A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

An Introduction

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TRULY HUMAN, TRULY DIVINE

Every place in the city is full of them: the alleys, the crossroads, the forums, the squares. Garment sellers, money changers, food vendors—they are all at it. If you ask for change, they philosophize for you about generate and ungenerate natures. If you inquire about the price of bread, the answer is that the Father is greater and the Son inferior. If you speak about whether the bath is ready, they express the opinion that the Son was made out of nothing.

—Gregory of Nyssa’s despairing comment on the pervasiveness of theological debate in the city of Constantinople

By the early third century, most Christians had come to believe that Christ was both human and divine. That conviction had not come easily. Then as now, many people, when confronted with a poor carpenter’s son suffering on a cross, thought that God could not possibly be like that. Important factors in Christianity’s background reinforced that instinct. The monotheism they inherited from Judaism made Christians nervous about saying that Christ was divine yet not identical with God the Father. That sounded like belief in two Gods. The Greek philosophical tradition with which Christianity had struck an alliance taught that the divine cannot change or suffer—so how could a crucified human being be divine?

In the second century, many Gnostics and others had concluded that Christ had not really been a human being—he only seemed to be. Historians call this view Docetism (from a Greek word meaning “to seem”). Most Christians, however, eventually came to feel that Docetism would turn Jesus’ life into a sort of trick, an illusion. Moreover, Christians who believed that Christ’s suffering and death on the cross saved them from their sins feared that if Christ had only seemed to suffer and die, then they could only seem to be saved.

What about the other alternative? Perhaps Jesus was not divine. Some early Jewish Christians apparently thought of him as no more than a great man, a prophet and teacher, or perhaps one of Yahweh’s angels. But in most of the books in the New Testament Christ’s divinity was already implied, whether by the story of the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke, or by John’s references to the divine Logos, or by Paul’s account of Christ’s preexistence in equality with God. The earliest surviving Christian sermon outside the New Testament firmly proclaimed: “Brethren, we must think of Jesus Christ as we do of God... and we must not think lightly of our salvation. For when we think little of him, we also hope to receive little.” That was the point, really. Christians prayed to Christ, they worshiped him, and they trusted in him for salvation. If Christ was only a man, or even an angel, that trust seemed misplaced. Only God never changes; only God is all-powerful. For believers to be ultimately secure, trust in Christ needed to be trust in God.

Such reflections produced general agreement among Christians by the late second century that Christ was both human and divine, but that agreement only led the foundation for centuries of debate, above all concerning two questions: If Christ was divine, what was his relation to God the Father? If Christ was both human and divine, how were humanity and divinity related within him? The Council of Nicea in 325 and the doctrine of the Trinity which developed in its wake tried to answer the first question; the Council of Chalcedon in 451 addressed the second. Before tracing the history of these debates, it may be helpful to set out the rules of the game. How did Christians decide what to believe? How did you win an argument if you were a third- or fourth-century theologian? Three principles guided the debate.

1. Do not contradict the Bible. Christians continued to debate just which books belonged in the New Testament, but they recognized the general authority of Scripture and tended to reject theories that seemed to contradict it.

2. Do not interfere with the liturgy. Christians will generally leave theologians alone, considering them harmless enough, but theologians who tell them to stop praying as their parents taught them risk instant unpopularity.

3. Do not threaten the means of salvation. As already noted, early Christians affirmed Christ’s divinity and humanity in part because saying that Christ had only seemed to be human, or had not been truly divine, had threatened their confidence in their
salvation. That concern continued to shape subsequent debates. To understand its impact requires a digression on how Christians thought Christ had saved them.

THE MEANS OF SALVATION

Many Gnostics, as well as apologists like Justin Martyr, spoke of Christ primarily as a teacher, one who saved us by telling us things we had forgotten or never known. Jesus taught us how to live, or explained our true nature. To many Christians, however, that picture of Christ as teacher seemed incomplete. If it was just a matter of imparting information, why couldn't God simply have sent an angel or a prophet? Even more, why would a teacher need to suffer and die on a cross? Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in southern France in the late second century who developed the theory of apostolic succession, sought the basis for a fuller account of Christ's saving work in Paul's references to Christ as the second Adam. When Adam, out of pride and disobedience, sinned, something went wrong with humanity. Christ put things right. He undid what Adam had done by living a human life of humility and obedience, even to death. Historians call this the theory of recapitulation (Christ repeated Adam, only in reverse), and it has undergirded most accounts of the work of Christ ever since. Accepting recapitulation, however, left a need to define what Adam had done wrong and how Christ put it right.

