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# HOW DID WE GET TO...THE DOCTRINE THAT JESUS WAS FULLY HUMAN AND FULLY DIVINE?

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## Discussion Guide

You will often hear Christians say that Jesus was “fully human and fully divine.” Yet, for some people, this affirmation seems far removed from the stories of an itinerant teacher wandering around Galilee. In this video, we will explore why early Christians affirmed Jesus’ full humanity and fully divinity and what they meant by that affirmation. Sarah argues that, as with the Trinity, Christological doctrines (or doctrines about the person and work of Jesus) were an attempt to work out what the Bible said about Jesus and what would have to be true of the humanity and divinity of Jesus in order for Jesus to be sufficient for salvation.

### Note on Doctrine and Salvation:

When discussing both the Trinity and Christology, Sarah says that the early Christians were trying to figure out what had to be true of God and of Jesus given their understanding of salvation. She occasionally says things like “the early church decided that X had to be true of Jesus in order to salvation to be possible.” That is different from saying that early Christians were saying that everyone had to believe or say X in order to be saved. In the Trinitarian and Christological debates, the larger question was what had to be true of God in order for God to be the kind of God who saves. Whether people had to believe or accept that understanding in order to experience salvation was (and is) a separate question. In other words, the focus was one how God had to be for salvation to be possible, not on what humans had to believe in order to experience that salvation.

Questions for Discussion (you might find it helpful to read these questions before you watch the video):

1. How have you thought about or been taught to think about the humanity and divinity of Jesus? What in the video aligned with what you have thought or been taught? What was new or different?
2. Sarah argues that one reason early Christians developed the doctrine was because of biblical language about Jesus. Does that explanation make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. Sarah offers multiple metaphors for understanding Nestorian and Chalcedonian Christologies. Did you find any of them particularly helpful (or unhelpful)? Did any of them change how you think of the divine/human relationship?
4. One of the ideas Sarah talks a lot about in this video is divine impassibility. What do you think of that idea? What, if anything, do you find compelling about it? What, if anything, do you find challenging or unhelpful about it?
5. Sarah suggests that Chalcedonian Christology means that God and humans are in a non-competitive relationship (we do not have to be less human in order for God to be fully God) and that our humanity is not a problem. Are these new ideas for you? Are they helpful or unhelpful?

**Key Ideas (you can watch for these in the video and revisit them afterwards in your discussion):**

1. Biblical accounts of Jesus included both things that could be said of any human being and things that could not. Early Christians had to figure out how to hold all of those things together.
2. Divine impassibility, or the idea that God cannot be affected by anything outside God and certainly cannot suffer, was a key issue in both trinitarian and Christological debates. In Christological debates it was important because if Jesus was fully human, Jesus would be able to suffer, but if Jesus was also fully divine, that might mean that God suffered (which divine impassibility did not allow).
3. After the early church came to a largely-accepted language around the equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, questions about the relationship between the divinity and humanity in Jesus took on new import because the trinitarian consensus meant that whatever was incarnate in Jesus was fully God.
4. Theologians offered various proposals regarding the relationship between divinity and humanity in Jesus. These included Apollinarianism (Jesus was a human body with a divine mind), monophysitism (the divinity and humanity combined into a new nature), and Nestorianism (the divinity and humanity were voluntarily in relationship but theoretically separable). The Council of Chalcedon in 451 rejected all of these proposals in its definition.
5. For many people in the early church, the idea that “what was not assumed, was not redeemed” was key to understanding what could and could not be true of the relationship

between the humanity and divinity in Jesus. In order to humans to be saved, the full divinity had to assume full humanity and heal it.

6. Modern theologians suggest that the way the Council of Chalcedon defined the relationship between humanity and divinity in Jesus has ongoing implications for how we understand the divine/human relationship more broadly, specifically that it is a non-competitive relationship (humans and God are not in competition for “space” or agency so we can be fully human and God can be fully God without dislodging or competing with each other).

