

# CHRISTOLOGICAL Errors: Then and Now

by Gary Evans

In recent issues of *Affirmation & Critique*, the topic of the person of Christ, or Christology, has been dealt with extensively. Such a theme would seem incomplete without some treatment of the Christological heresies of the early centuries, for ironically it was those very heresies which advanced the development of Christian orthodoxy by forcing early Christian teachers to examine and elaborate the biblical truths regarding the person of Christ. In retrospect, rather than frustrating the Christian faith, these heresies have actually served it quite well by creating the need to synthesize an orthodox Christology. Indeed, attacks on the truth often help to clarify our understanding of the truth. In this light, I intend to succinctly survey and describe here the most blatant and deviant of these heresies, including both ancient and modern variations. I will also briefly counter each with the antidotal truths as revealed in Scripture and as elaborated by early Christian scholars. In addition, when warranted I will point out the re-emergence of these heresies in modern garb. Heresies die hard, if at all, and some contemporary heresies, on closer examination, are found to be simply mutations or thinly-veiled variants of ancient falsehoods.

New research and archaeological discoveries are ever enhancing our knowledge of the theological battles of the first five centuries of church history, and our understanding of both sides of each issue continues to undergo clarification. For example, until as recently as 1945, scholars were obliged to rely solely on Christian apologists and heresiologists for any elaboration of Gnostic Christian teaching. At the end of World War II, however, an astounding archaeological discovery was made. Jars were unearthed in an ancient Gnostic graveyard in Egypt which contained fifty-two tractates of ancient Gnostic Christian texts. The contents of this discovery have forced scholars to reassess the common assumptions about Gnostic teaching, for honest scholars are never

very comfortable relying on only one side of the story. Even the most sound of the ancient Christian apologists have occasionally been found guilty of personal character attacks as well as prone to exaggerate or misrepresent their opponents' views. As one example, many scholars have now come to believe that Nestorius was no Nestorian at all—that he never held the heretical views ascribed to him by his peers and which unfairly bear his name. It is now clear that some theological battles were mounted not purely for the sake of the truth; instead, they were tainted with political motives such as the desire to secure positions in the clerical hierarchy. It has become evident that in their efforts to gain a bishopric, some early Christian theologians were quite willing to groundlessly accuse their competition of heresy. In light of this unfolding research and the new discoveries which are incrementally clarifying our understanding, it is difficult to make absolute statements. The body of knowledge is in flux, and our understanding in a constant state of evolution. Enough certainty exists, however, to accurately categorize the most basic Christological heresies and outline their premises.

Each of these basic heresies concerning the person of Christ shares a central underlying error. For the most part, they seem to stem from an unwillingness to embrace in equal proportion His multifarious dual nature, when faced with a desire to construct a systematizable theology to fit the fallen, finite understanding. Christ is complex, but not complicated. He is mysterious, but not unknowable. He is profound, but easy to experience. He is beyond our ability to fully understand, yet He can fully be apprehended. He is knowledge-surpassing, yet He can be known by us (Eph. 3:19). It is by simple faith that we are able to accept what is revealed in Scripture, even though we could never adequately explain it. By faith we can embrace all that He is both in His essential oneness

with the Father and His economical distinction in carrying out God's plan.

It is interesting to note that the earlier Christological battles were fought with non-Christians, while later heresies were intra-Christian in origin. The earlier debates occurred between the church and either Jewish or Greek unbelievers, testing the church against external forces. Later debates took place among professing Christians and represented more a process of self-reflection and internal tension than of external testing. Toward the close of the second century, as the Christian faithful became more confident of their continued existence and expansion, the Christian faith began to undergo polemical clarification—more as a result of deviation from within than of opposition from without. Once the onslaught of Jewish and Greek thought began to retreat, the church found itself struggling increasingly with a variety of falsehoods advanced by its own adherents.

On one hand, it seems that our battles today are much like those of the first two centuries, with the truth of the gospel under attack by external, non-Christian forces. A growing number of modern and postmodern religious systems are now being proffered and marketed as alternatives to the Christian faith. On the other hand, within the Christian community itself, or at least under the Christian nomenclature, various false teachings have arisen which distort and misrepresent the portrayal of Christ as seen in Scripture. Therefore, it is worthwhile for us to understand the ancient Christological heresies, know the scriptural rebuttals, and recognize their modern revisitations. For expediency, I have organized the primary Christological heresies into eight broad categories: the first two originating with external forces and the following six from within the Christian community. Under each category, I have included any variant forms as well as the leading proponents who often held the same central notion but may have embellished it from different angles.