According to one view, Adam had yielded to Satan's trickery and obeyed him rather than God, thereby putting humanity under Satan's lordship. Christ then freed us by defeating Satan. According to some accounts he even used trickery to defeat trickery. Since Adam had voluntarily submitted to Satan, so the argument went, Satan had legitimate rights over all Adam's descendants. Since God is completely just, he could not simply ignore those rights. But God had never submitted to Satan, so Satan had no rights over God. Now Christ looked like a mere human being, and therefore Satan, deceived, tried to seize him. Since Christ was also divine, Satan thereby overreached his rights. Now all deals were off, and God could legitimately punish Satan by freeing humanity from his power. In the vivid words of the fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa, "The Deity was under the veil of our nature, so that, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh." Augustine later said the same thing: "The cross of the Lord became a trap for the Devil; the death of the Lord was the food by which he was ensnared." Such imagery captured the drama and conflicts of salvation and portrayed a God acting in love to save humanity while remaining perfectly just, even to respecting the rights of Satan, but it raised some awkward questions. Did Satan really have a legitimate power over humanity, a power God had to respect until Satan went too far? Did Christ accomplish our salvation through trickery?

Another version of recapitulation used the language of sacrifice and the law courts. Adam had disobeyed God and thereby damaged humanity's relationship with God. When one betrays a friend, something must be done to mend that friendship. Similarly, in the Old Testament, people who had sinned offered a sacrifice to signify their repentance and restore their fellowship with God. In law, one might have to pay a penalty to an injured party to redress the injury done—and one did people an injury if one failed to give them their due honor or respect. Our disobedience has distorted our relationship with God and left us owing God a penalty for the injury we have done his honor. Christ's suffering and death represent a sacrifice on our behalf, a payment for our sin.

This theory too posed some problems. We expect Satan to be nasty, so it comes as no surprise when Christ has to suffer to overcome his power, but we might think God would be willing to forgive us without demanding the price of such suffering. Moreover, the idea that "Christ" pays a penalty to "God" risks implying a separation between them that either denies Christ's divinity or else posits the existence of two Gods. Yet, like the imagery of victory over Satan, this language explained Christ's work in a way that reconciled divine love and divine justice.

Behind these and other versions of the theory of recapitulation lay an assumption about the unity of "humanity" that owed much to Platonic philosophy. Most of us today take a kind of individualism for granted, and we find it hard to understand why something Adam did should affect all human beings. Plato, however, had taught that only universal terms like "justice" and "humanity" have an independent reality. Particular laws or human beings are just or human only to the degree that they participate in those universal forms. Adam's sin, therefore, did not just corrupt Adam; it corrupted all humanity, and therefore humanity needs to be transformed. When Christ became human, he united humanity with divinity, and thus all of us, as participants in humanity, began to share in divinity. As Origen put it, "With Jesus human and divine nature began to be woven together, so that by fellowship with divinity human nature might become divine." Today we retain only slight touches of this way of thinking—as when,
for instance, a fellow countryman does something unusually heroic or shameful and we feel proud or guilty, as if this act had altered what it is to be a citizen.

Different accounts of recapitulation thus offered different theories of what Christ did for us: he freed us from Satan, he healed our relationship with God by making a sacrifice or payment, or he transformed our humanity by uniting it with divinity. A particular theologian might appeal to two or all three, though the language of sacrifice was more popular among Latin-speaking Christians, and that of union with divinity more common in the Greek world. All these accounts of what Christ does repeatedly played an important role in defining who Christ is. That leads us back to the main theme of this chapter, the question of what it meant to call Christ both human and divine.

