinic teaching, amassing a following and then being crucified in Jerusalem. The earliest available sources – the letters written by the apostle Paul – presume that Jesus was a human being, a Jew who ‘descended from David’ (Rom 1:3). Jesus has all the qualities that we would think a human being would have. He is born, he walks, he talks, he sleeps, he weeps, he hungers, he thirsts, he grows tired, he bleeds, and he dies.

On the other hand, the New Testament also tells another story about Jesus. He is someone who came down from heaven being sent from an eternal existence (Gal 4:4) and had a position that had ‘equality with God’ (Phil 2:6-11); who was ‘before all things’ and who had the ‘fullness of God living in him’ (Col 1:15-19). He was someone who deserves the kind of worship that is only given to God (1 Cor 8). Amongst the Gospels, John makes this even more explicit. The story of Jesus does not begin with a baby in a manger, but rather with an eternal *λογος* (Word) that is ‘with God and was God’ at the beginning of creation and is involved in the creation of the world itself (Jn 1). Jesus, when confronting questions about his identity, answers ‘Before Abraham was, I am,’ invokes the divine Hebrew name ‘I Am’ (Jn 8:48). And then, and at the very end of John’s gospel, as if to hammer the point home, the disciple Thomas falls to his knees seeing Jesus alive after his death and resurrection and cries out “ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου” – My Lord and my God (theos). Both stories are told together about the same Jesus – the man and the God.

However, what emerges from the New Testament is also a very complex picture of Jesus with a vortex of images and titles given to him. How is he the Son of God, the Word of God, but also God? How is he the Messiah, the Lord, the great hero (*ἄρχηγός*), the firstborn of all creation, the beginning and the end all at the same time? – the list of titles and honorifics attributed to Jesus from Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures are almost endless.

It’s as if the authors of the New Testament did not have the words or categories to fully express what they experienced in their encounter with Jesus after His death and His resurrection. It was in their encounter with the human person of Jesus that they also simultaneously experienced an encounter with the God of the universe Himself, and not only that, but that they experienced a genuine sense of salvation, which only God can give, through this human person. And not just any God, but the same God who appeared in their Jewish Scriptures – what Christians call the Old Testament. So they imbued Him with every

possible category they had in their biblical and mythological arsenal.

This must have been an unsettling and disturbing prospect for many of them. The majority of the New Testament authors, being monotheistic Jews, knew it was blasphemy to worship anything or anyone other than the God of their Jewish scriptures. Not only that, but to worship another human being – something created rather than the Creator – would have been inconceivable to them. And yet, they did. They felt compelled to view what happened in the person of Jesus as fundamentally redefining their understanding of God.

As the New Testament was being written and coming together in the first century, major theological tensions began to emerge. How do we integrate the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus? And how do we reconcile the fact that Christians *worshipped* Jesus as God? Was Jesus actually a human? Was he actually fully divine? Or something in between? This led to a five century debate – often called the *Christological Controversies* – which culminated in two key moments for the Church, the Council of Nicaea, and the Council of Chalcedon.

2ND STAGE – THE ROAD TO NICAEA, THE FULLY HUMAN AND FULLY GOD JESUS.

The second stage of Christology was coming to terms with the fully human and fully God aspect of Jesus. Two key terms are important here: Docetism and Ebionitism. Docetism believed that Jesus was a divine being but not fully human, emphasizing only the story of Jesus the God. Ebionitism believed that Jesus was a normal human being who, at some point became divinely chosen, emphasizing the story of Jesus the Man. Finding the way between these two extremes was the story of the first 325 years of theological negotiation.

IS JESUS ACTUALLY HUMAN?

Today, the idea that a human being could be a supernatural divine being might be what gives people pause for concern. However, for the ancient world, it was the opposite question that was more concerning. They were familiar with divine beings coming to earth and interacting with human beings in corporeal form. The Greek and Roman myths of the gods appearing in human or animal form was a common motif, as were demi-god figures who were both of divine and human origin. Jewish stories of angelic visitations provided prototypes of divine beings walking amongst them. What made the claims of Christians so radical in their time was the coming together of two key factors. The first was the claim that the divine being who appeared in human form in Nazareth was not only someone of divine origin, but that he was *the* Most High God himself, rather than any intermediary god, demi-god, or angel. The second was the claim that this appearance of God was also utterly 'in the flesh'.