### Docetism and Gnosticism

Docetism, an argument advanced alongside Gnosticism by those under the influence of Greek philosophy, was probably the first documented heretical challenge to the biblical revelation of Christ. The central notion of Docetism was that Christ was not a real human being with a genuine body but was, rather, a phantasm. A verse favored by the Docetists in support of their view was

Philippians 2:7, which says that He took the *form* of a slave. According to Docetic interpretation, Christ only *appeared* to suffer and die on the cross; He only *seemed* to be human. The name Docetist itself comes from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means “to seem.” A Docetist would claim that the divine Christ could never condescend to the point of involvement with the flesh. He would maintain that Christ was fully divine—the eternal Logos—and that being God, He could never die. Docetism viewed the humanity of Christ as solely a disguise worn by the heavenly Redeemer. To the *Doketai* (first labeled as such by Serapion of Antioch, ca AD 200), the spiritual Christ entered the human Jesus at His baptism and departed prior to His crucifixion.

Docetic thought was almost certainly influenced by Gnosticism. Gnosticism as a systematic philosophy probably preceded the Christian faith, but it definitely arose, at the latest, contemporaneously with it. Undoubtedly, both Jewish and Christian notions provided fertile fodder for Gnostic philosophy, and there were not a few Gnostic Christians in the first two centuries of church history. Gnosticism

eventually developed into a complicated system of philosophical and religious thought. As an example, the Gnostic's hope of salvation was that a being from the heavenly realm of light would come to the evil world as the Savior—one who could free the divine light trapped in the material world by bringing “gnosis,” or secret knowledge, to the earth. To the Gnostic, both the physical body and the material world were corrupt and evil, being entangled in the darkness and passions of the physical realm, and thus oblivious to spiritual reality. Because of this notion, the Docetists could not acknowledge that God became a man, that the eternal Logos assumed a physical body by means of incarnation. The Docetists also taught that the physical phantasm of Jesus had deceived the demonic powers into believing they had crucified the Christ, but that all the while the Spirit Christ was laughing at them. Such convolutions were necessitated by the Docetic antipathy toward the notion that God could possess flesh and blood, let alone shed blood. In fact, ancient Gnostic writings mock orthodox believers as those who worship a dead man.

Simon Magus was a Docetist. He had received a stinging rebuke from the apostle Peter for trying to purchase the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:20-23). According to later writers, he went on to teach, regarding Christ, that “with men he seemed a man, though not a man; he seemed to suffer in Judea, though he did not suffer” (Pelikan 83).

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Simon's disciple Cerinthus continued and developed this line of thought. Also clearly reflecting Gnostic influence, he distinguished between the "Supreme God" and the "Creator God." To Cerinthus, Christ was not the Supreme God, but only the Creator God who descended upon Jesus (until then an ordinary man) at His baptism and departed at His crucifixion. Christ came, so the Gnostics said, as an emissary of the Supreme God, to bring gnosis. Some maintained that He assumed a human body temporarily, while others believed that He was entirely phantasmal in appearance.

Basilides, another Gnostic heretic, espoused a variation on Docetism, suggesting that it was actually Simon the Cyrene (the one conscripted to bear the Lord's cross on the road to Calvary) who was crucified in Jesus' place, for the Christ—being fully divine—did not and could not undergo death. Further, he insisted that Christ's physical body was not real, but merely appeared to be so in order to allow Him to carry out His earthly work, to undo the damage of the world's descent into physical matter and sin. Finally, consistent with the Gnostic abhorrence of the physical, Basilides also taught that salvation pertained only to the soul, not to the body.

Ptolemy voiced the central offense presented to the Gnostics by the cross of Christ. As mentioned earlier, the nascent church was attacked by external forces, mainly by Greek philosophy in the form of Gnosticism, its Docetic offshoots, and by Jewish thought. Greek thought maintained that God was absolutely impassible—that is, unable to be touched by human sufferings, or passions. Ptolemy articulated this objection to the notion of the Divine being involved in human passion. He claimed that the Logos "remained impassible, for it could not experience passion, since it was unconquerable and invisible; therefore when he [Christ] was led before Pilate, that Spirit of Christ set in him was taken away....What suffered was [only] the psychic Christ" (Pelikan 90).

Other Gnostic teachers included Valentius, Carpocrates (who taught that a good Gnostic can become like Jesus), Naasenes, Saturnus, Cerdo, and Marcion. Each promoted the same denial of the humanity of Christ, and, due to either the influence of Docetism or the notion of the separation of the pneumatic Christ from the man Jesus, refused to accept the truths of the incarnation and the redemptive death of Christ. The arguments advanced by these heretics bore out Paul's assertion that to the Greek, the cross of Christ is truly foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23).

