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Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book is a great idea and a valuable contribution to the church. Stephen Nichols provides a wise selection of classic excerpts on the doctrine of Christ, and he places them in the context of a readable story with helpful explanations that ordinary Christians can follow. In the daze of *The Da Vinci Code* and other revivals of ancient errors, we need clear celebrations of Christian orthodoxy such as this.”

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STEPHEN J.

NICHOLS

FOR US AND

*The Doctrine of Christ
in the Early Church*

FOR OUR SALVATION

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“Who Do People Say That I Am?”: Christ’s Crucial Question

Thanks to a best-selling novel and to a movie with the likes of Tom Hanks, people everywhere inside the church and out are talking about the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, gnosticism, the Christology of the early church, and early church figures such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Arius. This is a theologian’s dream scenario, and in some cases a nightmare scenario as well. Imagine the shock of reading three whole paragraphs about the Nicene Creed in the pages of *USA Today*. Before the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon, you would be hard-pressed to find three paragraphs on the Nicene Creed in a Christian book, let alone in America’s most read newspaper.

The overwhelming wake of *The Da Vinci Code* has, like a tropical storm, caused a great deal of damage. Yet, some good has come out of it, not the least of which is that people are talking about the Nicene Creed. What’s more, Christians are talking about it too. And some of them are looking at it for the first time. All of this is good, very good, for the church. The Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds express the bedrock of our faith. They put forth the biblical teaching of who Christ is and what he has done for us. This book’s title, *For Us and for Our Salvation*, comes right from the Nicene Creed. It is a way of saying that who Christ is has everything to do with the gospel, the church’s true treasure. If we learn anything from *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon, it must be the lesson of the importance of

getting the person of Christ right. The early church labored hard and long over this question, and they did so in the face of intense challenge. The contemporary church needs to do no less.

In our contemporary struggle to present Christ as the Bible portrays him, we should not work in a vacuum. We owe it to ourselves to look to the past and to learn from the church's struggles. Perhaps in no area of theology is this more necessary or beneficial than in the doctrine of Christ in the early church. The first four or five centuries of the church's existence witnessed the launch of nearly every possible challenge. Further, one is hard-pressed to offer a better response to those challenges than that offered by the early church leaders. We may be able to devise fresh and contemporary ways to illustrate their teachings and expressions, or we may have to think of new ways to relate their teachings to the particular challenges that we face in our day, but there is practically no room for improvement on those teachings. What these early church leaders said and did is tried and true.

The early church fathers wrestled with the same problems presented by *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon and its fanciful speculations about Jesus. They wrestled with the same problems presented by Islam and its adamant denial of the deity of Christ. And they wrestled with the same problems presented by the scholars working in the Jesus Seminar or in gnostic texts like the Gospel of Judas who quickly dismiss the four canonical Gospels as God's true revelation to humanity. In the days of the early church, the names of the opponents were different from those faced by us today, but the underlying issues bear a striking resemblance. When the church fathers responded with the orthodox view of Christ, they did the church of all ages a great service.

This book explores these controversies over Christ faced by the early church. This book also looks to tell the story of the people involved—Arius and Eutyches, Ignatius and Irenaeus, Athanasius and Leo. These may or may not be known to

contemporary evangelicals, but they should be. The following chapters unfold this struggle in the early church chronologically. Chapter 1 starts with one foot in the pages of the New Testament and stretches to the first decade of the 300s. Chapter 3 tells the story of Athanasius and his arch-nemesis Arius, the two figures behind the Nicene Council in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381. Chapter 5 unfolds the events of the 400s, focusing on Leo I and the Chalcedonian Council in 451. In an unprecedented event, no fewer than 520 bishops met and actually agreed on a very nuanced and sophisticated theological statement that we know as the Chalcedonian Creed. The intervening chapters, 2, 4, and 6, all break from the narrative to provide primary source documents, allowing the major figures in this struggle to tell the story in their own words. A brief epilogue explores the variations on these themes that have occurred in the life of the church since Chalcedon in 451.