THE ROAD TO NICAEA

Most Christians had come to believe that Christ was divine as well as human, and they had always believed that there is only one God, but did this mean that Christ was simply identical with that one God? Not exactly. Three theologians living in Rome about 200—Noetus, Praxeas, and Sabellius—encountered problems when they proposed such a simple identification. "Do you see," Noetus asked, "how the Scriptures proclaim one God? And as this is clearly exhibited . . . I am under necessity . . . to make this One the subject of suffering. For Christ was God." What evil, then, am I doing in glorifying Christ? he wanted to know. "We know in truth one God; we know Christ." What evil was he doing? A number of his contemporaries did not hesitate to tell him. Above all, they said, "Sabellians" like Noetus contradicted the Bible. Hilary of Poitiers set out the specifics 150 years later:

If he dares, let Sabellius proclaim the Father and the Son as one and the same . . . He will at once hear from the Gospels, not once or twice, but frequently: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." He will hear: "The Father is greater than I." He will hear: "I go to the Father." He will hear: "Father, I give thee thanks" and "Father, glorify me."

In other words, the New Testament repeatedly distinguished between the Father and the Son. Christ prayed to his Father. Therefore, Christ cannot be identical with the Father.

That leads back to the old question: If Christ is divine but is not the Father, are there not two Gods? Tertullian looked for a way out of this problem with a series of metaphors. "God sent forth the Word," he explained, ". . . just as the root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river, and the sun the ray." Therefore we can distinguish between Father and Son, just as we can distinguish between sun and the ray of light flowing from it, but they are not two separate things.

For the root and the tree are distinctly two things, but correlatively joined; the fountain and the river are also two forms, but indivisible; so likewise the sun and the ray are two forms, but coherent ones. Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated. This recognized the New Testament distinction between Father and Son without leading to belief in two Gods.

Unfortunately, these metaphors, used by Origen and many other writers as well, contained a hidden problem. If the Father was the sun and Christ merely one ray coming out of the sun, then Christ was clearly subordinate to the Father. Tertullian admitted as much: "For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole as He Himself acknowledges: 'My Father is greater than I.'" The difficulties of this view became clear only in the theories of Arius, a priest living in Alexandria around 300, whom tradition has cast as the villain of this story. Arius wanted to make it absolutely clear that the Son is not identical with the Father. Only the Father, he said, is eternal; the Son is subordinate to the Father and was created at some point in time.

The Word of God was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing . . . Wherefore there was a time when he did not exist, inasmuch as the Son is a creature and a work . . . He is neither like the Father as it regards his essence, nor is by nature either the Father's true Word, or true Wisdom, but indeed one of his works and creatures.

Having a genius for propaganda, Arius set his favorite slogan to a popular tune, and soon half of Alexandria was singing, "There was a time when the Son was not."

Arius encountered a remarkable opponent. If there is not already a patron saint of stubbornness, Athanasius would be the logical candidate. At the beginning of the Arian dispute, he was in his early twenties, secretary to the bishop of Alexandria. He had, according to tradition, unusually dark skin, a hooked nose, and a red beard, and he was so small that his opponents called him a dwarf. He never,
ever, gave in on anything. He once grabbed the bridle of the Emperor Constantine’s horse and refused to let go until Constantine had conceded a theological point. Before he died at about eighty, he had become bishop of Alexandria, had been exiled five times to every corner of the empire, had hidden for years in the deserts of Egypt, had received popular ovations greater than those given any military hero, and had taken on every opponent from the emperor on down.

Arius taught that the Son had been created in time. Athanasius insisted that the Son was begotten eternally. The conflicts between creating and begetting, and between in time and eternally shaped their debate.

Judaism had drawn a sharp line between God and God’s creation. Therefore, Athanasius argued, if the Son was created, the Son was on the wrong side of that line and could not be divine. Thearians protested that they did believe in the Son’s divinity. Even if they could do so consistently, Athanasius replied, they would then believe in two divine beings, one uncreated and the other created. That would mean they believed in two Gods. “Either they must own that He is not true God, because He Himself is one of the creatures, or if, from regard for the Scriptures, they will go on to call Him a God, it is impossible for them to deny that there are two Gods.”

According to Athanasius, the Son was not created but “begotten.” Anything created is made out of a separate material; a pot, for instance, has nothing substantial in common with the potter who made it. “Begotten,” or “born from,” on the other hand, implies that the Son comes out of the Father as a child comes out of its parents’ substance. But calling Christ begotten makes him divine and not a creature. Thus calling the Son begotten implied that (and this became the crucial term for Athanasius) the Son was “of the same substance” (in Greek, homoousios) with the Father.