Docetism with its Gnostic views was sufficiently widespread to evoke polemic arguments and counter-testimonies from faithful apologists such as Ignatius and Irenaeus. Ignatius writes in his epistles that Christ "was really born, and ate and drank, was really persecuted by Pontius Pilate, was really crucified and died...really rose from the dead" (Pelikan 174). In fact, the controversial title "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*) conferred upon Mary now appears to have actually been a reaction to both Gnosticism and Docetism, as a claim that Mary was the "God-bearer." In any case, it is interesting to note that Docetism's heretical denial of the humanity of Christ was actually also a testimony to the tenacity of the earliest belief that Christ was divine, that He was God, even at the expense of His humanity.

### *The Biblical Truth*

Gnostic Docetists frequently cited John 3:13: "And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended out of heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven." The thought of a Logos who had descended from heaven and was to

ascend again fit well into their philosophy. However, scriptures such as 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 7 which speak of "Jesus Christ coming in the flesh" were repugnant and reprehensible because the incarnation would render the impassible God passible. Yet this is the very force of New Testament truth as well as the critical

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distinction of the Christian gospel. Unlike both Jewish and Greek thought, the Christian faith centers on the fact that God became a man named Emmanuel—God with us (Matt. 1:23). He is Jesus—Jehovah the Savior (v. 21). He is the Christ, God over all, who "as regards what is according to flesh" descended from the fathers of Israel (Rom. 9:5). He is the God who obtained the church "through His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Mary conceived of the Holy Spirit, and what was in her womb was "the holy thing" (Luke 1:35) who was born a God-man. He was the child called the mighty God and the son called the eternal Father (Isa. 9:6). It is this wonderful mingling of the divine and human natures that ensures His status as Savior. It is by virtue of His human element that He defeated Satan (as in the wilderness when He unwaveringly refused to relinquish His position as a man), and it is His divine element which affords His redemptive work its eternal efficacy. Docetism was therefore destined for eventual defeat, both by its failure to acknowledge God's desire to be intimately involved with mankind and by its failure to reject the Greek philosophy of the day in favor of the full revelation of the apostles.

## Modern Guises

While no contemporary system of religious thought claims a direct affinity with Docetism, some of its central ideas can be found in both non-Christian and pseudo-Christian Christologies. Jehovah's Witnesses find repugnant the idea that God in Christ endured the cross. They commonly tell Christians, "My God didn't die—*your* God died." To them, as to Gnostics, the idea of God becoming incarnated to join Adam's race is an insult to His divinity. Unitarians also reject the union and mingling of God with man in the God-man, Christ Jesus. Similar to the Gnostics and Docetists, they believe there to be two separate persons in Jesus Christ—the fleshly and mortal (Jesus) and the divine, essential, and real part, the Spirit Christ. The physical is neither real nor central to His existence. Unitarians view God much as the Gnostics did: as totally impassible, as a vague Principle, Law, or Mind Being—similar to the abstracted Logos of the Gnostics. Yet another example of the resuscitation of Gnosticism is found in Mormon theology, which holds a cosmic view including many christs sent to many planets in multiple hierarchies of deities. But perhaps the most striking reincarnation of Gnosticism is found in Christian Science with its special text termed the "gnosis," which they deem superior to the Bible. Gnosticism and its offspring, Docetism, may seem like ancient heresies irrelevant to our modern times, but a closer look reveals their tenacity and persistent influence, now concealed behind a wardrobe of new masks.

## Adoptionism

Another external influence which attacked the biblical portrayal of Christ was what came to be called Adoptionism. This view was introduced primarily through either Jewish believers, Judaizers, or Gentile defenders of monotheism, which was itself a Jewish legacy. I have chosen to divide Adoptionism into two major camps: Dynamic Monarchism and Ebionism, mainly because the Gentile version (Dynamic Monarchism) was somewhat distinct from the Jewish version of the Ebionites. Yet underlying both versions was the guiding notion that Jesus was special though not divinely incarnate. An Adoptionist believed that at either Christ's birth or His baptism, God adopted the human Jesus as His special son and bestowed on Him an extra measure of divine power. A favorite corroboration was a manuscript variant of Luke 3:22 that appears in a few ancient texts. This historical but non-canonized reference includes the phrase, "This day I have

begotten You," spoken by the Father at the Lord's baptism. Adoptionists would also have favored Acts 13:33, which quotes God the Father on the day of resurrection: "You are My Son; this day have I begotten You." They interpreted this verse in support of their view that the Son's conception was not divine, that His divinity was instead a status conferred on Him later by God.

## Dynamic Monarchism

It can be both interesting and instructive to recognize the motives of various heresies. The heretics' intentions were often noble, albeit overzealous, in their attempts to defend some aspect of revealed truth. In defending a particular attribute of God's hypostasis, for example, they would sometimes overstress one aspect while neglecting or opposing the other. These infamous heretics were not always evil men seeking a following; more often than not, they sincerely believed they were defending the truth. Such was the case, I believe, with the Dynamic Monarchists. Their overriding concern was to protect monotheism, still a fragile, new idea to the pagan Gentile world.