The early church was right in spending so much time and effort on the doctrine of Christ. They were right to contend that Christ is the God-man, very God of very God and at the same time truly human with flesh and blood. They were right to contend that Christ is two natures conjoined in one person without division, separation, confusion, or mixture, to use the language of the Chalcedonian Creed. They were also right to contend that the gospel collapses without this belief. In the words of Athanasius and the Nicene Creed, Christ is the God-man “*for us and for our salvation.*”

In the Beginning Was the Word: Christ in the Early Centuries

For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

COLOSSIANS 2:9

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

2 JOHN 7

In what way did he come but this, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

AUGUSTINE, *ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE*

Even before we get out of the pages of the New Testament, Christ comes under fire. During his earthly life and public ministry, the crowds, the religious leaders, even at times his own chosen disciples got him wrong. His life of working miracles and his teaching of who he was and what he came to do were in plain view for everyone to see and hear. Despite this, he was misinterpreted, denied, and rejected. In the face of his healing, he was called the son of Satan (Matt. 12:22-32). In the face of his teaching, he was called the mere son of a carpenter (John 6:41-51). In the face of his death on the cross, he was mocked as the king of the Jews (John 19:19-22). And in the face of his resurrection, he was mistaken as a gardener (John 20:15). Fifty days after his death and after he had ascended back to heaven, Peter

had to tell the crowd that Jesus, the very one whom they had seen and who had walked among them, was indeed *the* Christ, *the* Messiah, and that he was indeed *the* Lord (Acts 2:36). Those great crowds missed it, and, at least for a time, so had his closest followers. They had gotten him altogether wrong.

After his ascension and in the first decades of the church, the situation grew worse. The apostles and the early church contended with those teaching falsely about Christ. According to John, these false teachings centered around two poles. The first concerned the denial of Christ as the Messiah (1 John 2:22). The second concerned the denial of the incarnation, the teaching that Jesus was fully human and had truly come in the flesh (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). These two poles of thought dominated not only the first century but the immediate following centuries. This chapter explores these false teachings and the response to them in the early church.

CHRISTOS AND COBBLERS

Mr. Christ. At least that's the answer from the child in the Sunday school class to the teacher's question concerning the one born in a stable in Bethlehem. In the child's scheme of things, Jesus was the first name, Christ was the last. And, as his parents had taught him, he added the Mr. out of respect. Of course, in the case of Jesus, Christ is not the last name, it's a title. However, many, even those who should have known better, missed this. To them he was Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus, the son of Joseph, the ancient versions of last names.¹ Acknowledging Jesus as *the* Christ, however, requires a great deal. The Greek word *Christos* means "anointed one" and is the counterpart to the Hebrew term meaning "Messiah." Designating Jesus as the Christ requires that one see him as the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed one of God, who would be the redeemer and deliverer of the covenant people. That Jesus assumed the title *Christ* in both word and deed is undeniable. That those in his day and

in the centuries following his birth denied him as the Christ is undeniable too.

The denial of Jesus as the Christ began among the leaders of the Jewish community. Jesus of Nazareth disappointed them as a candidate for the Messiah. He lacked charisma and *gravitas*, not to mention an army. The Israelite nation was faced with occupation by the Roman Empire, and Jesus failed to fulfill their dreams of a conquering Messiah. The Jewish leaders' rejection of his claim to be their Messiah may be clearly seen in the exchange with Pontius Pilate. When that official ordered an inscription on the cross that would signify Christ's crime as claiming to be "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," the Jewish leaders demanded that it be changed to read that he claimed to be the king of the Jews. Jesus claimed it, but they certainly did not want him. Pilate refused to change it (John 19:19-22).

One group in particular that was influenced by Jewish teachings denying the deity of Christ was the Ebionites. We don't know much about this group. Epiphanius, the fourth-century bishop of Salamis and later Cyprus, claims that Ebion founded this group. This may be a creative fiction. Other church fathers offered their own explanation of the name. The term likely comes from the Hebrew word for "poor." They were the "poor" disciples. Later opponents of them would use the name sarcastically to refer to their less than stellar mental capabilities, calling them "poor" thinkers. We also speculate that this group probably arose in the first century, likely coming into prominence after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Ebionites were scattered from Jerusalem and Israel and congregated initially in Kochaba but soon spread throughout the empire. Scholars further tend to see this group as an extension of the Judaizers, the faction that Paul contended with in his Epistle to the Galatians. They were in effect trying to be Jewish Christians, not quite ready to accept the teachings of Paul or the book of Hebrews or John. All of which is to say that they were falling short of what constitutes true Christianity. It appears

that the Ebionites were unable to sustain themselves in walking this tightrope between Judaism and Christianity. By the middle of the 400s they had virtually become extinct, some migrating to Judaism, others affirming orthodox Christianity.²

