

DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

Christological Heresies

Lesson # 21

Before the Apostles of Jesus Christ died, Satan was already busy raising up false teachers who taught false doctrines about the person and work of Jesus Christ. We see some of these false teachings mentioned in the New Testament. For instance, Paul in **I Corinthians 15** has to refute the false teaching that there is no resurrection from the dead. In **I Thessalonians 4** Paul has to refute the false teaching that the day of the Lord has already come. John, in **I John 1**, has to refute the beginnings of a heresy called Gnosticism which denied Jesus full humanity and physical substance. Peter, in **II Peter 3**, has to refute the false doctrine that Christ would not return in glory to judge the living and the dead. These are just a few of the many examples in the New Testament of false doctrines that the Apostles addressed and refuted. It seemed that as soon as one false doctrine would be refuted, Satan would invent another one. As time went on Satan resurrected false doctrines of old. They were given different names, but they taught the same errors. The ancient Arian heresy for instance, which denies the deity of Christ, is promoted by the modern day Jehovah's Witness cult.

As one studies the heresies concerning Jesus Christ it becomes apparent that heresies fall into one of several categories. Some deny Jesus' deity (see Lesson #5), others His humanity (see Lesson #6), still others His person (see Lesson #7), and finally there are those heresies that deny or distort His works (see Lessons #9-20). Satan knows that erring in any of these areas can lead not only to false doctrine, but doctrines that if believed and held to will ensure someone's condemnation in hell. Because Satan keeps resurrecting the same old heresies calling them by different names, it is important that we know and understand what they are, in order that we might spot them for what they are when we encounter them. For this lesson we will focus on the heresies related to Jesus' dual natures.

I. DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

A. Blasphemy

1. *Easton's Bible Dictionary*: "In the sense of speaking evil of God this word is found in Ps. 74:18; Isa. 52:5; Rom. 2:24; Rev. 13:1, 6; 16:9, 11, 21. It denotes also any kind of calumny, or evil-speaking, or abuse (1 Kings 21:10; Acts 13:45; 18:6, etc.). Our Lord was accused of blasphemy when he claimed to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:65; comp. Matt. 9:3; Mark 2:7). They who deny his Messiahship blaspheme Jesus (Luke 22:65; John 10:36).¹
2. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*: "Blasphemy – the act of cursing, slandering, reviling or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God. In the Old Testament, blaspheming God was a serious crime punishable by death (Lev. 24:15-16). It was a violation of the Third Commandment,

¹M.G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996, c1897).

which required that the name and reputation of the Lord be upheld (Ex. 20:7).

The unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day charged Him with blasphemy because they thought of Him only as a man while He claimed to be God's Son (Matt. 9:3). Actually, the lawlessness of the Jews themselves was causing God's name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles (Rom. 2:24). By their bitter opposition to Jesus and His gospel, they themselves were guilty of blasphemy (Acts 18:6). Jesus condemned as blasphemy their attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan (Matt. 12:31-32).²

B. **Cult/Sect**

1. *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*: "Deviant and heretical pseudo-religious group. Cults may originate either within the host Christian society, as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism and Christian Science, or be imported from another hostile culture, as Hare Krishna, Unification Church, Bahaism, and Scientology. Pseudo-Christian cults have extrascriptural source of authority, deny justification by grace, brainwash their members, devalue Christ, and maintain punitive disciplinary practices for members who question their scriptural legitimacy."³
2. *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*: "A cult may be briefly defined as "a separate religious group generally claiming compatibility with Christianity but whose doctrines contradict those of historic Christianity and whose practices and ethical standards violate those of biblical Christianity."⁴

C. **Dual Natures and Single Personhood of Christ**: A term used to describe the biblical teaching that Jesus had dual natures, a divine nature and a human nature, and yet was singular in His personhood. Jesus was not two people and two natures, or one nature and two people. He was a single person with dual natures. Jesus was fully God and fully man, each nature complete in every way, yet united together in the one person Jesus (see Lesson #7 for more detail). How Jesus could be both fully man and fully God is difficult, if not impossible, for mortal minds to understand. Yet this is what the Scriptures teach. Many heresies have arisen from men trying to build doctrines on the natures of Christ beyond what the Scriptures address, or by denying one of the natures of Christ because of what some feel is impossible.

