

SIX BASIC CHRISTOLOGICAL HERESIES

(from Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, Baker, 1985)

Heresies Regarding Christ's Deity

- Heresies which deny the genuineness of Christ's deity: Ebionism (1)
- Heresies which deny the completeness of Christ's deity: Arianism (2)

Heresies Regarding Christ's Humanity

- Heresies which deny the genuineness of Christ's humanity: Docetism (3)
- Heresies which deny the completeness of Christ's humanity: Apollinarianism (4)

Heresies which divide Christ's person: Nestorianism (5)

Heresies which confuse Christ's natures: Eutychianism (6)

Ebionism (1): An early heresy stemming from some Jewish Christian circles (Ebionite was the Hebrew word for "poor"; these may have been poor Jewish Christians). Strongly monotheistic, they denied that Jesus was God, rejected the virgin birth, and believed Jesus was born naturally. He was human but possessed of unusual gifts. They believed God's power descended on him in a special way at his baptism.

Arianism (2): Named after Arius of Alexandria, a presbyter whose views were condemned by Athanasius and others at the Council of Nicea in AD 325. Saw God as absolutely unique and transcendent (inflexible monotheism). They believed God alone possesses attributes of deity; to share these with anyone would be to render God less than divine. Everything besides God is created and temporal. The Word was a created being, though the first and highest created being. He was a demigod, an intermediate being, not God (this is the theology of modern-day Jehovah's Witnesses).

Docetism (3): Docetism is based on the Greek word for "seem" or "appear"--Jesus only seemed or appeared to be human; in reality he was God. An early heresy strongly influenced by Greek dualism which saw the invisible spiritual things as good, the visible, fleshly things as evil.

Apollinarianism (4): The views of Apollinarius, a close friend and associate of Athanasius, the leading champion of orthodox Christology (the one who defeated Arius at the Council of Nicea). He saw Jesus as a compound unity: some of Jesus was human, the rest was divine. Jesus was physically human, but psychologically divine (the divine Word took the place of his human soul). This view was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381.

Nestorianism (5): Named after Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople in 428. Nestorius had trouble with the idea that the divine and human natures were united in one person in Christ (he felt this obscured them both). He preferred to see them as a conjunction, operating in stages of Christ's life, or distinctly side-by-side. This tended to divide the natures of Christ, render him somewhat schizophrenic.

Eutychianism (6): Eutyches, an elderly church leader in the 440s, apparently sought to counter Nestorius's division of Christ by teaching the "one nature" formula. He saw Jesus's humanity as completely absorbed into his divinity. A variant of this taught that Jesus's nature was a hybrid of divine and human, and therefore a third, altogether new nature.

"CREDO" ("I believe"):

An Exploration of the Apostles' Creed Today

Week Five: "Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary"

Today's Focus: "The Christology of Christmas" (a.k.a. The Doctrine of the Incarnation or the "Two Natures of Christ")

Introduction

1. Conceived by the Holy Spirit: the origin of Christ's divinity
2. Born of the Virgin Mary: the source of Christ's humanity

Lecture

- I. Specific Biblical Basis: The Birth Narratives
 1. Matthew 1:18-25
 2. Luke 1:26-38
 3. Observations
- II. Reflections on the Significance of the Virgin Birth
 1. The scarcity of New Testament teaching
 2. Other indispensable doctrines are not necessarily linked.
 3. The proper place of the Virgin Birth in our doctrine (Millard Erickson)
 4. Women granted unique dignity
 5. Other blessings of this doctrine
- III. Broader Biblical Basis: Other Teachings on the Dual Nature of Christ
 1. The Incarnation in John (John 1:1-18; 1John 4:2)
 2. Eternal Equality and Earthly Submission: Balancing John 10:30 with John 14:28
 3. The Humility of Christ in Paul (Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 2:9)
- IV. Striking the Balance: Holding Together the Divine and Human Natures of Christ
 1. The Language of the Nicene Creed
 2. Heresies at both extremes
 3. Why the balance is important
 - A. Christ must be divine
 - B. Christ must be human
 - C. Only then is Christ the Mediator

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

A non-Christian friend says to you, "I believe Jesus was a great Teacher, but not the Son of God. He was an enlightened human being, not God. What do you believe?" How will you respond?

Why must Christ be both divine and human? What difference does it make?

Church history shows us that keeping the balance of Christ's divinity and humanity is important. What happens when these go out of balance?

What does it mean for you personally that Christ is human? How does it comfort you?

What does it mean for you personally that Christ is divine? How does this help you?