Throughout the second and third centuries, there were some people who worshiped Jesus who didn't believe





he was fully human. These perspectives are called Docetic – coming from the Greek verb ‘to appear’. Jesus was not truly Human, he only *appeared* to be human. While there was a tremendous diversity of ideas and opinions, two key movements have become the most famous: Marcionism and Valentinianism (later titled as a form of Gnosticism).

Around the year AD 140, an incredibly wealthy ship owner from the Black Sea (Behr 17, Tertullian) arrived in the docks of Rome and joined a Christian Church. There, he donated a staggering sum of 200,000 sesterces to the congregation and became a member. However, only a few years later, in the year 144, he was thrown out of the Church for his particular beliefs about Jesus. This ship-owner was none other than Marcion the Sinope. What did he believe?

In short, Marcion thought that the Father of Jesus Christ – the God of the New Testament could not have been the God of the Old Testament – the Jewish God proclaimed by the Law and prophets. Marcion seemed to have been overwhelmed by the wonder of the gospel – the grace that Jesus offered and radical invitation to call God Father. But he went too far. For Marcion, the Old Testament God was evil and the God that Jesus revealed was a loving and benevolent God – this might be a very familiar perspective! Marcion might have based his theology on his reading of Matthew 9:14-17 where Jesus teaches about ‘new wineskin’ – the gospel of Jesus Christ was completely separate from the story of the creator God who made the earth and accompanied the Jewish people throughout history. It was ‘new wine’ for a ‘new wineskin’.

Because Marcion believed that the God who created the world – the Jewish God – was evil, he also believed the created order like matter and materiality was also evil. Based on this belief, he reasoned that Jesus could not possibly have been a true human. He didn’t believe that Jesus was born as a child or had a real material body. What a horrifying thought that a divine being like Jesus should be ‘stuffed with excrement’ (Tert, *Marc.* 1.14). And so he believed that Jesus appeared full-grown, like an angel. He still underwent death on the Cross but this was taking on the curse of the evil Creator God of the Old Testament. The main theme from Marcion is ‘discontinuity’ and separation – between Jewish Law and the Gospel, between Father and God, between Old Testament and New Testament, and between Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless, Marcion had a problem. The majority of the New Testament books referenced Jewish prophecies and told the story of the human Jesus born of a virgin who was ‘in the flesh’. So he made a decision. Marcion believed that the apostle Paul alone knew the truth, and ‘[only to] him the mystery was manifested by revelation’ (Iren., *Haer.* 3.13), and he also used an edited version of the Gospel of Luke as his only biography about Jesus.

Marcion was a very convincing leader and he gathered lots of followers. It’s clear that he appreciated the radical beauty and wonder of the gospel, and could argue for his position compellingly from the Bible. This made Marcion a key figure in the development of Christology. He emphasised the story of Jesus the divine Son of God and completely rejected the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Meanwhile, there was another spiritual leader who was gaining traction - Valentinus. Like Marcion,



GNOSTIC

Valentinus seemed to have had a deep spiritual encounter with what he called ‘The Gospel of Truth which was joy’. (Robinson, 16). Jesus, to Valentinus, came to give us *knowledge* (or *gnosis*) to help us escape our physical bodies and gain salvation. Like Marcion, Valentinus believed that the creator God of the world was not the Most High God, and that Jesus came to liberate us from creation to become ‘spiritual’ beings. In a text that his followers probably read (*The Treatise of the Resurrection*), he seemed to have believed that human beings were souls that came from heaven, and that we only received our bodies when we entered this imperfect world. In other words, he believed that physical bodies are an evil burden that we can escape from with Jesus’ help.

The main difference between Marcion and Valentinus was that the Valentinians had a particularly strong goal of attaining ‘the gnosis [knowledge], the high knowledge, which enables its possessor to draw the truth out of various ancient writings and redeploy them in new myths’ (Behr, 23). That’s why they received the name ‘*Gnostics*’ (but it’s important to note that they would not have used that word to describe themselves).

