

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 4: THE HYPOSTATIC UNION — TWO NATURES IN ONE PERSON

Lesson 11

The Christological Heresies

Learning from Error to Guard the Truth

Every Christological Heresy Produces a Christ Who Cannot Save

Key Text: 1 John 4:2–3 — “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”

“Every Spirit That Confesses That Jesus Christ Has Come in the Flesh Is from God”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

The history of Christology is, to a very large extent, the history of the church learning what Jesus Christ is not, and through that negative learning, arriving at a more precise understanding of what He is. The great christological heresies of the first five centuries were not the products of malice or indifference; most of them arose from genuine theological concerns, real piety, and serious engagement with the difficulties of the christological question. They were, in most cases, sincere attempts to resolve the paradox of the incarnation by emphasizing one truth at the expense of another, by protecting the divine dignity of the Son at the cost of His genuine humanity, or by protecting the genuine humanity at the cost of the divine unity, or by protecting the divine unity at the cost of the genuine distinction of Persons. The church rejected each of these resolutions not because it was indifferent to the underlying concern but because it recognized that every resolution that diminishes either nature or divides the Person produces a Christ who cannot save.

This lesson is a systematic survey of the seven major christological heresies that the early church identified, engaged, and condemned: Ebionism (denying the deity), Docetism (denying the genuine humanity), Arianism (denying the co-equality of the Son), Apollinarianism (denying the complete human nature), Nestorianism (dividing the Person), Eutychianism/Monophysitism (confusing the natures), and Monothelitism (denying the two wills). For each heresy, the lesson identifies its core claim, the theological concern that motivated it, the specific christological truth it distorts, the New Testament evidence that refutes it, and the soteriological consequence of accepting it. The goal is not merely historical information but pastoral and apologetic preparation: the pastor who knows the heresies will recognize their contemporary recurrences and will be equipped to respond with both theological precision and pastoral compassion.

The apostle John provides the governing hermeneutical principle for this entire lesson in 1 John 4:2–3: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist” (NASB 1995). The test of christological orthodoxy, in John’s formulation, is the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, a confession that simultaneously affirms His genuine humanity (He has come in the flesh), His divine identity (Jesus Christ, the one who was with the Father before the world), and the historical reality of the incarnation (He has come, an event that has occurred in space and time with permanent consequences). Every christological heresy, in its own way, fails this test. And every person who has been catechized in the Chalcedonian Christology established in the previous lesson is equipped to apply it.

I. EBIONISM: THE DENIAL OF CHRIST'S DEITY

Jesus Was a Merely Human Prophet, Uniquely Anointed but Not Divine

A. The Ebionite Claim

Ebionism is the christological position of the Ebionites (אֲבִיּוֹנִים, 'evyōnīm, from the Hebrew for 'poor ones'), an early Jewish-Christian sect that flourished in the second and third centuries, particularly in Palestine and Syria. Their precise origins and doctrinal positions varied across different communities, but the core christological conviction was consistent: Jesus was a human being, born of Joseph and Mary in the ordinary way, who was uniquely righteous and who was chosen or adopted by God at His baptism when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. At the baptism, they taught, God adopted Jesus as His Son and anointed Him for His messianic mission, hence the category of Ebionite Christology as a form of adoptionism.

The Ebionites, as Jewish Christians who had not broken with the Jewish law, were motivated by a rigorous monotheism that could not accommodate the New Testament's identification of Jesus as the eternal, divine Son of God. The idea of the divine Son existing eternally before His human birth seemed to them to compromise the absolute uniqueness of the one God of Israel. Their solution was to maintain a high view of Jesus as prophet and Messiah while categorically denying His pre-existence and divine nature: He was a supremely gifted and uniquely anointed human being, not the eternal Son of God who had assumed human flesh.

B. The Biblical Refutation and Soteriological Consequence

The Ebionite Christ is refuted directly by every text we examined in Lesson 9: John 1:1 ("the Word was God"), John 20:28 ("My Lord and my God!"), Romans 9:5 ("Christ who is over all, God blessed forever"), Titus 2:13 ("our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus"), and Colossians 2:9 ("all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form"). He is also refuted by the pre-existence texts examined in Lesson 3: John 1:1-3, John 8:58, John 17:5, Colossians 1:15-17, and Micah 5:2. The Ebionite Jesus, born of ordinary human generation, pre-existent in no sense, divine only in an adoptive and functional sense, is not the Jesus of the New Testament.

The soteriological consequence of Ebionism is radical: a merely human Jesus cannot save. His death is the death of a martyr, morally exemplary, possibly inspiring, but not an atoning sacrifice of infinite value sufficient to bear the infinite weight of divine justice against sin. His resurrection, if it occurred, is the restoration of a human life, not the vindication of the Lord of glory and the firstfruits of the new creation. And His present intercession, if it continues, is the prayer of a human advocate, not the perpetual presentation of an infinite atonement before the throne of the infinite God by the one who is co-equal with the Father in divine nature. The Ebionite Jesus is a magnificent human being, but he is not the Savior the gospel declares and sinners need.