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**D**ynamic Monarchism boldly asserted that Jesus was not God incarnate, but rather merely a man who received divine power from the unique God. Their devoted defense of divine unity focused on the Father with the result that divinity was

withheld from Jesus; He became, under their Christology, merely the human locus for the divine activity. A Dynamic Monarchist objected to the worship of Jesus, who to them was an inspired man rather than the incarnate, pre-existent Word of God. This form of Adoptionism was also often called *Psilanthropism*, which means "mere man." One reputed proponent of this view was Paul of Samosota. His Adoptionist emphasis was an attempt to maintain the absolute primacy of God as a single Principle. Paul of Samosota contended that the Word (Logos) could not subsist outside the transcendent First Principle (the Father). The unity of the First Principle was thus safeguarded by the denial of divine status to Christ as a distinct hypostasis. To establish divine personhood for Christ would represent, to the Adoptionist, a return to polytheism.

## Ebionism

The Ebionites were Jewish Christians, some genuine and others only nominal. The more nominal Jewish Christians were ardent defenders of their Jewish legacy of monotheism,

teaching that God is one and that Jesus must be understood in an Old Testament sense as nothing more than a specially blessed prophet. One of their favorite biblical citations was 1 Timothy 2:5, which reveals Christ as a human mediator between God and man. Apart from this verse, the apostle Paul was not popular with the Ebionites; they largely viewed him as an apostate from the law. They customarily used only Matthew's Gospel; venerated Jerusalem; promoted circumcision, the law, Passover, and the Jewish way of life; and rejected the virgin birth. However, most central to their thinking was the Adoptionist view that Jesus was a mere man—not born of a virgin, but conceived like other men. However, because of His unique ability to fulfill the law of God, He was elected to be the Son of God and was therefore endowed by God at His baptism with special powers of the Spirit.

Adoptionism was an early heresy which arose before the truth of the Trinity had been well enunciated. Adoptionists often leveled charges of polytheism (or more accurately, ditheism) at those who defended the divinity of Jesus and His organic status as the incarnate Word of God. These heretics were doubtless unaware, however, that they had in fact performed a valuable service by forcing the early Christian writers to crystallize many of the truths concerning the Triune God and the person of Christ. As a case in point, the great trinitarian apologist Tertullian identified and clearly articulated the hazards of emphasizing the monarchy (unity) within the Trinity to the exclusion of the economy (distinction) within the Trinity. The Adoptionists realized the unity of God in His essence but not His distinctness in economy. Tertullian, on the other hand, urged believers to stress not only the divine monarchy, but also the divine distinction with equal precision.

### *The Biblical Truth*

The fatal flaw within Adoptionism lay in its soteriological inadequacy. If God had not become man, that is, if Jesus were not the Son of God by virtue of His divine-human conception, then the Old Testament formula for God's plan of salvation could not have been fulfilled in Him. The Old Testament predicts and the New Testament reveals a Savior who is at once completely divine and fully human—He is a man in order to satisfy God's righteous requirement, and He is the very God in order to include the divine, eternal life element. The wonderful Jesus Christ is our objective solution to sin once for all the law's demands and to reconcile us to God, as well as our

subjective daily salvation by means of His indwelling us believers as our life. We need a God-man Savior—One who is completely God yet utterly human, simultaneously, in one marvelous person.

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Like Gnosticism, Adoptionism re-emerges in various present-day schools of religious thought. One example is again the Jehovah's Witnesses. Like the Ebionites, they object to the worship of Jesus Christ—they are *Jehovah's* worshippers. Somewhat similarly to the ancient Adoptionist heresy, they acknowledge that Jesus was a son of God, but only in the same sense in which anyone else may be a son of God. Like Adoptionists, they confer upon Jesus the status of "special prophet." Consider the following statement: "The justice of God would not permit that Jesus as a ransom be more than a perfect man. And certainly not the supreme God almighty in the flesh" (*Let God Be True* 87, cited in Carlson 126-127). Jehovah's Witnesses also teach, "Some insist that Jesus, when on earth, was both God and man in completeness. This theory is wrong" (*The Harp of God* 101, cited in Carlson 127). Like Adoptionists, Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the title "Christ" was added to Jesus at His baptism, when He was anointed to be Messiah.

Pseudo-Christian Mormonism also reflects an Ebionite perversion of the gospel.

Ebionites believed that the designation "Christ" was conferred not by virtue of Jesus' incarnation, but merely because of His obedience to the law. Likewise, Mormons teach that as an adherent obeys Mormon law, he will likewise be designated a christ, a messiah to be as a divine emissary to another planet.