At the same time, Athanasius warned, the begetting of the Son is not like the begetting of a human child. “The generation of the Son is not like that of a man, which requires an existence after that of the Father. . . . But the nature of the Son of God being infinite and eternal, His generation must, of necessity, be infinite and eternal too.” The Son was not begotten in time; his relation with the Father is eternal. Therefore Athanasius could not accept Arians’ slogan that “There was a time when the Son was not.” A Christ who had come into existence, he insisted, had already undergone change and might change again. If Arius was right, he said, “there is the same nature in the Son as there is in us. He is liable to change and variation; He may turn into evil ways if He is so inclined: His nature, like ours, is mutable.” If our confidence in our salvation rests in a Christ who may change, then it cannot be secure, and for Athanasius a Christ who had come into existence was necessarily a Christ who might change again.

Both Arius and Athanasius won considerable support, and that aroused the concern of the Emperor Constantine. A short time before, Constantine had become a Christian. Whatever his motives—a notorious historical puzzle—he clearly had hoped for Christian support in holding his fragile empire together. While Christians probably constituted only 10 to 20 percent of the empire’s population, they had an enthusiasm and organization very appealing to an emperor who needed all the help he could get. Imagine, then, his dismay when he found that his new allies were torn by a dispute he could never quite understand. “Having made a careful inquiry into the origin and foundation of these differences,” he wrote to the leaders of both sides, “I find the cause to be of a truly insignificant character, and quite unworthy of such fierce contention.” Constantine therefore called over three hundred bishops together in a council at Nicaea. This first official council of the whole church condemned the Arians and wrote a statement of faith, the Nicene Creed, which declared that Christ was “begotten, not created,” and “of the same substance as the Father.”

THE TRINITY

Or so it seemed. At first glance, Nicaea appeared to have settled the question, but further arguments broke out almost at once. For one thing, though the Arians had lost a battle, they continued to fight the war. Later in Constantine’s reign and even more under his son Constantius they secured considerable imperial support. Even worse, it soon emerged that those who had signed the Nicene Creed could not agree on what it meant. The crucial debate centered on the statement that the Son was “of the same substance” (homoousios) with the Father. Perhaps an analogy can clarify the issue. Suppose I told you that the paperweight on my desk is made from the marble from which the Parthenon is constructed—the same substance. You might think I meant “the same substance” in the sense of “the same type of marble,” or you might think I had crept up to the Parthenon late one night and chopped off a piece of that very substance. Most of the bishops at Nicaea interpreted homoousios in the first sense. In effect, they thought that human beings, trees, and rocks are made of changing, destructible stuff, while the Father is made of eternal, unchanging stuff, and the Son is made of the same sort of stuff as the Father.
Athanasius, on the other hand, insisted that the Son was of the very same substance as the Father. He charged his opponents with abandoning the Nicene Creed by replacing "of the same substance" with "of similar substance" (in Greek, the change is from homousios to homoiousios—an iota's worth of difference). That led away from monotheism, since it implied the existence of two separate beings, both made of divine substance.

The difficulty for Athanasius concerned all those New Testament passages which made a distinction between the Father and the Son, which had earlier been the crucial problem for the Sabellians. How could the Son pray to the Father, or the Father be greater than the Son, if they were homousios? If Athanasius' position were to triumph, as it eventually did, someone would have to explain how the Father and the Son could be "of the same substance" yet not identical. To add further complications, a similar debate had developed concerning the Holy Spirit. The traditional formula of baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," which carried the authority of both Scripture and liturgy, seemed to imply that whatever was said about the Father and Son ought to be said about the Holy Spirit too. The works of the Spirit played an extremely important role in the early church; however, for a long time theologians had devoted little attention to it. As early as 200 Tertullian called the Spirit "God," but no Christian writing in Greek did so until the late fourth century. The Nicene Creed tersely declared, "We believe...in the Holy Spirit," without any further comment. Still, the ideal solution concerning the relation of Father and Son clearly ought to accommodate the Holy Spirit as well.

The task of developing that solution fell to three theologians from Cappadocia, in what is now northern Turkey—Basil, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Together, these three Cappadocians had all the resources needed in intellectual controversy. Basil and Gregory came from a remarkable family. Their sister Macrina may have been its most powerful personality. She devoted herself to an ascetic life, shamed Basil out of his youthful pride in his oratorical abilities, and comforted Gregory on Basil's death. Gregory's account of her own deathbed conversation portrays a woman of deep piety and formidable theological learning. Basil was the organizer in the family, with all the gifts of a great military commander. He founded a famous monastery, and the rules he set down for his monks still regulate life in most Greek monasteries. One senses Basil's spirit in a letter he wrote describing the site of his monastery; he reserved his greatest enthusiasm for its military ad-

vantages: "There is one entrance to it, of which we are the master." His brother Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, was a poet and a dreamer. For a long time he drifted through life without either a career or much religion, but he eventually found a deep faith. If faith came to Basil as a call to battle, however, Gregory heard it as an invitation to love whispered to the soul.