II. DOCETISM: THE DENIAL OF CHRIST'S TRUE HUMANITY

Christ Only Appeared to Be Human, His Body Was a Phantom or a Spiritual Semblance

A. The Docetic Claim

Docetism, already examined in Lesson 8, occupies the opposite pole from Ebionism on the christological spectrum. Where Ebionism denied Christ's deity to protect monotheism, Docetism denied Christ's genuine humanity to protect the divine dignity. The Docetists, a diverse group whose positions ranged from the relatively mild (Christ's body was a heavenly, spiritual body rather than a physical, material one) to the extreme (Christ was purely a divine spirit who only appeared to take on human form, the entire human narrative of the Gospels being a divine illusion), were motivated by the dualistic philosophical framework, common in Gnosticism and certain strands of Platonism, that regarded matter as inherently inferior, corruptible, or even evil. A truly divine being cannot be contaminated by genuine contact with material, mortal flesh.

In its more sophisticated Gnostic forms, Docetism took various shapes: some Docetists held that the divine Christ descended upon the human Jesus at His baptism and departed before the crucifixion, so that the one who actually suffered and died was the human shell, not the divine spirit. Others held that the entire human narrative was a divine performance, that the incarnation, the suffering, and the death were all appearances rather than realities. What united the various Docetic positions was the conviction that the divine being could not truly, genuinely, physically enter the messiness, the vulnerability, and the mortality of creaturely human existence.

B. The Biblical Refutation and Soteriological Consequence

The apostolic refutation of Docetism is explicit, direct, and repeated. John 1:14 declares that "the Word became flesh", not "appeared as flesh" or "adopted the semblance of flesh." 1 John 1:1-3 grounds the apostolic proclamation in the physical, sensory verification of eyewitnesses: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life" (NASB 1995). The threefold sensory appeal (heard, seen, touched) is a direct refutation of any claim that the humanity of Jesus was merely apparent. And 1 John 4:2-3 identifies the confession that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" as the decisive test of orthodoxy, while identifying the denial of this confession as "the spirit of antichrist."

The soteriological consequence of Docetism is equally devastating: a phantom Christ who did not genuinely suffer and die cannot genuinely redeem. The atonement requires a real death, a genuine, physical, biological death in which the one who bears the sin of His people actually pours out His life and blood. A docetic crucifixion is not an atonement; it is a divine performance, and a performance cannot accomplish what only a genuine event can accomplish. The resurrection of a docetic Christ is equally meaningless, there is nothing to resurrect because there was no genuine

body. And the sympathetic High Priest of Hebrews 4:15, who was “tempted in all things as we are” because He genuinely shared our flesh and blood (Hebrews 2:14), is impossible on docetic premises: a spirit who only appeared to be human cannot genuinely know what hunger, grief, fear, and temptation feel like from the inside.

“Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist.”

1 JOHN 4:2–3, NASB 1995

III. ARIANISM: THE DENIAL OF CHRIST’S CO-EQUALITY WITH THE FATHER

The Son Is the First and Greatest of All Creatures, There Was a Time When He Was Not

A. The Arian Claim

Arianism, discussed in detail in Lessons 3 and 9, is the most systematically developed and the most historically consequential of all the christological heresies. Arius of Alexandria (c. 256–336 AD) taught that the Son of God is not co-eternal or co-equal with the Father but is the first and greatest product of the divine creative activity: brought into existence by the Father before the creation of the world, exalted above all other creatures, and worthy of honor and worship, but a creature nonetheless. The Arian slogan encapsulates the error with memorable precision: “There was a time when He was not” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, ἔν ποτε ἠοτε οὐκ ἔν).

Arius was motivated by a concern for the absolute transcendence and uniqueness of the Father: if the Son is fully and equally divine, does this not compromise the divine unity and the Father’s absolute supremacy? His solution was to posit a gradation of deity: the Father is the one, true, supreme God; the Son is the highest of created beings, divine in a secondary and derivative sense but not co-equal in nature or eternal in being. This solution had a certain philosophical appeal: it preserved the absolute uniqueness of the Father, it seemed to account for the New Testament texts that speak of the Son’s subordination and dependence on the Father, and it offered an apparently more intelligible account of the incarnation (a supreme creature taking on a lower form).

B. The Biblical Refutation and Soteriological Consequence

The Nicene Council’s refutation of Arianism, the declaration that the Son is homoousios (of the same substance) with the Father, begotten not made, is grounded in the comprehensive biblical case for the full deity of Christ examined in Lesson 9. But the soteriological argument for the refutation is the most penetrating: a creaturely Christ cannot save. The infinite weight of divine justice against sin can only be borne by one who is infinite in worth; the power to raise the dead can only be exercised by

the one who has life in Himself; the access to the Father required for effective intercession can only be possessed by the one who is co-equal with the Father in divine nature. Athanasius of Alexandria, the great defender of Nicene orthodoxy, pressed this argument with surgical precision: only the Creator can redeem the creation, because only the Creator has the infinite resources that redemption requires.