Non-Christian spiritualism often teaches that Jesus Christ was not divine, not God manifested in the flesh, but rather an advanced spirit. It claims that Jesus' oneness with the Father was simply that of a medium or a vehicle, and neither organic nor essential.

The teaching of The Way International is very similar to that of Adoptionism. This heretical teaching acknowledges that Jesus Christ was the Son of God but denies that He is God the Son or God Himself. In other words, He cannot be part of the eternal Godhead, for He came into existence only after He was born of Mary. Unitarian theology, taught in what are called Unity Churches, also heretically separates the human Jesus from the divine Christ, teaching that the same Christ who lived within

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Jesus lives within us. This mirrors Adoptionism's refusal to confer both divinity and humanity on the person of Jesus. They maintain that the Christ, the divine One, is a separate person from Jesus.

Sun Myung Moon's counterfeit Unification Church also reflects Adoptionism's heretical notions. It teaches that Jesus simply attained deity and was not the incarnation of deity. Moon's teaching, like the Adoptionists, contends that because of His own attainments, Jesus had earned the title of God, albeit never that of God Himself—the First Principle, as the early heretics would have said.

### Modalism

Another form of Monarchism (one-rule, or oneness, unity of God) was modalism. However, it was so distinct from Dynamic Monarchism that I have categorized it separately. It was an attempt (although through falsehood) to defend monotheism, and in this sense only is it a type of Monarchism, sometimes even being labeled Modalistic Monarchism. Nevertheless, it bore no relation to Adoptionism, emphatically maintaining the divinity of Christ. Its heretical error lay elsewhere.

Modalism's great deviation was that it disavowed any permanent, eternal distinction within the Godhead. It correctly sought to emphasize divine unity, but did so by defining Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as temporary modes of existence for the accomplishment of God's work in His plan. It was antithetical to Dynamic Monarchism in that it fully subscribed to the divinity of Jesus Christ and His status as the incarnate Logos. However, it maintained His divinity only by postulating that it was merely God's name that changed with His roles, or modes of being, similar to a chameleon changing its appearance at will. Modalism taught that when God is the Son, He is no longer the Father, and that when He is the Spirit, He ceases to exist as the Son. In its heterodoxical overreaction to tritheism, modalism maintained no permanent distinction among the three persons of the Trinity. It emphasized divine unity at the expense of any distinct and permanent identification of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Modalists relied on Exodus 20:3 for scriptural support, exhorting trinitarians to have "no other gods before me." They also employed John 10:30, where Jesus states, "I and the Father are one," and Isaiah 45:5-6, 21 which tells us that God is one. According to modalistic reasoning,

at the moment of incarnation the Father possessed no distinct identity apart from the Son. He ceased to be the Father and was then wholly existent in a different mode—that of the Son. For this reason, Modalism in the West was more commonly called "Patripassianism" because it claimed that the incarnated Jesus was actually the Father in another mode who experienced the passion of Christ.

Christians have always been known for their uncompromised monotheism. Both the New and Old Testaments consistently maintain that there is one God. The crux of the Christological debates in those early years had to do with reconciling the core belief in one God with the divinity of Jesus Christ. The early church fathers unwaveringly defended the truth that Jesus was God. Ignatius and Justin Martyr both held that Jesus was God, yet distinct from the Father. The modalists sought to resolve this tension between the claim for Jesus' divinity and the strong loyalty to monotheism by claiming that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were three temporary modes of activity rather than three eternal characters within the

Godhead. One prominent teacher of modalism was Sabellius. So prevailing was his teaching that modalism in the East actually bore his name: Sabellianism. He viewed God as a monad possessing three energies—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—appearing in time for the purpose of carrying out creation and salvation.

In Sabellius's interpretation, God appeared throughout human history to man in multiple modes, lacking any eternal distinction within the Godhead.

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Faithful apologists refuted Sabellius with John 1:1, which balances both eternal facets of the one God—that the Word who became flesh (v. 14) existed at the same time with God and as God "in the beginning." Sabellius erroneously annulled the distinction within the Godhead by teaching that it was the Father, not the Son, who was born, suffered, and died. Yet the Scripture clearly testifies that at the same moment Christ the Son was baptized, the Father spoke from the heavens and the Holy Spirit economically descended upon the Son. This scene graphically demonstrates the simultaneous coexistence and distinction of the three of the Godhead during the Lord's earthly ministry. Furthermore, references such as 2 Corinthians 13:14 confirm that the three continue to exist simultaneously, even after the accomplishment of redemption. Since this is the case, we believers must be willing to

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embrace both scriptural truths—the essential oneness of the Triune God as well as the eternal distinction of the Triune God in His hypostases and in His economy.

