

Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding

Edward Caswall (1814–1878)

Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding:
"Christ is nigh," it seems to say:
"Cast away the works of darkness,
O ye children of the day!"

Startled at the solemn warning,
Let the earth-bound soul arise;
Christ, our Sun, all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.

Lo, the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heaven;
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiven.

So, when next He comes in glory,
And the world is wrapped in fear,
May He then as our Defender
On the clouds of heaven appear.

Honor, glory, might and blessing
To the Father and the Son,
With the Ever-living Spirit
One in Three, and Three in One.



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In the Nick of Time

Word of the Father, Now in Flesh Appearing

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If Jesus Christ were not truly and perfectly God, He could not be our mediator. If Jesus Christ were not truly and perfectly human, He could not be our mediator. This much, Scripture makes clear.

Our problem is that we have absolutely no experience with divine-human beings other than Jesus Christ. He is absolutely unique, the only one of His kind. For that reason, Christians have struggled to find words to express just who Jesus is.

With the Athanasian Creed we affirm that, as to their deity, the Father and Son are equally glorious, eternal, uncreated, incomprehensible, and almighty. Yet they are not two Gods, but one. So we confess.

Nevertheless, we also confess that we do not comprehend what we affirm. While the relationship of the Father to the Son involves no logical contradiction, it is inexplicable and impenetrable to the human mind. It rises above reason. We do not understand how such a thing can be.

Already bewildered, we then encounter the full humanity of the Son. Here we discover a person who, as to His deity, is coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial with God the Father, but who, without ceasing to be fully God, also becomes fully human. We are asked to believe that a person who is equal with God is also one of us.

Not everyone agrees. Often, people reject what they cannot explain. Worse yet, they modify the truth to fit some human explanation. So they have done with the person of Christ.

Some have denied His full deity. Ebionites saw Jesus as a good man, a teacher and prophet who kept the law. Arians explained Jesus as God's first creation, so highly exalted above others that He could be called "a god," but who was still not properly "God." Adoptionists (Dynamic Monarchians) understood Jesus as a human who was elevated to divine status by some act of God.

Some have denied the distinction of the Son from the Father. The Sabellians (Modalistic Monarchians) affirmed that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were simply three modes in which God presented Himself and not actual personal distinctions. As the same man might appear as husband to his wife, as teacher to his students, and as peer to his fellows, God presented Himself at one time as Father, at another as Son, and at another as Holy Spirit. Ultimately, however, the Trinity is a mask, and God is one and only one person.

Others have denied Jesus' complete humanity. Docetists believed that the human body of Jesus was a mere phantom projected by the divine Christ. Apollinarians taught that Jesus possessed a human body and soul, but that the place of the rational, human spirit was taken by the divine Logos (in other words, Christ was 3/3 divine but only 2/3 human). Eutychians affirmed complete divine and human natures but saw the human nature as so recessive as to be almost completely overwhelmed by the divine—rather like a drop of honey in an ocean of water.

Still others have rejected the integrity of the person of Jesus Christ. Cerinthians believed that the divine Christ descended upon the human Jesus, only to abandon Him before the cross. Nestorians affirmed the full deity and full humanity of Christ but divided these two natures into two distinct persons, joined rather like Siamese twins.

The equal and opposite reaction was for others to affirm the unity of the person by denying the distinctiveness of the natures. Monophysites collapsed the divinity and humanity of Christ into a single nature. In principle this nature was supposed to be both divine and human, but in practice the divine so overwhelmed the human that Monophysitism became a reaffirmation of Eutychianism. A more subtle form of denying the distinction between the natures is Monothelitism, which denies that Jesus had a human will. *De facto*, this is a denial of the completeness of the human nature of Jesus.

These are not merely ancient heresies. They have had a tendency to reappear throughout church history. The Jehovah's Witnesses are unreconstructed Arians. Mormonism applies Adoptionist principles not only to Christ but to all humanity. Many liberals have regarded Jesus simply as a human teacher or prophet, and contemporary biblical scholarship is witnessing a resurgence of interest in Gnostic understandings of Christ. Modalistic Monarchianism shows up in the teachings both of Witness Lee and of the so-called "Jesus Only Movement," represented by the United Pentecostal Church. The Coptic Orthodox Church still defends Monophysitism and condemns the Council of Chalcedon as "divisive."

Our understanding of the person of Christ has been hammered out in opposition to these heresies. Each new heretical theory forced Christians to return to the Scriptures in order to test the theory against the text. At each new controversy, Christians erected a new barrier against heresy. They were forced

to say, "Scripture teaches *this* but not *that*. We may say it *this* way but not *that* way." This process resulted in the adoption of several public summary statements, each of which was more specific than the one that preceded it.

At the end of the day, here is what we must affirm. If Jesus Christ were not true God, He could not be our savior. If Jesus Christ were not true human, He could not be our savior. If Jesus Christ were not one person, He could not be our savior. If the person of Christ were divided, then He could not be our savior. If the natures were combined or transmuted, then He could not be our savior. All of this is summarized and elaborated in the formula of Chalcedon.

Nothing is more important to Christianity than the incarnation of Jesus Christ. A false step here can lead us to deny the gospel and plunge us into apostasy. We learn about the old heresies so that we may confront the new ones. We confront the new ones so that we may keep the gospel pure. We aim for precision in our understanding of Jesus Christ so that we may trust Him and worship Him as He is, rather than worshipping a false Jesus whom we have manufactured in our own idolatrous hearts.

In one sense, we are indebted to the heretics. Everything that we need to know about Jesus Christ is in the text of Scripture. If we had not been challenged by the heretics, however, we never would have studied the Scriptures as they deserved to be studied. We never would have noticed the depth and texture and richness of the biblical teaching concerning the incarnation. The heretics have forced us to discover exactly what Scripture says and what it forbids us to say.

We cannot explain the incarnation. We cannot fully comprehend the notion of a theanthropic person. But we can learn to be precise in saying who He is and who He is not. We can know Him. We can trust Him. We can love Him. We can worship Him. Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing: O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