The Arian heresy is not merely an ancient error; it persists with remarkable vitality in contemporary forms. The Jehovah's Witnesses represent the largest and most systematic contemporary Arian movement, with their identification of Jesus as Michael the Archangel and their translation of John 1:1 ("the Word was a god"). Various forms of subordinationism, including the Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS) controversy discussed in Lesson 4, have been accused, with varying degrees of justice, of functional Arianism. The pastor who has worked through the Nicene arguments and the exegetical case for the full deity of Christ is equipped to engage every contemporary form of the ancient error.

IV. APOLLINARIANISM: THE DENIAL OF CHRIST'S COMPLETE HUMAN NATURE

The Divine Logos Replaced the Human Rational Soul, Christ Had No Human Mind or Will

A. The Apollinarian Claim

Apollinarius of Laodicea (c. 310–390 AD) was a gifted theologian and a committed defender of the Nicene faith against Arianism. He was a close friend of Athanasius and shared his passionate conviction that the Son is fully and truly God. It was precisely his commitment to the full deity of the Son that led him into the Christological error that bears his name: in seeking to protect the unity of the Person and the sinlessness of Christ, he denied Christ a complete human nature by teaching that the divine Logos had replaced the human rational soul (νοῦς, nous) in the incarnate Christ.

Apollinarius reasoned as follows: the human rational soul is the seat of human moral decision-making and the primary locus of sin; if Christ had a genuine human rational soul, He would have had a genuine source of moral conflict and potential sin within Himself, compromising His sinlessness. His solution was to posit that in Christ, the divine Logos functioned as the rational soul: Christ had a genuine human body and a genuine lower (animal) soul, but no human rational soul or mind, that dimension of His being was supplied by the divine Logos. The result was a Christ who was a single, unified divine being inhabiting a human body, rather than a complete human being united to the divine Person.

B. The Biblical Refutation and Soteriological Consequence

The condemnation of Apollinarianism at the First Council of Constantinople (381 AD) was grounded primarily in Gregory of Nazianzus's decisive principle: "What has not been assumed has not been healed; but that which is united to God is also being saved" (Epistle 101). If the Logos did not assume a genuine human rational soul and mind, then the human rational soul and mind are not redeemed. The New Testament explicitly promises the renewal of the human mind (Romans 12:2: "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"), the transformation of human thought (Philippians 2:5: "have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus"), and the renewal of the human will in conformity with the divine will (Romans 8:5–6; Galatians 5:16–17). All of these promised renewals require that the Logos assumed what needs to be renewed; and Apollinarianism denies that He did.

The soteriological consequence of Apollinarianism is a partial Savior for a partial humanity. The Apollinarian Christ can redeem the human body (since the Logos assumed a genuine human body) but cannot redeem the human mind, will, or spiritual life (since the Logos did not assume a genuine human rational soul). The New Testament's promise of the redemption of the whole person, body, soul, and spirit, requires the redemption of every dimension of human nature that needs to be redeemed, and this requires that the Logos assumed every dimension of human nature. Apollinarianism fails the test of Gregory's principle and is therefore rightly condemned as a denial of the full redemption the gospel promises.

V. NESTORIANISM: DIVIDING THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Two Persons in One Christ, The Divine Logos and the Human Jesus in Moral Union

A. The Nestorian Claim

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (d. c. 451 AD), was a disciple of the Antiochene theological school, which rightly emphasized the genuine distinction and integrity of the two natures against the Alexandrian tendency to emphasize the unity of the Person so strongly as to threaten the integrity of the human nature. Nestorius's difficulties began with his objection to the title Theotokos ("God-bearer" or "Mother of God") for the Virgin Mary: Mary, he argued, is the mother of the human Christ (Χριστοτόκος, Christotokos) but not of the divine Logos (θεοτόκος, Theotokos). The debate revealed a Christology in which the divine and human natures were so sharply distinguished that the unity of the Person was effectively dissolved: Nestorius's Christ appeared to be two persons, the divine Logos and the human Jesus, united in a relationship of moral and functional cooperation (συνάφεια, synaphēia, "conjunction") rather than a genuine hypostatic union.

The Nestorian error, in fairness, was more subtle and more theologically motivated than its caricature suggests. Nestorius was genuinely concerned to protect the genuine integrity of the human nature

against what he perceived as the Alexandrian tendency to dissolve it into the divine. He was not trying to posit two Christs; he was trying to maintain the genuine distinction of the natures. But the language he used, and the implications of his Theotokos objection, effectively produced a Christology in which the divine and human aspects of Christ were so separate that they could be attributed to different subjects. When he said Mary is not the mother of God but the mother of Christ, he was implicitly treating “God” (the Logos) and “Christ” (the human Jesus) as two different subjects, which is precisely the Nestorian division that Chalcedon condemns.