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Probably the closest resemblance to modalism today is found in the “Jesus Only” theology of Oneness Pentecostalism (although the majority of Pentecostals are actually trinitarians). This branch of Pentecostal theology is strikingly similar to ancient modalism. It nullifies the distinctness of the “persons” of the Godhead by overstressing the aspect of oneness within the twofold truth concerning the Triune God.

Like modalism, “Jesus Only” theology teaches that Christ’s sonship was not eternal but a temporary role with a definite commencement and termination. Sonship, according to this theology, began at the manger in Bethlehem with incarnation. To those who hold this view, the word *begotten* implies a beginning, and thus an element of finiteness. “Jesus Only” proponents believe that the Logos is eternal, but that the term *Son* denotes the temporary mode in which Christ existed while He was revealed in humanity.

“Jesus Only” theology correctly highlights verses which identify the Son with the Father (Isa. 9:6; John 10:30) and the Son with the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17) but neglects the equally crucial verses which just as definitively show eternal distinction. Again, this heresy stems from an apparent inability to embrace the full mysterious revelation of Christ in the Bible—that is, both His essential oneness in the Godhead and His eternal distinction from the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is eternally distinct but not separate from the Father and the Spirit.

“Jesus Only” theologians seriously err in limiting Christ’s sonship to His incarnation, to His human living on earth. Hebrews 1:8, 10-11 says, “But of the Son, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever’...And, ‘You in the beginning, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain perpetually.’” This entire eulogy is directed to the Son.

Another fallacy in modalistic reasoning concerns the interpretation of the word *begotten*. If its temporal association indeed precludes the Son’s eternal existence, as they claim, then so must the designation *Father*; yet they

rightly teach that God is the eternal Father (Isa. 9:6). One cannot be a father without having a begotten son; therefore, if God can be the eternal Father, then it follows that the Son also is the eternal only Begotten of the Father (John 1:18). Faith responds with “amen.” Faith does not force Scripture to fit into its theology but conforms its theology to the Scripture.

### Arianism, a Type of Tritheism

The antithesis of modalism is tritheism—the separation of the Trinity into three separate Gods. Orthodoxy has consistently upheld the view of the Trinity in its distinction, though not to the point of separation. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct but not separate hypostases. To separate them swings the Christological pendulum to the extreme of tritheism. Yet it is likely that many Christians unconsciously worship as if there were three Gods, failing to be balanced by both equally weighted “sides” of the Trinity.

The principal tenet of Arianism, a form of tritheism, held that the Son as the Logos was created by God before time. In other words, the Logos was not eternal or perfect like God, although He was God’s agent in the creation of everything else. The maxim of the Arians was, “There was [a time] when he [the Logos] was not” (Ferguson 85); but to be fair, Arius himself was uncomfortable with the presumption of any time interval preceding the generation of the Logos. Yet he maintained that the Father could exist without the Son, since the Son was begotten. In any case, the major deviation represented by both Arianism and Arius himself was not the issue of preexistence but the teaching that the Monas (Father) *must* be capable of subsisting without the Logos.

The Arians built their case primarily on a translation of Proverbs 8:22, which they read to mean that God formed Christ at a certain point in time. Arius himself took no issue with the eternality of Christ. His contention was that Christ was begotten and therefore a creature, even though He was above all other creatures, eternally faithful, and the agent of God’s creating work. But Arius wrongly deduced from this premise that the Father was independent of the Son, which led to a hierarchy among the three of the Godhead. He erroneously taught that the Logos in Himself did not *have* to exist, but that God willed the Son to exist. To Arius, their unity was not a union in essence, but a union in harmony of will. This

The full mysterious revelation of Christ in the Bible confirms both His essential oneness with and His eternal distinction from the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is eternally distinct but not separate from the Father and the Spirit.

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inevitably led to a substantial separation of the three—in effect, tritheism.

### *The Biblical Truth*

The early church fathers responded to tritheism with a variety of refutations. Alexander said of Christ that He was “always God, always the Son” (Ferguson 85), thereby emphasizing His eternal deity. Origen stressed the truth that while Christ is the only *begotten*, He is eternally begotten, just as the Father is eternally the Father (Isa. 9:6), and that the Word is eternally generated from the Father. Arianism troubled the early church fathers in that it apparently jeopardized the integrity of monotheism in proposing an independent individual alongside God, or at least, an eternal partition of God’s inherent substance. The Nicene Creed (AD 325) responded to this heresy by establishing Christ’s full deity in His eternal distinction from the Father and Spirit. This creed proclaimed that the Son was generated out of the Father’s substance and of the same substance. Nicaea therefore upheld the biblical revelation of the Son’s eternal distinction and deity in the Godhead as well as His essential, substantive oneness with the Father.