What this often looked like was drawing on esoteric ancient philosophies with highly convoluted myths about the creation of the universe. Some of them paint incredibly elaborate pictures of how spiritual beings emanated from the realm of God with countless levels of angels, demons, and aeons (spiritual powers) emerging from Him. As they get closer to the physical world, they degrade and become trapped in physical bodies and it is from this physical prison that Jesus came to liberate us by his death on the cross. (*The Tripartite Tractate*). So again, Jesus was not fully human, but only *appeared* to be human – because if he had had a body, he would also be trapped in the prison of the material world. Valentinians were especially fond of the title *logos* for Jesus as in John 1. *logos* was a profoundly rich and complex concept with both Jewish scriptural and Greek philosophical roots. For Greeks in particular, the *logos* was the disembodied agent of creation of the transcendent Father God – it was the way that an infinite being like God could communicate with the created world, and it was this *logos* that appeared in Jesus.

As strange as the Valentinians and other *gnostic* thinkers were, they were drawing on some key themes in the New Testament – like the redemption and reconciliation of the human spirit with the transcendent greatness of God. How can the human mind possibly comprehend the abyss and heights of God’s plan for the world? So while it was a fundamental distortion of Christian doctrine, it did represent a serious effort to come to terms with the meaning of human existence. And so, throughout the second century, Marcion and Valentinus and other spiritual leaders gained a significant following.

Despite the sympathetic elements of the theology of Marcion and Valentinus, there are two serious problems with it. If Jesus is not fully human, then he is not truly with us. God did not *actually* come to meet us and fully identify himself with human suffering and existence. He only *appeared* to do so. And secondly, especially for Marcion, it’s unclear what God Jesus is meant to be revealing if it isn’t the creator God of the Old Testament.



There were many key theologians who took on these challenges throughout the first three centuries of Christianity. However, the person who gave the most extensive defence of the full humanity of Jesus was Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies* written in AD 180 in Lyon, Gaul.

WHAT WERE HIS MAIN ARGUMENTS?

Firstly, Irenaeus recognised that these debates about Jesus were about how we read the Bible. Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and huge chunks of the writings that were agreed by most Christians as being authorities on Jesus' life. Meanwhile Valentinus and other Gnostics brought in texts and 'ways of reading' texts that went far beyond the Old and New Testament.

Irenaeus argued that Christians shouldn't read the Bible in isolation. They have to take it as a whole instead of picking and choosing. That included the Old Testament but also all the texts that had been written in the apostolic period and those that were already becoming authorities in the Church. Further, Christians couldn't just let the Bible mean what they felt in their hearts. While the Bible can speak to us spiritually and metaphorically, it ultimately has to talk about the experience of Jesus Christ as the one who brings Salvation from God. So Irenaeus wrote that the 'only way to understand Scripture is to apply the canon of truth which is the faith of one God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth'.

This might sound slightly circular. The only way to properly understand the Bible and gain the proper understanding of Jesus is to read the Bible in a way that gives us the proper understanding of Jesus? This *would* be circular if the Bible was a completely closed system and was disconnected from real events that were narrated and experienced by people who met Jesus. But this forgets the fact that the Bible was written from the experiences of people who met the human Jesus and encountered God's salvation and God's very presence through him. It was these experiences that were remembered in early Christian worship which gave the framework for how to read the Bible. This way of reading the Bible was *handed down to them* by Christian leaders going back to the first followers of Jesus.

Irenaeus' perspective on the nature of Jesus Christ flowed from this understanding of the Bible. While the two stories of Jesus were found in the books of the New Testament – the logos that came from heaven, and the man who comes from the line of *Adam* (a human) – they had never been fully woven together explicitly. Irenaeus' theological innovation was making explicit the connection of *logos* and *Adam*. For Irenaeus, when the Gospel of John wrote that the 'Logos became flesh', it was not metaphorical, or figurative, or 'appearing' to be like flesh. Instead, it was into the very flesh of Adam's family – that is, humanity – that the *logos* was born. Only in this way could God actually be *with* us and truly save humanity by infusing humanity with something of his divinity. So he writes that Jesus 'through his transcendent love, became what we are in order to bring us to be like him' (Book V, preface). In the person of Jesus, heaven meets earth – divine presence was made manifest in his physical body.

Irenaeus' arguments were crucial for Christianity at this time and followed through into the third and fourth century. By the end of the second century, the idea that Jesus was not really a human being was broadly rejected by the Church.



IS JESUS ACTUALLY GOD?