B. The Biblical Refutation and Soteriological Consequence

The Nestorian division of the Person is refuted by the *communicatio idiomatum*, the principle, grounded in the hypostatic unity of the Person, that the properties of both natures may be predicated of the one Person. Acts 20:28 refers to “the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (NASB 1995), a statement that, on Nestorian premises, would be either false (God, i.e., the Logos, did not have blood) or meaninglessly metaphorical (the Logos acquired the church through the instrumentality of the human Jesus’s blood, in which the Logos was not directly implicated). On the orthodox account of the *communicatio*, the statement is precisely true: the Person who shed His blood is the Person who is God, not because the divine nature literally bled, but because the one Person who shed His blood in His human nature is the divine Person of the eternal Son.

The soteriological consequence of Nestorianism is the diminishment of the atonement. If the person who died on the cross is a human person (the human Jesus) rather than the divine Person of the eternal Son dying in His human nature, then the death is the death of a human being, however righteous, a death of finite value, insufficient for the infinite weight of divine justice against the sin of the elect. The infinite value of the atonement depends on the Person who dies being an infinite Person, the eternal Son of God. Nestorianism’s division of the Person threatens to divide the atonement from the divine Person who gives it its infinite value.

“Take heed then to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

ACTS 20:28, NASB 1995

VI. EUTYCHIANISM AND MONOTHELITISM: CONFUSING THE NATURES AND DENYING THE TWO WILLS

Two Remaining Heresies and the Why Heresies Always Matter for the Gospel

A. Eutychianism/Monophysitism: One Nature After the Incarnation

Eutyches (c. 380–456 AD) was an elderly Alexandrian monk who represented the extreme end of the Alexandrian emphasis on the unity of Christ’s Person. Reacting against what he perceived as the Nestorian tendency of the Antiochene school, Eutyches pushed the unity of the Person so far that he effectively denied the genuine integrity of the two natures after the incarnation. His position was that before the incarnation, Christ existed in two natures (divine and human); but after the incarnation, He has only one nature, the human nature having been absorbed into the divine, like a drop of water absorbed in the ocean. This single post-incarnation nature is neither purely divine nor purely human but a composite, mixed nature that Eutyches insisted was “of one substance with us” in some undefined sense.

The broader movement associated with Eutyches and the rejection of Chalcedon is called Monophysitism (one-nature Christology) or, in its more careful contemporary expressions, Miaphysitism (mixed-nature Christology). The Oriental Orthodox churches, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, and Syriac, rejected the Council of Chalcedon’s two-natures formulation and maintain a christological position that has been the subject of extensive ecumenical dialogue in the modern period. The modern ecumenical consensus is that the Oriental Orthodox do not intend to affirm the Eutychian confusion of the natures but that their terminological tradition (following Cyril of Alexandria’s formula “one nature of the Word incarnate”) expresses an orthodox christological intent in different vocabulary. The careful distinction between the heretical Eutychianism condemned at Chalcedon and the christological tradition of the Oriental Orthodox is important for ecumenical charity and theological accuracy.

The soteriological consequence of classical Eutychianism is the denial of the genuine humanity of Christ, which (as we saw in Lessons 8 and 10) undermines every dimension of the gospel that requires genuine human representation: the active obedience (genuine human obedience to the law in humanity’s place), the substitutionary atonement (a genuine human death in humanity’s place), the sympathetic high priesthood (a genuine human experience of weakness and temptation), and the resurrection hope (the glorification of a genuine human nature as the firstfruits of the general resurrection).

B. Monothelitism: One Will in Christ

Monothelitism is the christological heresy, flourishing in the seventh century, that holds that Christ possesses only one will, despite possessing two natures. The position arose as a proposed compromise between Chalcedonian and Monophysite parties in the Byzantine Empire, promoted by Emperor Heraclius and Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople in the 630s as a basis for ecclesiastical reunion: Christ has two natures (satisfying the Chalcedonians) but only one operation (ἐνέργεια, *energeia*) and one will (θέλησις, *thēsis*) (satisfying the Monophysites’ insistence on unity). Pope Honorius I’s apparent endorsement of the position would later become one of the papacy’s most theologically embarrassing historical moments.

The orthodox response to Monothelitism was articulated most powerfully by Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662 AD), who suffered exile, mutilation, and death for his insistence on two wills in Christ. Maximus’s argument was simple and devastating: will is a faculty of nature, not of person. If Christ has two complete natures (as Chalcedon defines), He has two complete natural wills, a divine will and a human will. The Gethsemane prayer (“Not My will, but Yours be done,” Luke 22:42, NASB 1995) demonstrates the existence of a genuine human will that is genuinely distinct from the Father’s will, in a relationship of perfect voluntary submission. If Christ had only one will, the prayer is either a performance with no genuine human volitional content or a statement that the divine will itself was in tension with the Father’s will, both of which are impossible on orthodox premises. The Third Council of Constantinople (681 AD) condemned Monothelitism and defined Dyothelitism, two wills in Christ, as the orthodox position.