### *Modern Guises*

Arianism appears in several major contemporary heretical notions. First, Jehovah’s Witnesses, while not referring to their theology as Arianist, strongly echo its views by teaching that Jesus Christ is neither essentially one with Jehovah God nor eternal. Instead, they insist that Christ was simply the first son that Jehovah brought forth. According to their view, He was the first creation of God to have a pre-human, yet not eternal, existence. Curiously, they also teach that in His preexistence, Jesus Christ was formerly Michael, the archangel.

Mormonism also contains elements of Arianism as well, even to the very radical extreme of polytheism. Mormons teach that Jesus Christ was the firstborn spirit child of Elohim and that all subsequent spirit children are His juniors, thus creating many gods. By His obedience and devotion, so they teach, He reached the pinnacle of intelligence and was therefore ranked as a God, even before incarnation. Further, Mormons teach that there are many worlds with many gods who were sent, as Jesus was, to be saviors.

Arianism exhibits the same recurrent fatal blunder of dismissing what it cannot explain. The mystery of the Trinity is a notion beyond our full comprehension—He is, after

all, God. It is sheerest folly to attempt to fully comprehend the infinite God with a finite human mind, yet the Trinity *does* reveal Himself in Scripture, and though not fully comprehensible, the entire portrait of God as triune should be embraced by faith.

### **Monophysitism— Apollinarianism and Eutychianism**

Monophysitism, meaning “one-naturism,” holds as its basic tenet the belief that Christ has only one nature. Two variations developed through the years, an earlier form by Apollinarius around AD 371 and a later version proposed by Eutyches in the 440s.

Apollinarius, ironically, was considered a champion of orthodoxy until his later years, especially in the fight against Arianism and in the establishment of a more accurate understanding of the Trinity. Toward the end of his life, however, as the contemporary dialogue shifted to Christology, he failed to accurately grasp the nature of Christ. Apollinarius taught that Jesus was not equally human and divine but, rather, was one person with only one nature. Apollinarius correctly maintained the Jewish and Christian tradition that man is tripartite—body, soul, and spirit. However, he tainted this truth by using it to expound his unorthodox notions of Christ’s nature.

The principal tenet of Arianism, a form of tritheism, held that the Son as the Logos was created by God before time. In other words, the Logos was not eternal or perfect like God, although He was God’s agent in the creation of everything else.

### **CHRISTOLOGICAL ERROR**

Apollinarius taught that within the human Jesus resided a divine mind, will, and spirit, and that His divinity, which was dominant, controlled or sanctified His “recessive” humanity. He summarized his teaching by saying that Christ was only one nature, consisting of the Logos made flesh. He saw the essential unity of the Logos with the Father as a pattern which explained how the Logos was made flesh, yet with only one nature. He further explained that Christ’s flesh could have no substantial reality outside His own divine nature, just as the Logos could not logically subsist outside of the Father. In Apollinarius’s view, the human subject disappeared in Christ; in other words, the Logos assumed a body but not a soul. A key issue here was whether the humanity of Christ should be worshipped or not.

**I**n retrospect, it is not hard to see how Apollinarius fell into this extreme. He was such an ardent opponent of Arianism—which at best diminished and at worst denied the deity of Jesus, elevating His humanity—that he readily overstressed Christ’s divinity in a dramatic overreaction. Arians were accused of “Anthropolatry,” or the

worship of man, for having made the Logos less than God. To counter the Arians, Apollinarius and his fellow defenders of the deity of Christ proclaimed that there should be a single worship of the Logos and of the flesh which He assumed. He should be worshipped as God from God, as the Son of God, including His humanity in the flesh. They proclaimed that whoever did not worship Christ's humanity did not worship Him. But to Apollinarius, Christ's humanity was limited to the body He assumed and did not include personality.

**I**t seems obvious that Apollinarius and other opponents of Arianism were justly concerned with maintaining the indivisible unity of the Trinity and were guarding against replacing the Divine Triad with a Tetrad of Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the man Jesus. In sensitivity to the concerns about erroneously worshipping man, they overstressed the divinity of Christ to the point of forfeiting the distinctive permanency of His human nature. They fell victim to the peril of sacrificing the integrity of Christ's humanity to the unity of His person, with the result that Christ's humanity was considered to be merely His flesh, His human body. They say that in Christ the Logos was united with a body, but these two were not equal components: Christ had only one nature, and that, divine.

In the fifth century Eutyches developed a form of Monophysitism, likewise emphasizing the divinity of Christ. He correctly taught that by incarnation the eternal Word became thoroughly involved with humanity; but contradictorily, at the moment of union in incarnation Christ had one nature—He was divine only. Eutyches taught that the sufferings of Jesus were actually the sufferings of the Divine Logos. Various defenses of Eutychianism explained that since it was impossible for Jesus to have more than one nature, His humanity was swallowed up like a drop of wine in the sea.