On the other hand, there were some religious leaders and people who followed Jesus who couldn't believe that Jesus was *actually* God. God was God, He was One, and transcendent, and eternal. How could a human actually *be* God? And so lots of different options emerged.

Some thought that Jesus Christ was just a human being born of Mary and Joseph who was a particularly powerful prophet and teacher who was possessed by the Holy Spirit. This was very much in line with existing Jewish categories of divine activity through people like the prophets.

Others went slightly further by saying that, while Jesus Christ was born as a normal human being but was *adopted* into divinity at a certain point in time – not unlike many of the Roman Emperors. Some pointed to the Baptism scene in Matthew 4 or John 1 to show that Jesus *became* divine during his ministry. These people came to be known as 'adoptionists'.

Other people believed that Jesus was always a divine being but was subordinate or lesser than God the Father – like a sub-deity or a demi-God. These people came to be known as the Subordinationists and they pointed to passages in the Gospels where Jesus says that the Father is *greater* than he is (Jn 14:28).

However, the biggest controversy from this side of the debate arose in the late 3rd century with the emergence of an Alexandrian theologian in Egypt called Arius. Arius' perspective was very nuanced and well-argued from the Bible. Arius did believe that Jesus was a divine being, involved in the creation of the world, and who also existed before all time. He also believed that Jesus became a real human and died and rose again. But, he believed that Jesus was a created being – even though he was the 'firstborn' and ranks highest amongst all creation – he was nevertheless not *God* in the sense of eternally existing. In his words: "There was a time when the Son was not". He based this on some key bible texts. For example, in Proverbs 8:22-31, a passage about God's Wisdom which was often used to show Jesus in the Old Testament. In that passage, Wisdom is described as being 'created'. Another key phrase that Arius used was that Jesus and the Father were not of the same 'essence' – they were not the same *thing*, that is, God. Because God the Father is utterly transcendent, it means that there is no way that anything can be the same essence as Him, so we can't call Jesus God.

On one level, Arius' perspective is understandable. He wants to respect the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity, and take seriously some of the passages in the Bible. He was trying to be faithful to what he believed was the truth about Jesus. However, the result of his perspective meant that Jesus was neither human or God but something in the middle. 'The ultimate outcome of the Arian system was a Christ suspended between man and God' (Pelikan, 198), less than God, but more than humanity. What this meant, again, was that the fundamental experience of the person of Jesus as 'God with us' – Emmanuel – could not be given full expression.



HOLDING THEM BOTH TOGETHER: JESUS IS FULLY GOD AND FULLY MAN?

The controversy surrounding Arius' theology was electric in the Christian Church. But, during this time, something extraordinary happened throughout the Roman Empire. The Emperor, Constantine the Great, had abolished all policies that persecuted Christians and had even apparently converted to Christianity. Not only that, but he wanted Christians leaders from all around the world to come together to Nicaea to sort out, once and for all, what they actually believed about Jesus. This was the watershed moment of the Council of Nicaea in the year AD 325.

The result of this council was the first official creed – a short statement of faith that summaries the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith to be used during public worship:

*We believe in one God, the Father almighty,
maker of all things visible and invisible;
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
begotten from the Father, only-begotten,
that is, from the substance of the Father,
God from God, light from light, true God from true God,
begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, (Homooousios)
through Whom all things came into being,
things in heaven and things on earth,
Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down,
and became incarnate and became man,
and suffered, and rose again on the third day,
and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead,
And in the Holy Spirit.*



What is most striking about this first creed of Christian faith is how much space is devoted to the person of Jesus Christ. It comprises the majority of the Creed and was the primary subject of discussion at the Council of Nicaea. The creed describes Jesus as the ‘Son of God’ the Father, who is a divine being - a ‘true God’. He is ‘begotten, not made’ pressing the point that he was never created by anyone at any given time. It also holds together the story of Jesus the human, asserting that he ‘became man’ and could also ‘suffer’. However, the most crucial word in this creed is the Greek word: “Homoousios”. Translated here as ‘one substance with the Father’ or other times, ‘one essence’ with the Father. This went directly against Arius and the majority of the proceedings were devoted to whether or not we could call Jesus *homoousios* with the Father. Was this the end of the matter? Well, no. Just because a council in Nicaea agreed something about theology didn’t mean that all Christians everywhere agreed. For the next 60 or so years, theologians were still debating and discussing this issue. There were still many people who were convinced by Arius’ perspective, but there were also many critics – the most voracious of whom was the Alexandrian bishop, Athanasius.