C. Why Every Christological Heresy Matters for the Gospel

The lesson title declares the governing principle of this entire survey: every christological heresy produces a Christ who cannot save. This is not hyperbole; it is the sober theological conclusion that follows from tracing the soteriological consequences of each error. Ebionism produces a Jesus who cannot bear the infinite weight of divine justice. Docetism produces a Christ who cannot genuinely die. Arianism produces a Savior of finite value. Apollinarianism produces a Redeemer who cannot renew the human mind and will. Nestorianism produces an atonement of diminished value, detached from the divine Person who alone gives it infinite worth. Eutychianism produces a Christ who cannot genuinely represent humanity. Monothelitism produces an active obedience that is not genuinely human and a Gethsemane prayer that is not genuine.

The hermeneutical principle of 1 John 4:2–3 applies to every one of these: the test of the spirit is the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, genuinely, physically, permanently. The christological precision of the Chalcedonian Definition is not philosophical pedantry; it is the theological grammar that makes the proclamation of the gospel both possible and precise. Every deviation from Chalcedon in either direction, toward the denial of the genuine humanity (Docetism, Apollinarianism, Eutychianism) or toward the compromise of the genuine deity or the unity of the Person (Ebionism, Arianism, Nestorianism), produces a Christ who is less than the gospel requires and less than sinners need. The pastor who has internalized this lesson will recognize the christological heresies in their contemporary forms, however carefully disguised in modern theological or popular cultural dress, and will be equipped to identify, name, and refute them with both intellectual rigor and pastoral compassion.

Key Texts: *1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7; 1 John 1:1–3; John 1:1, 14; Hebrews 2:14–17; 4:15; Acts 20:28; Luke 22:42; Romans 12:2; Philippians 2:5*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Ebionism	An early Jewish-Christian sect (2nd–3rd centuries), representing the earliest systematic denial of the deity of Christ. The Ebionites held that Jesus was a human being born of Joseph and Mary who was uniquely chosen and anointed by God at His baptism, a form of adoptionism. Motivated by a Jewish monotheism that resisted the identification of Jesus with the eternal divine Son, the Ebionites preserved the messianic dignity of Jesus while categorically denying His pre-existence and divine nature. The soteriological consequence is the elimination of a Savior of infinite worth: the Ebionite Jesus can be a moral exemplar but cannot bear the infinite weight of divine justice.
Adoptionism	The broader theological category encompassing Ebionism and related positions that hold Jesus to be a human being who was adopted or elevated to divine Sonship at a specific moment, typically His baptism or His resurrection. Adoptionism denies the eternal, ontological Sonship of Christ and the pre-existence of the Son before the incarnation. In various forms, it is the most natural christological error for those who begin with a strong monotheistic commitment that resists the identification of Jesus with the eternal God: rather than accepting the New Testament’s claim that the eternal Son became human, adoptionism inverts the relationship and holds that the human Jesus became (in some functional sense) the Son of God.
Docetism	From the Greek <i>dokein</i> (‘to seem’). The Christological heresy denying Christ’s genuine humanity, holding that He only appeared to be human, His body was a phantom, a heavenly spiritual body, or a divine performance rather than genuine material flesh. Typically arising from a dualistic philosophical framework that regarded matter as inferior or evil. The apostolic refutation is direct: John 1:14 (‘the Word became flesh’), 1 John 1:1–3 (sensory verification by eyewitnesses), 1 John 4:2 (‘has come in the flesh’), and 2 John 7 (denial of the incarnation is the spirit of antichrist). Soteriological consequence: a phantom Christ cannot genuinely die, rise, or sympathize with human weakness.
Arianism	The Christological heresy associated with Arius of Alexandria (c. 256–336 AD), teaching that the Son of God is the first and greatest of all created beings, brought into existence by the Father before the creation of the world, but a creature rather than the co-eternal, consubstantial God. The Arian slogan: ‘there was a time when He was not.’ Condemned at the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which defined the Son as <i>homoousios</i> (of the same substance) with the Father, ‘begotten not made.’ Soteriological consequence: a creaturely Christ of finite worth cannot provide an atonement of infinite value sufficient to bear the infinite weight of divine justice against sin.