### *The Biblical Truth*

The Council of Chalcedon responded to the heretical notion of Monophysitism by reaffirming the scriptural presentation of Christ. It affirmed His complete and eternal possession of both the human and divine natures with no loss of distinction to either. The Bible clearly reveals that Christ is still a man (1 Tim. 2:5) and the Son of Man in ascension (Acts 7:56). Of course, He also remains God (Heb. 1:8). Therefore, we believers do worship a man—but not a mere man, not even a mere *perfect* man. We

worship a God-man—one wonderful person who is simultaneously both God and man without confusion, blurring, or subsuming of one nature by the other. Christ has two distinct natures, divine and human, mingled in one person without confusion or loss of distinction. Christians worship the man Jesus because He is the unique God-man.

### *Modern Guises*

Christian Science rejects the eternally dual nature of Christ, teaching that His dual personality continued only until the ascension, when the man Jesus disappeared, whereas Christ continues to exist. Jehovah's Witnesses also reflect Monophysitism by claiming that Christ was resurrected not in flesh, but with a spiritual body, and that He was raised not as a man, but as a mighty immortal spirit.

### **Monothelitism**

Another heresy erupted in the seventh century as a result of an attempted compromise with Monophysitism. This heresy, termed Monothelitism, proposed the existence of but a single will in Christ. It sought to placate the Monophysitists by rejecting Christ's human will. It was rejected by the Council of Constantinople in AD 680 and was short-lived; hence, it deserves only brief attention. When the Lord Jesus declared that He always did what was pleasing to the Father, He was testifying that with His human will He always chose the divine will. And when He prayed in Gethsemane, "Not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39), it was painfully evident that He was in full possession of His own human will. Therefore, both were present in Him. Once again, another heresy arose due to the failure to accept the entire portrait of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, trying instead to isolate a part of Scripture in an attempt to portray the whole Christ.

### **Nestorianism**

At the opposite extreme from both Monophysitism and Monothelitism is Nestorianism, named for Nestorius, a bishop of Constantinople from AD 428-431. This bishop was deposed and exiled, being accused (though perhaps falsely) of propagating dyophysite (two-nature) theology to a heretical extreme. Promoters of Nestorianism claimed that the second person of the Trinity was composed of two separate persons—the man Jesus who bled,

The Nicene Creed proclaimed that the Son was generated out of the Father's substance and of the same substance, upholding the biblical revelation of the Son's eternal distinction and deity in the Godhead and His essential, oneness with the Father.

**THE BIBLICAL TRUTH**

suffered, and died, and the Divine Logos who is eternal and unbegotten. They committed the fatal error of emphasizing the distinction of the two natures in Christ to the point of separating them. Nestorian disciples claimed, "On account of the One who is hidden I worship the one who appears....I distinguish the natures, but I unite the worship....On account of him who is clothed I adore the clothing" (Pelikan 240). To Nestorians, two persons with two separate natures were united in Jesus Christ: the divine Christ and the human Christ lived together in Jesus.

### *The Biblical Truth*

The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) confirmed the biblical portrait of a Christ who has both complete humanity and divinity with no schism in His unique personal existence as the Son of God. There is only one Christ, one Lord (Eph. 4:5) presented in the Gospels and Epistles. The perfect, sinless humanity is wonderfully blent with divinity in the one person of Jesus Christ, as typified in Leviticus 2:4 by the mingling of the oil (the divine Spirit) with fine flour (humanity). While there is unquestionably a mingling of natures and persons, there is no loss of distinction. Both natures remain, mingled in one dear person, but never confused or negated by each other, and certainly never separated into two persons.

### *Modern Guise*

Christian Science teaches that while Christ was on earth, there were two persons within Him: Jesus was the human being while Christ was the divine idea. Unitarianism also teaches that there were two separate regions in Christ—the fleshly, mortal part which was Jesus, and the central, vital part which was Christ. Both teachings heretically divide Jesus Christ into two persons.

### **Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past**

Present-day believers face a far more daunting task than those of earlier centuries. Our battles are against neither simple anti-Christian notions, as occurred during the first two centuries, nor against pseudo-Christian notions generated by heretics, as in the third through sixth centuries, but against both. Today's heretical notions are, for the

most part, reappearances of ancient ones, often a syncretism of several heresies into a single theology. But today's antidote is the same as that of the nascent church—the Word of God.

While creeds were useful in formulating declarative statements in repudiation of particular heresies, they were limited in scope and purpose. They were, for the most part, reactions to specific heretical notions rather than attempts to fully portray Christ. For the full portrait, therefore, we must look to Scripture and not to creeds. While we prayerfully anticipate new light from Scripture, we also should assiduously reject all anti- and extra-scriptural suggestions. **AFC**

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**AVOIDING MISTAKES**

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