²*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Rev. Ed. (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1995).

³*Nelson's New Christian Dictionary : The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Pubs., 2001).

⁴John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1999) pg. XXII.

- D. **Essential Doctrine** – When discussing heresy and false doctrine the phrase “essential doctrines” is often used. Though definitions vary, “essential doctrines” usually are a reference to the doctrines one must believe in order to be saved; doctrines like the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, or the Trinity. These doctrines must be believed if someone is to be a Christian. One cannot reject them and be born again. Therefore they are “essential” to salvation. While every doctrine God has given us in the Bible is essential and important, not all doctrines are necessary to know and understand in order to be saved. Thus, sometimes people make a distinction between the two categories of doctrine. When it comes to Jesus Christ many doctrines are “essential” to salvation. There is only one Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. He is defined by the Word of God. If we fail to believe in the correct Jesus we trust a false savior who cannot save. Therefore it is imperative that we have an accurate understanding of the doctrines related to Jesus Christ.
- E. **False Doctrine** – is a term used to describe doctrines that cannot be supported biblically. Though most of the false doctrine promoted by those who claim to be Christians is supposedly derived from the Bible, it is nevertheless unbiblical. False teachers arrive at their false doctrines in a number of ways:
1. *False teachers often base their doctrines on what is not said in the Bible, but which they think is logically implied.* Though we must surely use logic and inference, we must be careful not to base our doctrines on what we think is logical, right, and rational. Sin and the curse have distorted our thinking. It is also affirmed in the Word of God that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts (**Isa. 55:8-9**) and it is foolish to think we can guess at the mind of God and infer doctrines from the white spaces of Scripture.
 2. *False teachers often base their doctrines on only part of what the Bible says yet speak as if what they believe represents the whole.* A few select verses will be cited to base their doctrines while other clear Scriptures are ignored or explained away. Thus what they believe may be partially true, but since it isn’t completely true, it misrepresents what the Bible teaches as a whole and is therefore false and misleading.
 3. *False teachers often arrive at their false doctrine by ignoring the context of passages.* Most false teachers do not have a sound system of studying the Bible. They pick and choose texts from different places in the Bible, assembling them together into what appear to be logical strings of thought. Thus different texts from different contexts are united into what seems to be a coherent system. Yet in doing this the author’s of Scripture original intended meaning is lost and the truth with it. This is very common among false teachers and is especially deceptive because what they teach is derived from a series of texts found in the Bible. Those who have little or no discernment or training are easily deceived by this kind of false doctrine.

4. *False teachers also derive their false doctrine by trusting and relying upon information found outside of the Bible.* It may be visions, experiences, teachings of men, but there is a source of information they draw from that is not found in the pages of Scripture. The Mormons trust in the writings of Joseph Smith. Those of the Christian Science faith trust in the writings of Mary Baker Eddy. Some Seventh Day Adventists believe the visions and writings of Ellen G. White are inspired. Cults like this often claim to believe in the Bible yet when the Bible is used to show them their error, they often show their alliance is really to the extra-biblical writings they claim are inspired and more authoritative than the Bible itself. Jehovah's Witnesses have created their own extra-biblical works by editing the Bible, removing or changing texts which disprove what they believe.

F. Heresy

1. *Tyndale Bible Dictionary:* A sectarian group or teaching that deviates from the norm. The Greek word (*haireisis*), literally meaning "choice," designates a sect or faction. For example, the Sadducees were a sect within Judaism (Acts 5:17), as were the Pharisees (15:5). When many Jews first believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, they were known as "the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:5). In each of these verses, the word *haireisis* denotes nothing more than a sect. After the church grew and developed, any factious group within a local church was called *haireisis* – that is, it was a sect that held certain opinions contrary to the truths established by the apostles. . . Eventually, the word "heresy" came to connote the particular teaching that caused certain ones to break away from orthodoxy. Thus, Peter warned Christians about various false teachers who would try to deceive believers with their heretical teachings (2 Pt 2:1).⁵
2. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms:* Any teaching rejected by the Christian community as contrary to Scripture and hence to orthodox doctrine. Most of the teachings that have been declared heretical have to do with either the nature of God or the person of Jesus Christ. The term heresy is not generally used to characterize non-Christian belief. That is to say, systems of belief such as atheism or agnosticism, or non-Christian religions such as Buddhism or Islam are not technically heresy. The term heresy is generally reserved for any belief that claims to be Christian and scriptural but has been rejected by the church as sub-Christian or antisciptural.⁶

⁵*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 596.