Athanasius was consecrated Bishop of Alexandria in AD 328 when he was still only in his early 30s. Alexandria, was in a state of instability with the Arian controversy splitting the Church. Athanasius’s life was an incredibly exciting one filled with death-threats, desert exiles, and conspiracies against him. But for the purposes of this chapter, what’s most important is his perspective on Jesus. Athanasius, building on the work of Irenaeus, made a very strong case for the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus.

Firstly, Athanasius argued that it is only God who can save and only God who can break the power of sin and bring humanity to eternal life. Only the creator can redeem the creation. If Christ is not God, he is part of the problem, not its solution. Having emphasised that only God alone could save, which everyone could agree on, Athanasius made a theological move that the Arians found hard to deny. Throughout the New Testament and early Christian worship Jesus is consistently regarded as the Saviour of humanity. So, If only God can save, and Jesus is the Saviour, Jesus must be God incarnate. Like Irenaeus, Athanasius argued that humanity could only be saved from death if something eternal also entered into humanity – like having a spiritual blood transfusion. God had to become human for humans to gain eternal life like God.

Secondly, Athanasius pointed to the fact that Christians worshipped Jesus from the very beginning of the Christian movement. If Jesus was not God, this would amount to idolatry and Christians were doing a terrible thing by worshipping Jesus, the human being. Arius still believed that Christians should worship Jesus even though he is not God. For Athanasius, this was logically inconsistent – you could only worship God and so, Arius could not both affirm the Christian practice of worshipping Jesus and hold to the perspective that he was not God.

Athanasius' arguments were very powerful, although he was known for polemicising Arius and making him seem more like a villain than he really was. Nevertheless, in AD 381, another council of Christian leaders met at Constantinople to fully confirm what they agreed at Nicaea as well as iron out some finer details. This led to what has come to be known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed – many Christians say this version of the Creed even today in their Church services. At this point, things seemed quite stable. Christians, almost everywhere, agreed that Jesus was indeed, fully human and fully God and that this was the proper interpretation of the entire Bible.

381-451: THE CHALCEDONIAN STAGE – HOW IS HE FULLY GOD AND FULLY MAN?

It would be nice if Christians called it a day and never argued ever again. That, of course, was not the case. After Nicaea affirmed that Christ is both fully divine and human, there was another question that followed from it. *How* did these two aspects of Jesus relate to each other? How exactly was Jesus fully God and fully Human? This became the central question to the third stage of Christological development in the early Church which culminated in the year AD 451 at the Council of Chalcedon. By this time, the Church in the Roman Empire was imperialising and developing powerful institutional structures. The history between 325 and 451' is incredibly rich and included several other Church councils and gatherings that decided on various smaller subjects. For now however, we'll focus primarily on the ideas about Jesus behind what was agreed in 451.

JESUS WAS ONE MAN WITH ONE BODY. HOW CAN HE BE TWO THINGS FULLY?

One option was to say that Jesus is both a human person with a human nature *and* a divine person with a divine nature – two beings crammed into one body. This view became associated with a controversial Christian leader called Nestorius who was an Archbishop in Constantinople in AD 431. In some ways, this was the easiest option, uncomplicated and easy to visualise. However, this option did not seem to take seriously the true coming together of humanity and divinity in Jesus. It was as if God and Humanity moved into the same house without truly becoming one. This also has the strange implication that there are two independent people in the same human body in a strange split-personality sense. You can say this depiction of Jesus has *two natures* – divine and human – and *two persons* [*hypostases*] – the human Jesus of Nazareth and the divine Son of God. This was rejected as early as 431 at another Council at Ephesus.

Another option was put forward by Apollinarius of Laodicea. Apollinarius was anxious about the idea that God could be contaminated with the weaknesses of human nature. He asked, how could Jesus actually be sinless if he's fully human? The human mind and the soul was the source of sin and rebellion against God. And so, the only way Jesus Christ could be a sinless human is if the divine part of Jesus *took the place* of a human part of Jesus. For Apollinarius, therefore, Jesus didn't have a human mind or soul – instead, where the mind/soul *should* be, was a 'divine energy'. It was as if a part of the human Jesus' personality was switched out with a divine piece. This was condemned by a theologian called Gregory Nazianzen because it meant that something human was not actually taken up by God and therefore, not redeemed. For God to be really with *us*, and save humanity, he must have fully been *us* – human all the way through.