When she has torn herself from her attachment to sin, and by that mystic kiss she yearns to bring her mouth close to the fountain of light, then does she become beautiful, radiant with the light of truth... Like a steed she races through all she perceives by sense or by reason; and she soars like a dove until she comes to rest with longing under the shade of the apple tree... Then she is encompassed by a divine night during which the spouse approaches but does not reveal Himself.

Such visions of speeding beyond sense and reason drew on the neo-Platonic tradition, but Gregory brought to them an emotion uniquely his own. With love, everything ought to be simple. When Basil feuded with a friend and they refused to speak to each other, Gregory forgave a letter of apology from the friend to Basil. Basil was furious when he found out, but the quarrel had been mended, and Gregory never thought he had done anything wrong.

If Gregory of Nyssa added the insight of a poet to his brother's determination, their friend Gregory of Nazianzus brought the skills of a great orator. In his youth he went off to study at the pagan university at Athens, full of ambition for a career in public speaking. He met Basil, and it changed his life. "I sought there eloquence," he wrote many years later, "and found happiness, for I found Basil. I was like Saul, who in searching for asses found a kingdom." Basil tested their friendship severely. Needing bishops he could trust to vote on his side, he arranged Gregory's appointment to a tiny village in the middle of nowhere. Completely unsuited for pastoral work, Gregory soon retired in discouragement. Doubts about his own faith evidently always haunted him, but when the issue hung in the balance, he yielded again to Basil and went to Constantinople, the imperial capital, and delivered a brilliant series of orations that secured the triumph of the Nicene Creed.

The Cappadocians saved homousios theology by making a terminological distinction. The problem was how to define the difference among Father, Son, and Spirit if they were "of the same substance." Using terminology that went back to Origen, the Cappadocians said that God was one ousia but three hypostases
Tertullian, Latin-speaking Christians had made a parallel distinction between three personae (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and one substantia. Unfortunately, substantia is the literal Latin translation of hypostasis (both words mean “that which stands under”), so horrified Latin-speaking Christians read Greek references to “three hypostases” as meaning “three substantiae.” Eventually, the two linguistic halves of Christianity decided that they were just using different words to say the same thing. As Augustine put it, “For the sake, then, of speaking of things that cannot be uttered, that we may be able in some way to utter what we are able in no way to utter fully, our Greek friends have spoken of one essence, three substances; but the Latins of one essence or substance, three persons.”

In fact, this agreement between Greeks and Latins on terminology may have covered up a fundamental difference. Greek theology always began with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Greek-speaking Christians, in contrast, generally addressed prayers to one particular hypostasis, not just to God. For them, the problem was how to unite the three hypostases in one ousia. Latin-speaking Christians, on the other hand, began with the unity of one God. Their problem lay in explaining how that substantia could involve three personae. Their choice of terms is revealing. The word persona can, like hypostasis, mean “particular individual,” but it can also refer to a character in a play or even the mask an actor wore to play a particular part. In short, Greeks emphasized the oneness, Latins the oneness. If Greek Trinitarianism risked so emphasizing the distinctions that it ended up with three Gods, Latin Trinitarianism risked treating the personae as merely masks or roles and denying any real distinction at all.

As Augustine remarked, all these theories sought to speak of things that cannot be uttered, and the Trinity is a favorite target of critics out to show the logical incoherence of Christianity. It should at least be acknowledged that fourth-century theologians knew that one does not equal three. They were trying to avoid conclusions they thought dangerously wrong. Sabellianism apparently contradicted Scripture, for the New Testament distinguished between the Father and the Son. Arianism seemed to lead to belief in two divinities and the horrifying possibility that Christ might change in unpredictable ways. Anyone who tries to distinguish between Father and Son and avoid Sabellianism, however, while preserving an identity of substance between them and avoiding Arianism, will inevitably move toward something like the doctrine of the Trinity.
THE ROAD TO CHALCEDON