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## Video Outline

### I. Introduction

A. In the fifth-century, a debate broke out among Christians about how to refer to Mary. Was she Theotokos, God-bearer, or Christotoks, Christ-bearer?

1. Why it mattered: the name for Mary indicated something about the relationship between the divinity and humanity in Jesus.

a) Mary as Theotokos meant she bore God and that people could say that God was born, God suffered, and God died.

b) Mary as Christotokos meant that the human Jesus was born, suffered, and died.

B. The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) created a definition of the relationship between the humanity and divinity in Jesus that sided with the Theotokos party:

1. “We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one

and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.”

2. In sum: the definition said that:
  - a) The divinity and the humanity in Jesus were united without division, separation, combination, or confusion;
  - b) Whatever you said about Jesus—he was born, he suffered, he died—you could correctly say about God.
  - c) Mary, then could be called both the mother of Jesus and the mother of God or Theotokos.

C. In this episode, we are going to explore the debates about the nature of Jesus that led to the Council of Chalcedon.

D. Thesis: For both biblical and soteriological (salvation) reasons, early Christians came to believe that you had to say more than that Jesus was a really good person or a good teacher, but also that whatever you could say about the human Jesus, you could also rightly ascribe to God.

## II. The Bible

A. Although the language of the Council of Chalcedon might seem very removed from the stories about Jesus in the Bible, early church leaders understood themselves to be making sense of what the Bible said. So, what sorts of things were they dealing with?

B. What the Bible says about Jesus:

1. Things you could say about any other human being: Jesus learned, ate, prayed, cried, and slept. Jesus was also born and he died.
2. Things not typical of what we say about people.
  - a) Paul regularly uses languages of followers of Jesus being “in Christ” or “part of the body of Christ.”
  - b) Jesus, in the Gospel of John, makes claims about being one with the Father.

C. Rather than using available categories to describe Jesus (Jesus as angel or divine messenger), the early church continued to grapple.

## III. The First Centuries

A. Two early proposals:

1. Ebionitists claimed that Jesus was fully human and not divine.
2. Docetists claimed that Jesus only seemed human, but that he was really only divine. For the Docetists, for example, Jesus only seemed to suffer and to die.

3. Early church largely rejected both because both failed to account for the entire biblical witness.

B. A quick excursus on the issue of divine suffering.

1. The issue of Jesus suffering was a big one for many people in the early centuries of the church, because part of what it meant to be God was that God could not suffer.

a) Many early Christians believed that God was impassible, meaning that God was not subject to change of any kind and that God could not be affected by anything outside of God.

2. Notes on divine impassibility.

a) For much of church history, it was the consensus theological view.

b) Today, the doctrine of divine impassibility is much more contested.

(1) For some, the idea that God cannot be affected by anything outside of God makes God sound inert or unfeeling.

(2) Some theologians, such as Jurgen Moltmann, argue that God who cannot suffer with us cannot truly be loving.

(3) Some contemporary theologians continue to assert that God is impassible because, among other things, they think it important to say that things outside of God, particularly evil, do not determine who God is.

(a) They want to assert that God is always the fullest, most active love possible and nothing outside of God can change that.

c) Key historical point: In the early centuries of the church, what most people agreed upon was that God was impassible and could not, in God's self, suffer.

(1) Divine impassibility led to some problems with the notion that Jesus was fully human and fully divine because if you said that Jesus was human, you had to say that Jesus suffered, but, if Jesus was also divine, you were attributing suffering to God.

IV. The Fourth Century

A. Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople affirm that whatever is incarnate in Jesus was fully God, equal to the Father.

1. One reason Arius, who had made the proposal that what was incarnate in Jesus was not fully God, believed what he did was because he believed in divine impassibility.

B. After Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD), the consensus view was that the equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was settled. The question turned to how to understand the relationship between what people now agreed was full divinity and humanity in Jesus.