Term	Definition
Apollinarianism	The Christological heresy associated with Apollinarius of Laodicea (c. 310–390 AD), teaching that in the incarnate Christ, the divine Logos replaced the human rational soul (nous). Apollinarius intended this to explain Christ’s sinlessness but succeeded in denying Him a complete human nature. Condemned at the First Council of Constantinople (381 AD). Primary refutation: Gregory of Nazianzus’s principle ‘what has not been assumed has not been healed’, if the Logos did not assume a genuine human rational soul and will, the human mind and will are not redeemed. Soteriological consequence: a partial Savior for a partial humanity.
Nestorianism	The Christological heresy associated with Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (d. c. 451 AD), which so sharply distinguished the divine and human natures as to effectively posit two persons in Christ, the divine Logos and the human Jesus, united in moral and functional cooperation (synaphēia) rather than genuine hypostatic union. Condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD). Primary refutation: the communicatio idiomatum, Acts 20:28 (‘the church of God which He purchased with His own blood’) is only meaningful on the premise that the one divine Person shed blood in His human nature. Soteriological consequence: the atonement is detached from the divine Person, diminishing its infinite value.
Eutychianism	The Christological heresy associated with Eutyches (c. 380–456 AD), holding that after the incarnation Christ has only one nature, the human nature having been absorbed into the divine, like a drop of water in the ocean. The broader movement is called Monophysitism (one-nature Christology). Condemned at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which defined the two natures as existing ‘without confusion’ and ‘without change.’ Soteriological consequence: a Christ without a genuine, integral human nature cannot genuinely represent humanity, die the human death, or provide the resurrection hope for genuine human bodies.
Monothelitism	The Christological heresy (7th century) holding that Christ possesses only one will despite having two natures. Promoted as a compromise formula between Chalcedonian and Monophysite parties. Condemned at the Third Council of Constantinople (681 AD), which defined Dyothelitism (two wills) as the orthodox position. Primary refutation: Maximus the Confessor’s argument that will is a faculty of nature, not of person, two complete natures entail two complete wills. The Gethsemane prayer (‘not My will, but Yours be done’) demonstrates a genuine human will in perfect voluntary submission to the divine will. Soteriological consequence: without a genuine human will, the active obedience of Christ is not genuinely human obedience.
Miaphysitism	The christological position of the Oriental Orthodox churches (Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Syriac), which rejected the Council of Chalcedon’s two-natures terminology, following Cyril of Alexandria’s formula of ‘one nature of

Term	Definition
	the Word incarnate.’ Distinguished from the heretical Eutychianism condemned at Chalcedon: the Oriental Orthodox affirm that Christ’s single nature (μία φύσις, <i>mia physis</i>) includes both the divine and the human without mixture or confusion. Modern ecumenical dialogue has produced substantial agreement that the christological intent of the Oriental Orthodox tradition is orthodox, even where the terminology differs from the Chalcedonian formulation.
Maximus the Confessor	Byzantine theologian (c. 580–662 AD) and the primary orthodox theologian in the controversy against Monothelitism. Maximus argued that will is a faculty of nature (not person), and that two complete natures in Christ (as defined by Chalcedon) entail two complete natural wills. He suffered exile, the cutting off of his right hand and tongue, and death for his refusal to accept Monothelitism. His theological achievement, the definition of Dyothelitism affirmed at Constantinople III (681 AD), represents the completion of the Chalcedonian settlement. The title ‘Confessor’ (ὁμολογητής) is applied to those who suffered for the faith without dying as martyrs.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the christological heresies are not merely ancient historical curiosities that the church resolved long ago and that can now be safely ignored by those engaged in contemporary ministry. They are permanent temptations, recurring in every generation in forms that are more or less recognizable depending on the theological sophistication of those who encounter them, because they arise from genuine theological concerns (protecting monotheism, protecting the divine transcendence, protecting the unity of the Person, protecting the sinlessness of Christ) that never lose their relevance. The pastor who dismisses the heresies as ancient news will be caught off guard when he encounters their contemporary forms, whether in the pew (the Jehovah’s Witness who knocks on a parishioner’s door), in the academy (the professor who teaches a “spirit Christology” or a “degree Christology”), or in popular culture (the documentary that presents Jesus as a purely human revolutionary or spiritual teacher).

We must also believe that the knowledge of the heresies is not a source of theological pride but of pastoral vigilance. The purpose of understanding what the heresies are and why they are wrong is not to win academic arguments but to protect the people of God from a gospel that cannot save. Every heresy on this list produces a diminished Christ, and a diminished Christ produces a diminished gospel, a diminished hope, and ultimately a diminished life of faith. The congregation

that has been catechized in the christological heresies and their refutations is a congregation that is protected from the specific forms of christological reductionism that will inevitably knock on their door in one form or another.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the study of the christological heresies produce in you a deeper gratitude for the theological labor of the fathers who fought and suffered to preserve the orthodox confession of Christ. Athanasius stood *contra mundum* (against the world) for the Nicene homoousios when the entire Imperial establishment was prepared to accept the Arian compromise; he was exiled five times for his refusal to surrender the full deity of Christ. Maximus the Confessor had his right hand cut off and his tongue removed for his refusal to accept Monothelism. These were not academic disputes; they were battles fought at the cost of suffering and exile and death by people who understood that the christological precision they were defending was the difference between a gospel that could save and one that could not.