If the doctrine of the Trinity clarified, at least up to a point, the relations among Father, Son, and Spirit, it said nothing about another issue—the relation between the human and the divine in Christ. Christ was divine, but he was also a human being. Given how different humanity is from divinity, how could he be both at the same time? Gregory of Nyssa admitted that he did not know. "We are not capable," he wrote, "of detecting how the Divine and the human elements are mixed up together. The miracles recorded permit us not to entertain a doubt that God was born in the nature of man. But how—this, as being a subject unapproachable by the processes of reasoning, we decline to investigate."22 As with other issues, however, some theologians developed ideas that forced their fellow Christians to define their faith more precisely in order to show why these ideas were wrong. In this case, the debate became intertwined with the jealousy between Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria, two of the greatest cities of Eastern Christianity. To set out all the terms at the start: The "Logos-flesh Christology" of Alexandria, pushed to an extreme, turned into Apollinarianism. The "two-natures Christology" of Antioch, pushed to an extreme, became Nestorianism. An Alexandrian attack on Nestorianism pushed in its turn to an extreme developed into Monophysitism. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 found a compromise that most Christians accepted, but the Nestorians and the Monophysites continued to hold the allegiance of many.

Alexandria: Logos-Flesh Christology and Apollinarianism. Ever since the days of Philo, the divine Word, the Logos, had been one of the dominant ideas in Alexandrian thought. In trying to understand the relation of human and divine in Christ, therefore, Alexandrians started with the Gospel of John's assertion that the Word became flesh. As Athanasius put it, "The Word of God ... took a human body to save and help men, so that having shared our human birth, He might make men partakers of the divine and spiritual nature."23 In the late 300s another Alexandrian, named Apollinaris, tried to clarify what that meant. That had proved a dangerous thing to attempt in the past, and so it proved again. Ordinary human beings, Apollinaris explained, have a body and a mind. Christ had a human body, but in him the divine Logos took the place of a human mind. "The Word became flesh without assuming a human mind; a human mind is subject to change and is the captive of filthy imaginations; but He was a divine mind, changeless and heavenly."24

Theodore of Mopsuestia, the great leader of the theologians of Antioch, accused Apollinarius of contradicting Scripture. The New Testament described Christ as "afraid" and "growing in wisdom." Now these statements apply to Christ's mind: "it is obvious that the body did not grow in wisdom." Therefore, unless the Apollinarians claimed that during Jesus' boyhood the divine Logos grew in wisdom—a view which "not even these men are so impudent as to maintain in their wickedness"23—they must acknowledge that Christ had a human mind, not just a human body.

Apollinaris offered a compromise. The human mind, he explained, is composed of parts. Its lower elements feel fears and emotions, while reason dwells in its highest part. Christ had not only a human body but also the lower parts of a human mind; the Logos replaced only the human reason. Theodore responded that the real problem concerned salvation, and there this compromise did not help. Since Christ saved humanity by uniting it with divinity, only those parts of us which have been united with divinity in Christ will be saved. Therefore, if Christ lacked a human reason, then human reason has not been united with divinity and was not saved. In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, "If anyone has put his trust in Him as a Man without a human mind, he is really bereft of mind, and quite unworthy of salvation. For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved."25

Antioch: Two-Natures Christology and Nestorianism. Theodore's arguments carried the day, and the Council of Constantinople in 381 condemned Apollinarius, but a condemnation alone did not solve the problem. Theodore had to offer an alternative theory of the relation of human and divine in Christ. Like the Cappadocians, he introduced a distinction in terminology. Christ, he said, had two natures (physēis) in one person (prosōpon). At first, it was not clear just what these terms meant, but Theodore tried to explain. He believed that Christ was fully human. He did not just have a human body; he felt emotions and pains as we do. On the other hand, everyone acknowledged that divinity could not suffer or change. Theodore explained this by treating each "nature" as a subject to which one could assign different predicates. When Christ wept or feared, that was the human nature; when he performed miracles or forgave sins, that was the divine nature.