⁶*Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 58.

II. HERESIES CONCERNING THE DEITY OF CHRIST

- A. **Ebionism** – The Ebionites were a second century group of believers whose roots came from some of the early Christian Jews. They were born out of the judaizers of the early church. The Ebionites were strictly monotheistic and sought to embrace the doctrine of grace while conforming to the letter of the law. In a way they were trying to live by both old and new covenants. Their strict monotheism caused them to deny the deity of Christ.⁷

Not only did Ebionism deny the deity of Christ, they also rejected the virgin birth. They claimed, as did the Dynamic Monarchianists (see below), that "the Christ" descended on Jesus at His baptism by John and left shortly before His death. They believe that only the "divine Christ" is worthy of worship, but not the human Jesus. These beliefs left Christ as a mere man who was influenced by a divine presence. One might ask how a belief like this could arise in light of what Scriptures plainly teach. The answer partially relies on the fact that the Ebionites rejected all of Paul's letters saying he had no apostolic authority, hence his writings were not considered.⁸

- B. **Arianism** – Arius was a fourth century presbyter from the church of Alexandria. He also taught that Jesus was not God. Unlike Ebionism, Arianism was more of a threat to the doctrine of Christ for Arius was more systematic in his beliefs and did not deny the authority of the Apostle Paul's letters. Arius believed that God the Father was not a created being and that He alone had the attributes of deity which could not be shared or divided with any other. Thus Arius believed that Jesus Christ could not be God. Arius believed the Word Incarnate (Jesus) was God's highest created being through which He created everything else. Arius also believed that the Son had no communion or direct knowledge of the Father. He believed that the Son was the Word and Wisdom of God, but not of the same essence as God. He believed that the Scriptures which teach Christ is of the same essence as the Father were merely accommodations or expressions of courtesy so we could understand the exceptional human Jesus.⁹

The passages which Arius used to support his view of the Son being a creature are **Acts 2:36**, "*Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-this Jesus whom you crucified*"; **Col. 1:15**, "*And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation*". He believed these passages along with **Prov. 8:22**, **Rom. 8:29**, and **Heb. 3:2** taught that the Son was created. He saw in these texts Jesus the man, not God, for God is self-existent and Jesus was not. God made Jesus both Lord and Christ. Jesus was the first born of creation, which in Arius' mind clearly taught that the Son was created, hence not the eternally existing God.

⁷Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1989), p. 694.

⁸J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), p. 139.

⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 695-6.

Arius believed that **Jn. 17:3** which says, "*And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent,*" taught that the Father and not the Son was the only true God. He also saw in **Jn. 14:28**, "*You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I,*" that Jesus was inferior to the Father. Finally, he saw in **Mk. 13:32**, "*But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but the Father alone,*" that the Son was inferior in knowledge to the Father.¹⁰ Arius also used the passages which support Christ's humanity and took them literally yet watered down those passages which taught His deity by using allegorical or symbolic interpretation.

Semi-Arians allowed for a Son of God, but believed the Logos (Jesus the incarnate Word of God) was only similar to and not the same as God the Father. They also allowed for a pre-existent state of Christ but not an eternal one.¹¹

- C. **Dynamic Monarchianism** – Another group that denied the deity of Christ were the Dynamic Monarchians. Dynamic Monarchianism arose in the second century and later in the sixth and seventh centuries became known as adoptionism.¹² They believed that Jesus was a normal man but at His baptism the God spirit descended upon Him making Him a specially anointed godlike person, but not God in essence (like Ebionism above). They used passages such as **Lk. 1:35**, "*And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God,'*" and **Deut. 18:15**, "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him,*" to prove their point that Jesus was merely inspired by the Spirit of God. Their beliefs were highly influenced by Greek thought. They could not accept the fact that Jesus was God and God the Father was God, yet the two were one. The orthodox view of Christ and the Father did not fit their logical reasoning, therefore they sought to explain away what they could not rationally comprehend.¹³

III. HERESIES CONCERNING THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

- A. **Docetism** – The Docetic heresy was a heresy that arose in the very early church at the end of the first century. They denied the humanity of Christ. Among them

¹⁰Ibid., p. 697.