Desire a congregation that knows why these battles were fought and what was at stake in them, not because they need to know the technical vocabulary of the ancient councils, but because they need to know that the confession “Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man” is not a formality but a hard-won, blood-purchased truth that the church has refused to surrender across fifteen centuries of challenge. Let that knowledge deepen both the congregation’s confidence in the gospel and their gratitude for the cloud of witnesses who passed it on to them.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Develop a concise, accessible guide to the christological heresies and their contemporary equivalents that can be used as a teaching resource in your congregation. The format of this lesson, name, claim, concern, error, refutation, consequence, provides a natural template. A one-page summary of the seven heresies, translated into contemporary language and illustrated with contemporary examples, would be an invaluable resource for Sunday School, small group study, or new members’ catechism.
- Read the primary sources of the christological controversies, not merely secondary summaries. Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation* and *Against the Arians*; the letters of Cyril of Alexandria; the Chalcedonian Definition itself; and Maximus the Confessor’s *Disputation with Pyrrhus* are among the most theologically illuminating documents in the history of Christian thought. They are also, particularly Athanasius, among the most spiritually nourishing. The pastor who has read these texts firsthand will have a grasp of the christological controversies that no secondary summary can fully convey.
- Engage the Jehovah’s Witnesses as the most systematically organized contemporary form of the Arian heresy. Their theology represents a coherent and extensively developed version of the ancient error, and they are specifically trained to engage Christians on the christological

questions. Know their key arguments and know the exegetical and theological responses to them. The most important resources for this engagement: Robert Bowman's *Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel* (comprehensive and irenic) and Greg Stafford's debate with Jehovah's Witnesses on John 1:1 (advanced exegetical engagement).

- Identify the specific christological errors most prevalent in your own ministry context and address them with targeted preaching and teaching. In a congregation with many former Catholics or Eastern Orthodox, the most pressing errors may be different from those in a congregation with many former Jehovah's Witnesses or in a congregation formed by charismatic communities that may tend toward implicit Docetism. Know your specific christological context and address the specific errors that threaten your specific people.
- Preach the Gethsemane narrative (Matthew 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46) as a simultaneous refutation of Docetism (the genuine human anguish), Apollinarianism (the genuine human will in the cry 'remove this cup from me'), and Monothelitism (the 'not my will but yours' presupposing a genuine human will distinct from the divine will). This single pericope, preached with christological intentionality, provides the congregation with a living, narrative, pastoral demonstration of why the heresies are wrong and why the orthodox Christology is both theologically precise and deeply human.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Before studying this lesson, had you encountered any of the seven christological heresies surveyed here, either in their ancient form or in a contemporary expression? Where did you encounter them: in a conversation with a Jehovah's Witness, in a popular book or film, in a theological education context, or in the questions of parishioners? How prepared were you, before this lesson, to identify and engage the specific christological error involved?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read 1 John 4:1–6. What is the immediate pastoral context of John's christological test in verses 2–3? What specifically does the test require: what must be confessed, and what must be denied? What does the present perfect 'has come' (elēlythota, v. 2) indicate about the nature and permanence of the incarnation? How does John distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of error in verses 5–6?

3. Read Hebrews 2:14–18. Identify every specific theological purpose John assigns to the genuine humanity of Christ in these verses. How does verse 14 ('He Himself likewise also partook of the

same') refute Docetism? How does verse 17 ('He had to be made like His brethren in all things') refute Apollinarianism? What does the phrase 'like His brethren in all things' (κατὰ πάντα, kata panta) establish about the completeness of the human nature Christ assumed?

4. Read Luke 22:39–46. Identify every specific indicator in this passage of: (a) a genuine human will distinct from the Father's will; (b) genuine human suffering and physical distress; and (c) genuine human prayer and dependence. How does each of these indicators refute a specific heresy: the genuine human will refutes Monothelitism, the genuine human suffering refutes Docetism, the genuine human prayer refutes Apollinarianism (which posited no genuine human soul). How does Hebrews 5:7–8 interpret the theological significance of this scene?

5. Read 1 John 1:1–4. What specific sensory experiences does John invoke in verses 1–2 to establish the physical reality of the incarnation? What is the significance of the plural subject ('we') in these verses, why does John appeal to communal rather than merely individual witness? How does the purpose statement of verse 4 ('so that our joy may be made complete') relate to the christological affirmations of verses 1–3?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson argues that all seven christological heresies arose from genuine theological concerns rather than malice or indifference. For each heresy, identify the genuine theological concern that motivated it and explain how the heresy attempted to address that concern. Then explain why the orthodox response is a better solution to the underlying concern than the heresy itself. Which of the seven heresies do you find most theologically understandable (i.e., most motivated by a genuine concern that orthodoxy also takes seriously)?

7. The lesson claims that 'every christological heresy produces a Christ who cannot save.' Choose three of the seven heresies and trace the specific soteriological consequences of each with as much precision as possible. For each heresy: (a) What specific dimension of the atonement is undermined? (b) What specific promise of the gospel is rendered impossible? (c) What specific pastoral consolation is removed?