Another, more radical version of this, associated with Eutyches, was the idea that the divine and human parts of Jesus came together to form a new third nature – a mingling or confusion of the two parts. This was no good either, because once again, Jesus would no longer be fully God or fully human – he would be neither again. This depiction of Jesus has *one nature* – a mixture of divine and human – and *one person* – Jesus of Nazareth. The problem is similar to what occurred with Arius' perspective – the person of Jesus is neither *human* or *divine* but something in the middle.



We then have another seeming paradox on our hands. Jesus Christ can't just be two separate human and divine persons crammed into the same body. Neither can his humanity and divinity be merged into one thing. His humanity and his divinity must be perfectly united in the person of Jesus, yet also separate in some way. Christians wanted to say that Jesus really was one person with two natures – somewhere in between the other two options. And the way theologians mediated this was by proposing something known as the *hypostatic union*. The two natures of Jesus (divine and human) existed in one 'person' with the two natures being held together in a mysterious and supernatural way. Jesus was one person – he experienced the world as one personality and sense of being. But, in this one personality, he fully expressed and embodied the fullness of both divinity and humanity held together in union. You can't split Jesus and stories about him into his God-parts and his Human-parts: every part of him tells us something about the full reality of God and Humanity.

This stage of the debate shows us just how radical and paradigm shifting it was to make the claim that Jesus was truly *fully God* and *fully Human* – and this 'Chalcedonian' debate was about Christians wanting to find the right way to talk about and worship Jesus! When Jesus died on the cross, could they say that God died on the Cross? When Mary gave birth to Jesus, could they say that Mary gave birth to God? Christians then, like today, wanted to make sure that when they wrote their prayers, songs, and liturgies for their services they were being truthful and faithful to the Jesus they had encountered. The Jesus that Christians worship was not Jesus of Nazareth and the divine Son of God – two persons – crammed into one body with a split personality. Neither was Jesus a blend of Jesus of Nazareth mixed together with the divine Son of God. The Jesus that Christians worshipped was Jesus of Nazareth who was at the same time the divine Son of God.

These debates continued through the end of the fourth century and halfway through the fifth when, finally, in 451 AD, yet another Council came together in Chalcedon, a city in Northern Turkey. What they came up with was perhaps less elegant as Nicaea but it articulated the development in a single paragraph: Jesus Christ, was:

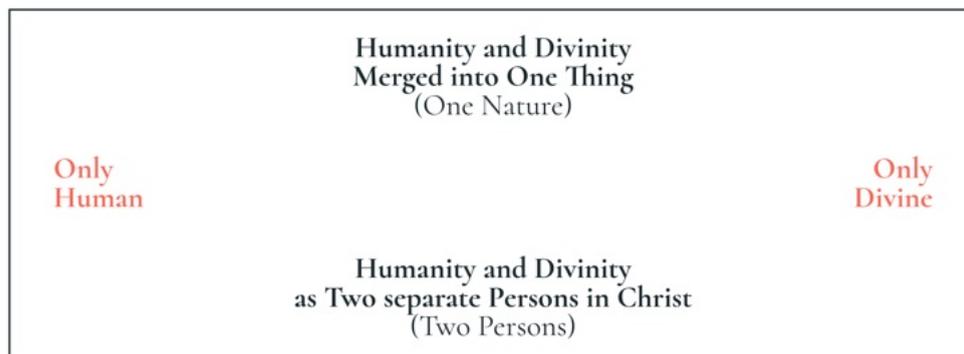
...perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity... acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no 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 and a single subsistent being.

The most important words in this formula were the four 'no's – 'no confusion, no change, no division, no separation'. In many ways, Chalcedon was more about establishing what Jesus wasn't rather than what he was. They didn't, in the end, give a fully coherent way of how his divinity and humanity were united in this '*hypostatic union*' but that wasn't the point. The point was to affirm again, even after the complexity it raised, the mysterious fact that Jesus was well and truly, completely, fully God and fully Man.