C. One fourth-century proposal: Apollinarianism (or the alien-invasion theory of the incarnation).

1. Apollinarius claimed that what happened in the incarnation was that a human body was united with a divine mind.

2. Condemned at Council of Constantinople in 381 (same council that affirmed Trinitarian language).

3. As with the Trinity, debates about the relationship between humanity and divinity were debates about salvation or what had to be true about the relationship of divinity and humanity in order for salvation to “work.”

a) [Note: these were not debates about what individual people had to believe in order to be saved, but debates about what had to be true of Jesus in order for salvation to be a possibility for anyone.]

b) Early Christians believed that sin and death had injured every part of our humanity. Salvation entailed God healing everything broken within humanity. In Apollinarius’s scheme, the Word replaced the human mind, which did not heal it the human mind.

(1) As Gregory of Nazianzus, a theological opponent of Apollinarius, famously said: what is not assumed is not redeemed. [Note: here “assumed” means “taken on.”]

## V. The Fifth-Century Debates

A. One Proposal: Nestorianism

1. Named for Nestorius, archbishop of Constantinople.

2. Changed the name of Mary in the liturgy from Theotokos to Christotoks.

a) Lesson: changing the liturgy can get you in big trouble.

3. Nestorius’s view of the humanity and divinity:

a) The human Jesus voluntarily joined with the divine word. In practice, they always went together. In theory, however, they were associated, but separable.

(1) Theoretical separation important for Nestorius because he did not need to ascribe to the divinity the “changeable” part of the human Jesus story, which protected impassibility. Nestorius could say that Jesus or Christ was born, but not need to say that God was born.

- B. Another proposal: Etychianism or Monophysitism
1. Monophysites claimed that the divinity and humanity combined so that there was only one nature in Jesus.
- C. The eventual consensus: rejected both Nestorianism and Monophysitism.
1. Problem with monophysitism: what is not assumed is not redeemed. If Jesus “assumed” a combined nature, Jesus did not “assume” a truly human nature and, hence, our human natures are not redeemed (humans have human natures, not combination human/divine natures).
  2. Problem with Nestorianism: a bit more complicated because Nestorianism seems to make sense, particularly in light of impassibility.
    - a) Cyril of Alexandria (opponent of Nestorius): the separation between the humanity and divinity of Jesus upon which Nestorius insisted would have undermined salvation.
      - (1) According to Cyril, in order to be healed, restored, and transformed, humans needed union with the divine (only God can heal us).
      - (2) According to Cyril, the separation between the divine and human natures that Nestorius thought necessary did not allow for the interpenetration of the divine and human that would revivify or bring to life the human nature.
        - (a) In order to transform us, the divine had to touch every part of human life from birth to death. Only that would allow Jesus to “reconstitute our condition within himself.”
    - b) The Council of Chalcedon (451)
      - (1) Agrees with Cyril.
      - (2) According to the Definition of Chalcedon, in Jesus, the human and divine were united without confusion, change, division, or separation.
        - (a) No to monophysitism with the “without confusion or change” clause.
        - (b) No to Nestorianism with “without division or separation.”
      - (3) The Council asserted that Jesus was of the same nature with the Father in terms of divinity, and the same nature with humans in terms of humanity.
        - (a) Note that the language is not mathematical.

(b) Rather than offer math, the Council provides a description that says when you see Jesus, you are seeing God without interruption. There is no point at which Jesus is acting only humanly. Also, there is no point at which the humanity is lost and just God takes over. Everything Jesus does is what a human being, fully animated by God, did.

D. An Attempt at Metaphors

1. Nestorian Christology: The divine and human natures are like two pieces of wood strapped together.

a) They are always together but the divine piece isn't transforming the human piece. They are just sitting there side-by-side.

2. Chalcedonian/Cyrian Christology: The divine and human nature are like the body and soul.

a) The soul and body are not the same thing, but they are inseparable. The soul (here standing in for divinity) animates the body or enlivens it as the Word of God enlivens human nature.