8. Maximus the Confessor argued that will is a faculty of nature (not of person), and that therefore two complete natures in Christ entail two complete wills. Evaluate this argument. Is the claim that will is a faculty of nature rather than person philosophically and biblically defensible? What is the relationship between the Dyothelite doctrine and the Dyophysite (two-natures) doctrine of Chalcedon? Does Dyothelitism follow necessarily from Chalcedonian Dyophysitism?

9. The lesson distinguishes between Eutychianism (the heresy condemned at Chalcedon) and Miaphysitism (the position of the Oriental Orthodox churches, which rejected Chalcedon). On what grounds does the lesson suggest that the Oriental Orthodox tradition may express an orthodox christological intent in non-Chalcedonian terminology? What are the limits of this charitable reading,

where does the ecumenical dialogue between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian traditions reach its remaining difficulties?

10. The lesson's governing principle, drawn from 1 John 4:2–3, is that the confession 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh' is the decisive test of christological orthodoxy. Apply this test to each of the seven heresies: in what specific sense does each heresy fail the test? Is the 1 John 4:2–3 test sufficient to identify all seven heresies, or are some of them more subtle than the test easily captures?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson recommends developing a concise, accessible guide to the christological heresies and their contemporary equivalents for congregational use. What contemporary expressions of each heresy would you include in such a guide? For each heresy, identify at least one specific contemporary form that your congregation is most likely to encounter: a specific religious movement, a popular book, a television documentary, or a type of popular theological claim.

12. The lesson observes that the christological fathers who fought these battles did so at great personal cost: Athanasius exiled five times, Maximus having his hand and tongue removed. What does the willingness of these men to suffer for christological precision tell us about what is actually at stake in these debates? How would you communicate that urgency, the sense that christological precision is worth suffering for, to a congregation that regards theological debates as inherently divisive or as less important than practical ministry?

13. The lesson recommends preaching the Gethsemane narrative as a simultaneous refutation of Docetism, Apollinarianism, and Monothelitism. Plan the outline of a sermon on Matthew 26:36–46 or Luke 22:39–46 that weaves the christological refutations into the pastoral and devotional exposition of the text. What would be the main point? How would you introduce the christological dimensions without making the sermon feel like a theology lecture? What specific pastoral application would you draw from the passage?

14. This lesson completes the survey of christological heresies within Unit 4 on the Hypostatic Union. Looking ahead to Lesson 12 (the Impeccability of Christ) and Lesson 13 (the Knowledge and Will of Christ), which of the heresies studied in this lesson most directly raises the questions those lessons will address? How does the Apollinarian question (did Christ have a genuine human rational soul?) connect to the questions of Lesson 13? How does the Monothelite question (did Christ have a genuine human will?) connect to the question of impeccability in Lesson 12?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a reading of 1 John 4:1 || 10 in its entirety, the passage that provides this lesson's governing hermeneutical principle and that places the christological confession in its proper pastoral and doxological context. Read it slowly, attending to the movement from the warning against false spirits (vv. 1–6) through the affirmation of divine love as the ground of the christological confession (vv. 7–10). Let the group notice that John's christological test, "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh", is embedded in a context of love: the love of God manifest in the sending of His Son as the propitiation for our sins (v. 10). The christological precision John requires is not an end in itself; it is in the service of the doxological recognition of the love of God. The Christ who has truly come in the flesh is the Christ through whom God's love is truly expressed, truly effective, and truly received.

Spend time in gratitude for the theological faithfulness of those who bore the cost of christological precision across the centuries. Pray specifically for the memory and the example of Athanasius, who stood alone against the Arian empire for decades; of the Nicene fathers, who forged the homoousios under imperial pressure; of Cyril of Alexandria and the Council of Ephesus, who defended the Theotokos and the unity of the Person; of the Chalcedonian fathers, who produced the most precise christological definition in the history of the church; and of Maximus the Confessor, who gave his hand and his tongue rather than compromise the two wills. These were not primarily academics; they were pastors, bishops, and monks who understood that the christological precision they were defending was the difference between a gospel that saves and one that does not.

Pray for the contemporary church's christological faithfulness, for the courage to maintain the full, undiminished, uncompromising confession of Jesus Christ as truly God and truly man in the face of the specific pressures that contemporary culture exerts on the christological confession. Pray for those who are forming doctrine in seminaries and theological schools, that they would be faithful to the apostolic testimony and the conciliar tradition. Pray for those who preach and teach in local churches, that they would have both the theological competence to recognize the heresies when they encounter them and the pastoral wisdom to engage them with charity and clarity.

Close with the test of 1 John 4:2, spoken together as a positive confession rather than merely a negative criterion:

"Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." He is truly God, the eternal Son, co-equal with the Father, through whom all things were made and for whom all things exist. He is truly man, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, hungry in the wilderness and weeping at the tomb. And He is one Person, the same 'I' who says 'Before Abraham was born, I am' and 'I thirst.' To Him be glory forever. Amen.

1 JOHN 4:2, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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