HERESY

The English word *heresy* is a transliteration of both the Greek and Latin word. The Wycliffe Bible may contain the first occurrence of the English word, merely transliterating it from the Latin Vulgate at Acts 24:14. It occurs several times in the New Testament, initially meaning “sect” or “school of thought.” The Sadducees and Pharisees are termed a sect in Acts 5:17 and 15:5. The term is also used to speak of the Christians themselves in Acts 24:14 and 28:22. In the epistles the term is used to refer to groups that are causing division in the church, such as the ESV translation of the word as “factions” in 1 Corinthians 11:19. By the later epistles, especially 2 Peter, the term comes to mean divisive groups within the church that are promoting false teaching. In 2 Peter 2:1 the ESV translates the term as “heresies,” which are destructive and are brought into the church by false teachers. This particular heresy in 2 Peter centers on Christ. In the early church, teachings that went against Scripture were considered heresy, usually at synods. Once Christianity became legalized in the Roman Empire, a charge of heresy not only meant excommunication from the church but could also bring legal ramifications. As the church formulated and finalized the creeds, especially the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, there became rather fixed and firm boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy. Augustine once said, in a rather lengthy letter dealing with heresy, that heretics “prefer their own contentions to the testimonies of Holy writ” and that they consequently separate themselves from the true, universal church.

Most of what we know about the Ebionites comes from the writings of the church fathers against them. Irenaeus mounted the first sustained refutation of them. He, in fact, was the first to use the name “Ebionites” in print, around 190. Hippolytus and Origen would later contribute their own refutations. The Ebionites viewed Christ as a prophet, and some of them even accepted the virgin birth. But they all denied his preexistence and consequently denied his deity. Eusebius, the first church

historian, writing in 325, put the Ebionite heresy succinctly: “The adherents of what is known as the Ebionite heresy assert that Christ was the son of Joseph and Mary, and regard him as no more than a man.” While viewing Jesus as a mere man, the Ebionites nevertheless exalted Jesus as one who kept the law perfectly, and as a group they stressed the keeping of the law in order to attain salvation. Like the Judaizers of Paul’s day, they insisted on circumcision. Their faulty view of Christ led to a faulty view of Christ’s work on the cross. Their misunderstanding of the incarnation led to a misunderstanding of the atonement. They did not grasp the fact that Christ is the God-man who is for us. This fact makes all the difference for our salvation.³

Another and more sophisticated view that denied Christ’s deity circulated in the early church. This view, called adoptionism, held that God adopted the human Jesus as his son after he was born, either at Jesus’ baptism or at his resurrection. When the one God descended on the human Jesus, Jesus became the son of God and became the Christ, filled with divine power. Eusebius refers to this as “Artemon’s heresy.” We, however, know nothing of Artemon beyond this brief reference. Later proponents of this teaching include Paul of Samasota (third century) and Theodotus (c. 190). Theodotus the Cobbler—to distinguish him from the other Theodotuses in church history—arrived in Rome around 190 and began spreading adoptionist teachings. The church excommunicated Theodotus, and his followers floundered. Paul of Samasota was able to gain a little more traction due to his being bishop at Antioch. Around 260 he was declared a heretic for his adoptionist view in a synod at Antioch. Eusebius gives us the report: “The other pastors of the churches from all directions, made haste to assemble at Antioch, as against a despoiler of the flock of Christ.” It was in the course of dealing with his teaching in three different synods that the term *homoousios* came into play (much more on this

term, which means that Christ is of the same essence as the Father, in Chapter 3).⁴