Nevertheless, the Council of Chalcedon was nothing like Nicaea in terms of its universality. It was ambiguous because not *everyone* attended Chalcedon. Many bishops from Egypt, Syria, and Armenia did not or could not attend which sadly led to the first global split in the Church between the Christians in the Roman Empire and Christians further East and South. Because of this, it is often seen as the *ambiguous* ending to almost a half millennium of Christological discussion but that's for another time.

SO WHAT?

We can summarise this entire story of Christology in this diagram where the portrait of Jesus exists in the middle of these two continuums. Fully human, fully divine, with both of these existing separately in the *one* person of Jesus Christ.



We might get to this stage with spinning heads, feeling intellectually exhausted! And the question that might confront us is, so what? How can all this - *homoousios*, *hypostatic union*, natures, persons, essences – be relevant to being a Christian today? We don't need to know any of this to have a vibrant faith, neither do we need to even understand it! I can just worship Jesus and get on with life.

On one level, that's very true. You don't need to know exactly how an internal combustion engine works to drive a car or know how computers are put together to use it. But then again, it can be helpful to know what kind of fuel the engine takes for the car to run or what operating system your computer runs. With the wrong fuel, the car isn't going to go very far. What difference does this story of Christology make for our faith today?

Well, firstly, it helps us recognize how extraordinary and paradigm shifting the event of Jesus actually was. It made monotheistic Jews contend with how they could worship a human being, it made Greek and Roman philosophers reconsider their entire philosophical worldviews. It was not an easy or obvious direction for religion to take and it demonstrates how fundamental the early Christians' experience of Jesus was. The ideas we take for granted today were hard won truths that required intense reflection on the part of some of the smartest thinkers in the Christian Church. The events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were so rich and significant that the authors of the Bible painted a stunningly complex portrait of Jesus and how they experienced him. It took later Christians hundreds of years to decipher and encapsulate what they meant in a way that could be faithful to the entire Bible but communicated to Christians everywhere. These Christians, even the ones whose perspectives were ultimately rejected, were like the first engineers experimenting with the belts and gears and highly flammable substances to put together an engine. It should be a humbling experience hearing these stories of Christians who spent their entire lives wrestling with these questions. Maybe we should be less confident about the way we want to read the Bible.

Secondly, what resulted from this 500 year-long development was a picture of Jesus that always remains a riddle. Yes, Jesus was the personal God who was with us who we could encounter in the Bible and in the



communities of Christian faith, but you could never pin him down or completely ‘figure’ Him out. The perspectives that Nicaea and Chalcedon ruled out were the perspectives that ‘figured’ Jesus out – wanting to collapse the two stories about Jesus into a clean definition. It wasn’t a council of leaders imposing a definition that would flatten out the Church and eliminate other competing opinions – it was an attempt to ensure that Jesus always remains fresh, paradoxical, and mysterious. One way to look at this is seeing the Creeds as ‘horizons’ rather than static ‘definitions’ (Coakley, 160). They created the boundaries within which Christians could safely *play* in their worship of their God rather than fixing Jesus down with philosophical pins. Because of these developments, Jesus remained always both out of reach and yet closer than a friend and set the stage for later Christians to continue to encounter Him. But it also means that when we read the Gospels, and read that ‘Jesus wept’, we can say that ‘God wept’ – and even that God died for us, and God walked with us. We can say these things without worrying that we’re getting something wrong.

But ultimately, what the conclusions of the Christological debates continually affirmed was the fundamental experience of the Bible. That God became Incarnate in the person of Jesus. That God was *really with us*. It provided us a framework for understanding the rich biblical testimony about Jesus – helping us to see him as the intersection between God and humanity, the lens through which we see and know God and the path to God. Jesus does not just teach us about God but reveals Him to us.

The writer Dorothy L. Sayers provided one of the finest summaries of the significance of Christ for Christians, which beautifully unfolds the deeper meaning of the doctrine of the Incarnation, set out at the Council of Chalcedon: ‘The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which relevance stands or falls. If Christ was only man, then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life.’ (Sayers 1946, 32) Early Christianity grasped this insight as central to the apostolic understanding of Christ, and developed classical ways of expressing it which remain relevant and helpful today.

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