¹¹William G.T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 1, (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), p. 393.

¹²Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 115.

¹³Ibid., p. 117.

were the Docetae, Gnostics, and Modalists.¹⁴ Docetism had its roots in Greco-Oriental beliefs which taught that the divine could not become human and that all matter was impure or evil. The Docetists believed Jesus was divine, therefore denying that He could be human. Rather, Jesus only appeared to be human. To them it was absurd to think that the highest reality, "spirit", would unite itself with the lowest reality, "matter". The Docetists, unlike the Ebionites, had no problem with the virgin birth, but did not believe that Mary gave birth to Jesus in the normal way. They thought that Mary would have contributed something to Christ and this again would be the mixing of spirit and matter— an unacceptable idea. They believed Mary as only a vehicle of Christ, like water passing throughout a tube.¹⁵ So in this view Christ only appeared to be born in a normal way as a human, yet in reality was kept completely separate from Mary and her humanity.

- B. **Gnosticism** – Gnosticism was born out of the early church when Jewish Christians expecting a second coming of Christ were disheartened when He did not return. They felt that the Messianic Kingdom should have come, but after several decades and no return they grew despondent. Out of their disillusion "Gnosticism" was born.¹⁶ The Gnostics taught that some members of the church lived by faith and others by knowledge. They believed in an elite group of Christians who didn't need faith. Thus the few elite had special illumination. This elite group could supposedly comprehend the mysteries of the Christian faith. They believed that the God of the Old Testament was evil but the God of the New Testament revealed Himself in Christ and was good. The New Testament God created the spirit world.¹⁷ Gnosticism produced bizarre speculations. Christ's body was not a fleshly one but was made of a "psychic" substance.¹⁸ Gnosticism believed that Jesus was a lesser deity created by the good God of the New Testament and that He had no fleshly body. They believed Jesus did not suffer while here on earth. Jesus, they argued, only appeared to be a man but was not.
- C. **Eutychianism** – Eutychianism arose shortly after the debate of Nestorius and Cyril in the fifth century. A strong trend arose among the followers of Cyril who insisted on the "one nature formula" of Christ.¹⁹ Eutychius rejected the orthodox view of the two natures of Christ and insisted that the Father became the perfect God-man and that He possessed only one nature. Later, the followers of Eutychius taught that the humanity of Christ was totally absorbed in His deity,

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1978), p.102.

¹⁵Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 727-8.

¹⁶Robert Barr, *Main Currents in Early Christian Thought*, (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1966), p. 9.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁸Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 141-2.

¹⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 728-9.

leaving Him without humanity. Eutychius himself believed that the fusion of natures produced a third unique God-man substance.²⁰ In either case, Christ had lost His humanity. The Eutychian heresy was finally condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

IV. HERESIES CONCERNING THE DUAL NATURES OF CHRIST

- A. **Nestorianism** – Nestorius was patriarch of Constantinople in 428. Early in his career as patriarch he was called upon to determine whether Mary, the mother of Christ, accomplished 'God-bearing', 'Man-bearing', or 'Christ-bearing'. While trying to figure out his position on the subject he embraced points of the Arian heresy that Jesus was just a son and parts of the Apollinarian heresy that Jesus' manhood was incomplete.²¹

Nestorius ended up splitting the God-man into two distinct persons which were somehow mingled together into one body. Nestorius believed that the natures were totally separate but united in a form of worship. He could not conceive of God being limited or suffering so he held that the two natures were separate, existing side by side, but each having their own properties and peculiarities intact. Jesus the man suffered, but the God part did not. The God part displayed power, omniscience, etc. but the man part did not. It was this very controversy which spurred Cyril of Alexandria to develop his theory of the hypostatic union.²² Nestorius's Christology became known as "word-man" theology.²³

Even after much debate Nestorius was not close to accepting Cyril's theory of the hypostatic union. He continued to maintain a strict separation of God and man in Christ, which were represented in the one historical figure Jesus. It is of considerable controversy today if Nestorius ever believed the heresy which was attributed to him and for which he was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. It can be argued that his beliefs were orthodox yet expressed in a different way. Either way, his beliefs and writings encouraged the early church to develop their christology on the two natures.