Nestorius, who became patriarch of Constantinople in 428, encountered problems because he followed out all the implications of this two-natures Christology, especially on the issue of Mary, the mother or bearer of God. For at least a hundred years, Christians had been
praying to Mary, "the bearer of God." Irenaeus and other theologians had described Mary as the second Eve who undid the sin of the first Eve just as Christ, the second Adam, undid the sin of the first Adam. Popular piety revered Mary. Nestorius gladly honored her, but he insisted that no one should call her the "bearer of God," for being born was something that had happened to Christ's human nature. Calling Mary "the mother of God" would be like saying that God is two years old, two years after Jesus' birth; it applied a predicate of the human nature to the divine nature. One could, Nestorius offered, call Mary "the bearer of Christ."

When theologians interfere with popular piety, they rouse opposition, and Nestorius soon found himself under bitter attack as a defamer of the Virgin Mary. To add to his troubles, his chief opponent was Cyril of Alexandria, one of the nastiest controversialists in the history of theology. Cyril had succeeded his uncle as patriarch of Alexandria and stopped at nothing in defense of Alexandria and of himself. When he died, one of Cyril's contemporaries wrote to a friend:

At last with a final struggle the villain has passed away... Observing that his malice increased daily and injured the body of the Church, the Governor of our souls has lopped him off like a canker... His departure delights the survivors, but possibly disheartens the dead; there is some fear that under the provocation of his company they may send him back again to us... Care must therefore be taken to order the guild of undertakers to place a very big and heavy stone on his grave to stop him coming back here.27

Even if it is difficult to like him, however, one must admit that Cyril put some legitimate questions to Nestorius. Nestorius argued that Christ must be fully human so that all of humanity could be joined with divinity and saved, yet he so emphasized the distinction between the two natures that it was hard to see how humanity and divinity really came together at all. Further, Nestorius agreed that Christ's suffering on the cross contributed to our salvation, but, according to this sharp distinction between the two natures, only the humanity, not the divinity, suffered. He therefore seemed to imply that we owe our salvation to a human being, not to God. A council of bishops was called to meet at Ephesus in 431, with Cyril in charge, to discuss these matters. Bad weather delayed the arrival of Syrian bishops sympathetic to Nestorius, but Cyril refused to wait for them. With the help of a troop of Egyptian monks who threatened recalcitrant bishops, he secured the condemnation of Nestorius.

**Alexandria Again: Monophysitism.** Victory accomplished, Cyril began to have second thoughts. Both Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius had taught that Christ has two natures in one person. Cyril, characteristically unwilling to compromise, at first insisted on Christ's oneness in every respect: one person (prosopon), one nature (physis), one particular individual (hypostasis). Gradually, however, he came to admit that after all, Christ had been both human and divine, and one needed some word to talk about that duality. He conceded that it was possible to speak of "two natures" as long as acknowledgment was made of only one person and one hypostasis. What really mattered to Cyril was that, because of the union of the two natures in one hypostasis, predicates belonging to one nature could be applied to the other. (The technical Latin term for this is communicatio idiomatum, the interchange of attributes.) Thus, for example, although Christ suffered as a human being and worked miracles as God, and although Mary had borne a human being, one could say (contrary to Nestorius) that the divinity had suffered and the humanity had worked miracles, and that Mary had borne the divinity. Humanity and divinity so came together in Christ as to justify such an exchange of predicates.

Cyril's insistence on the communicatio idiomatum still gave grounds for the condemnation of Nestorius, for one could apply the human predicate of "being born" to the divine nature and thereby say that Mary gave birth to God; but Cyril's switch from one to two natures left some of his own supporters stranded. Shortly after Cyril's death in 444, an elderly monk named Eutyches blundered onto the scene. He seems to have been fuzzy on a great many theological points, but he was absolutely sure that Christ had only one nature. Cyril's successor at Alexandria, Dioscurus, who had all of Cyril's faults and none of his virtues, regretted that Cyril had conceded anything at all to his opponents and seized on Eutyches as the symbolic hero of the cause of "one nature" (mono- + physis). Dioscurus presided over a council at Ephesus in 449 that vindicated Eutyches and condemned any reference to "two natures" after Jesus' birth, but the carryings on at this "Robber Council" created a major scandal. Dioscurus refused to let his opponents speak at all and used an army of monks to handle anyone who threatened to cause trouble. The pope's representative barely escaped back to Rome with his life.