3. Chalcedonian/Cyrian Christology (because the ideas are complicated and they need multiple metaphors): The divine and human nature are like fire and iron.

a) The fire (divine nature) "transforms" cold iron (human nature) to hot iron without the fire ceasing to be fire or the iron ceasing to be iron. It is full interpenetration without confusion or change.

4. Chalcedonian/Williams Christology (Williams agrees with Cyril too): The divine and human nature is a great performer playing Bach.

a) The performer (here human nature) gives a perfect performance of Bach (here divine nature). There is no moment where the performer is not fully the performer's self (or human nature). There is also no moment where it is not a perfect performance of Bach (divine). Likewise, in the incarnation, we see a perfect translation of God into human life. No moment not fully God; not moment not fully human.

VI. Conclusion

A. Implication of Chalcedonian Christology:

1. In Chalcedonian Christology, God is willing to identify with humanity and human limitations.

a) Different from the picture of a God who can only be God by not entering the mess of creation.

b) Chalcedon offered a description of a God who would, out of sheer love, take on the limitations, pain, and suffering of human life. Rather than a God who refuses the suffering and limitations of being human, we see God in a peasant who suffered a humiliating death.

2. In Chalcedonian Christology, humans and God are in a non-competitive relationship.

a) The infinite God can fully interpenetrate our finitude and neither cease to be God nor makes us less than human.

(1) What we see in Jesus is that to be most fully human is to be most fully in union with God. God does not need us to become less so that God can become more. Rather, God gives us God's self precisely so that we can become the fullness of what God created us to be.

3. In Chalcedonian Christology, humanity is not a problem (sin is, humanity as created is not).

a) Our humanity is not a problem, but it was always a humanity intended to be lived in relationship with God. What we see in Jesus is humanity as it was always intended to be and the lengths to which God will go—even to the point where God so identifies with us that we can say that God was born, God suffered, and God died—to make it so.

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## Glossary

**Apollinarius:** fourth-century theologian who proposed that the divine nature took the place of the human mind in Jesus; Apollinarianism was condemned at Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

**Arius:** early fourth-century theologian who argued that the Son was created. Arius believed that a created Son ensured that God did not suffer. His teaching about the created Son was condemned at Nicaea in 325 AD.

**Chalcedon:** council in 451 AD that created a definition affirming that both the humanity and divinity in Jesus were united without division, separation, combination, or confusion.

**Christotokos:** Nestorius's title for Mary; means "Christ-bearer" and was distinguished for Theotokos or God-bearer; suggested that while the human nature was born, suffered, and died, the divine nature was not.

**Constantinople:** council in 381 that reaffirmed that Father and Son were homoousios, declared that Holy Spirit was to be worshiped and glorified, and condemned Apollinarianism.

**Cyril of Alexandria:** fifth-century opponent of Nestorius; held that in order for our humanity to be healed, it must be fully assumed by Christ's divine nature.

**Divine Impassibility:** doctrine that God is not changed or affected by anything outside God; a consensus view in the early church that is much more contested today.

**Docetism:** belief that Jesus only seemed human (and thus only seemed to suffer and to die).

**Ebionism:** belief that Jesus was only human.

**Gregory of Nazianus:** fourth-century theologian who, in response to Apollinarianism, said that “what is not assumed is not redeemed.”

**Monophysitism:** fifth-century proposal for understanding the relationship between the divinity and humanity in Jesus; claimed that the two combined (also called Etychianism).

**Nestorius:** fifth-century theologian who proposed that the divine and human natures were voluntarily joined in Jesus but were theoretically separable; Nestorius started controversy by calling Mary Christotokos rather than Theotokos.

**Nicaea:** council in 325 that declared the Father and Son homoousios.

**Theotokos:** title for Mary meaning “Mother of God;” at issue in Nestorian controversy because it suggested that God was, in some sense, born, suffered, and died.