- B. **Athanasius** – Early in the fourth century Athanasius was a champion of orthodox views of Christ and labored to show the error of the Arian heresy. However, in laboring to explain the finer details of the two natures of Christ his views in the eyes of some erred. Athanasius believed that **Jn. 1:1, 14** taught that the Logos (Jesus the incarnate Word of God) did become man. Yet, he still

²⁰Ibid., p. 729.

²¹Ibid., p. 311.

²²Ibid., p. 312.

²³Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 727.

believed in the separate workings of each nature. He believed that the God part did some things and the man part did other things. He was hesitant to say that Jesus had a human soul or mind. His thought was that Jesus was fully human in body and yet had a divine spirit. This one small detail has brought criticism from some circles who reason that Jesus would not be fully man if He did not have a human soul and mind. Thus they believe Athanasius fell short in affirming the full humanity of Christ. The ancient Athanasian Creed, affirmed by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, and which has orthodox views of Christ, was probably not written by Athanasius at all, but was named after him because it represented his views and fight against the Arian heresy.

- C. **Apollinarius** – Apollinarius was a fourth century friend of Athanasius. He was appalled at the idea that Christ had both a human and a divine soul. He desperately wanted to maintain the unity of Christ, but thought it impossible to accept the idea of two souls. He took a narrow view of **Jn. 1:14** which he believed taught that the only part of Jesus that was human was His flesh. The rest of Jesus – His soul, mind, spirit – were divine. Apollinarius believed the divine Logos usurped the human soul of Jesus.²⁴ This made Jesus only partially human, having no human will. Although Apollinarius was a brilliant thinker and tried to come up with an acceptable christology, his teaching was condemned as heresy in 381 at the Council of Constantinople.
- D. **Modalistic Monarchianism** – Modalistic Monarchians were another group who strayed away from the dual natures of Christ. They seemed to be extra sensitive to the teaching of the oneness of God and felt that any teaching which called the Word or Christ divine must also agree that the Word or Christ is equal with and the same as the Father. Any other teaching they felt made Christ into two gods and therefore was blasphemy. They believed the Father entered into Mary's womb and became the Son. Therefore the Son was only a different role of the Father.²⁵

V. REFUTATION OF CHRISTOLOGICAL HERESIES

Because of the scope and purpose of this lesson the heresies mentioned above will not be refuted. However the student can refer to Lessons #5, #6, and #7 of the Doctrine of Christ study for a full treatment of the deity, humanity, and dual natures of Christ. Each of the three major doctrines are addressed in those lessons and serve the purpose of refuting the heresies mentioned above.

²⁴Ibid., p. 714.

²⁵Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 121.

VI. **APPLICATION AND IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING HERESIES ABOUT JESUS CHRIST**

- A. Studying heresies about Christ helps keep you from falling into the same error.
- B. Studying heresies about Christ keeps you from being deceived by false teachers.
- C. Studying heresies about Christ increases your discernment and protects you from false ideas, teachings, or teachers.
- D. Studying heresies about Christ should move you to study the Scriptures diligently so you can both understand and proclaim sound doctrine about Jesus Christ.
- E. Studying heresies about Christ should move you to pray for those who teach and preach the Word that they not fall into heresy.
- F. Studying heresies about Christ should make you a better evangelist for you will be better equipped to address the false views of Christ held by others.
- G. Studying heresies about Christ should make you praise God for the long history of men and women who have faithfully proclaimed the truth about Jesus so that you could know and believe the truth.

The men who say that Christ is not God, that the Redeemer of the world was but the son of Mary, that he who walked the waters of the deep, chained the winds, cast out evil spirits, and made even Hades startle with his voice when the soul of Lazarus came back — that he was but a prophet, a creature, a mere man! Surely, sir, thou art the chief of sinners to have talked thus of him who is “very God of very God,” the express image of his Father’s person! But even to thee is Jesus gracious, and he bids thee still believe in him. Thou shalt bow the knee to him one day, and worship him, for “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Bow thy knee now, and kiss the Son lest he be angry and thou perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. He bids thee come to him, then will he blot out thy sins like a cloud, and like a thick cloud thine iniquities. The chief of sinners, we are sure, are found among those who directly attack the person of Jehovah’s Christ, yet even to these is the gospel of salvation sent.²⁶

²⁶Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, vol. 9, (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).