Many "Monophysite" Christians, loyal to the traditions of Alexandria and Cyril's earlier views, accepted the conclusions of the Robber Council, but other Christians found both the condemnation of
two natures and the way it had been accomplished disturbing. They arranged another council, at Chalcedon in 451, to straighten things out. The bishops at Chalcedon based their conclusions in part on a letter Pope Leo I had written from Rome to the Robber Council. Dioscorus, needless to say, had not allowed anyone there to read it. In the definition of Chalcedon the bishops rejected Monophysitism and, basically, returned to Cyril's later position. Two natures, human and divine, coexist in one person, and the oneness of the person makes it appropriate to apply the predicates of either nature to the other (the communicatio idiomatum). By this time, every phrase had its importance.

Following the Holy Fathers we all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same son, . . . truly God and truly man, the same consisting of a reasonable soul and a body, of one substance with the Father as touching the Godhead, of one substance with us as touching the manhood. . . . born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. . . . to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. 39

"Reasonable soul" rejects the Apollinarian view that Christ lacked a human soul. "Of one substance" opposes the Arians.

"The Mother of God" is against Nestorius. "In two natures" rejects Eutyches and the Monophysites.

Other debates followed, but Chalcedon provides a good point to stop and review. No doubt the intricate precision of the Chalcedonian definition signals an impressive accomplishment, but what does it—or the debate that went before it—matter?

There are two sorts of answers to that question, political and theological. Politically, in all the conflicts between Alexandria and Antioch, Rome always came out on the winning side, and the use of Pope Leo's letter as the basis for the settlement at Chalcedon added to the prestige of the bishop of Rome as the arbiter of orthodoxy. The papal authority that has endured until today grew in part out of these debates. Second, after the Nestorians were condemned at Ephesus in 431, they did not just disappear. A strong Nestorian church spread from Syria to China and survived for centuries. Small communities of Nestorians indeed still exist today. Similarly, after the condemnation of "one nature" at Chalcedon in 451, Monophysite Christians remained numerous in Egypt and adjoining territories. The "orthodox" Christians who accepted Chalcedon persecuted both Nestorians and Monophysites. When Islam began to spread from Arabia in the 600s and 700s, many Nestorians and Monophysites found the Muslims more tolerant than their Christian opponents, and the inheritors of Chalcedon often showed little interest in coming to the aid of "heretics." Perhaps nothing could have stopped the Muslim expansion, but its intriguing to speculate on whether a theologically united Christianity might have produced a stronger defense and even kept much of the Middle East Christian. If so, then results of the theological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries would have had an impact that continues down to today's headlines.

Theologically, it is admittedly sometimes tempting to dismiss all these debates as a quibbling over details. But by and large Christians avoided definitions until they felt their salvation stood under threat. For Ignatius of Antioch, going off to face suffering and death in the confidence that Christ had taken that road before him, it was not quibbling to reject the Docetist view that Christ had only seemed to suffer and die. Athanasius thought that Arianism implied that Christ might change and turn evil; he did not consider that point trivial. Apollinarius' view that Christ had not had a human mind posed a real threat to people who hoped for the transformation of their humanity because it had been united with divinity, and who did not want to leave their minds behind. Pious believers praying to Mary, the bearer of God, found Nestorianism deeply disturbing. And so on. To be sure, some aspects of the Trinity and the union of humanity and divinity in Christ remain always a mystery. But that is no excuse for not trying to understand what one can understand, particularly when challenges to faith raise hard questions and demand clarification. In such a context, the Christological discussions represent a great accomplishment. It was in a way the last great accomplishment of an intellectually united Christianity. Nicaea and Chalcedon drew on the work of theologians from all parts of the Christian world; subsequent theological debates tended to take place in either the East or the West.

FOR FURTHER READING

Introductions. For a rare combination of entertaining biographies and serious theological discussion, see Robert Payne, The Holy Fire (Harper & Row, 1957). Biographical comments in this chapter have closely followed Payne.
NOTES


10. Ibid., 9, pp. 603–604.

11. Letter of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, summarizing the Arian position; quoted in Socrates, Ecclesiastical History 1.6, tr. by A. C. Zeno,


12. Athanasius, Oration against the Arians 3.16, in The Orations of S. Athanasius (London: Griffith Farran; no date or translator given), p. 199.

13. Ibid., 1.14, p. 25.


22. Gregory of Nyssa, The Great Catechism 11, in From glory to Glory, p. 466.


27. Theodoret of Cyr, Letter 192; quoted in Prestige, Fathers and Heretics, p. 150. The authenticity of this letter is disputed, but I find it irresistible.