The views of these adoptionists are a subset of a larger group of heresies under the umbrella term of *monarchianism*, which refers to “one” ruler or one God. The monarchians put all the emphasis on the oneness of God. They were unable to see the other side, the three persons of the Godhead. They believed that the Bible teaches about Christ and even about the Holy Spirit. They understood these teachings, however, to refer to modes of being of the one God; Christ and the Holy Spirit were manifestations of this one God. They would speak of *patripassionism*, which literally means that God the Father (the Latin word is *pater*) was the one who was suffering on the cross (*pathos* or *passion* means “suffering”). Jesus Christ and God the Father are not separate persons, they said. Rather, Jesus Christ is a mere manifestation of God. One teacher of this heresy was Praxeas, known to us only through the writings of his opponent, Tertullian. Some think “Praxeas” to be a nickname. We know that he was a figure who arrived at Rome some time around 200. Another advocate of patripassionism was Sabellius, who also taught this view in Rome in the first two decades of the 200s. Sabellius was excommunicated in 217, but the movement he founded, known as Sabellianism, appeared in various places in the ensuing centuries.⁵

The views of the Ebionites and adoptionists were only the first ripples of the heresies that would deny Christ’s deity and would come to dominate the 300s. These views, however, seemed eclipsed by the damage done by controversies over Christ’s humanity. Pilate, in addition to identifying Christ as the King of the Jews, also rather insightfully said of Christ, “Behold the man!” (John 19:5; *Ecce homo* in Latin). Many, however, were not ready or willing to see him as truly in the flesh. “It is his flesh,” Tertullian would say, “that is the problem.” Thus, in the first and second centuries Christ’s humanity dominated the

discussion. This makes sense given the philosophical climate of those first two centuries. Plato's ideas dominated the intellectual world of both scholars and the populace alike. A fundamental doctrine of Platonic philosophy conflicts with the doctrine of the incarnation. For Plato, matter is bad, while the ideal is good. The body is bad, while the soul is good and pure. In Greek a catchy little jingle catches this well: *Soma toma*. Translated, it means: "Body, tomb." If they'd had bumper stickers, this saying would have been on the chariots of the Platonist philosophers. For a Platonist, being in the flesh was not worth celebrating. Instead Platonists viewed the flesh as an inconvenient impediment that someday, when the body lies in the grave, will be overcome. Jesus coming in the flesh, the incarnation, embarrasses those who like their Platonism. His incarnation becomes quite the stumbling block.⁶

One of Plato's more popular dialogues causes even more problems for the doctrine of the incarnation. In *Timeaus*, Plato takes a stab at explaining the big questions of life: Where did everything come from? Where did I come from? He answers by first running through mythological explanations such as the phoenix myth or the Atlantis myth, with most scholars understanding the Atlantis myth as Plato's creative invention. Then Plato posits what appears to be his own explanation for the world and all things in it. Plato's cosmology, or understanding of the world, starts with the abstract form, or what he prefers to call The Ideal. This Ideal, or God—but Plato would prefer to keep this figure impersonal and not personal—then created a buffer god, whom Plato calls the *Demiurge*, which means a creator god. The *Demiurge* in turn created all things. But even here there's a flow chart. Plato thought males to be superior to females, females to be superior to animals, animals to be superior to flora and fauna, flora and fauna to be superior to stones and dirt. Matter is at the bottom of the chain, idea and the immaterial at the top. The farther down the chain, the lesser the value, the lesser the meaning.⁷

PLATO'S COSMOLOGY

The Ideal

§

The Demiurge (creator god)

§

The World, Humanity, and Matter

Males

§

Females

§

Animals

§

Flora and Fauna

§

Rocks and Dirt

The biblical cosmology differs from Plato's on another count. For Plato, this world of matter matters very little. As the physical body cages the human soul, the physical world cages the *forms*. Things represent instantiations of the forms, which represent The Form or The Ideal. Now this needs some unpacking. Again, at the top of the chain is The Ideal, the ultimate reality. The Ideal then is represented in various ideas or forms, like the forms of justice, beauty, or truth, or even the forms of personhood or of different animals. These forms then are represented in the world in individual, material things, like the things of laws, art, and science, or like the things of different human beings or dogs or cats.⁸

You might still be lost, so consider dogs as an example. There are many, many different dogs. Some are little, while some are large, like a Chihuahua versus a mastiff. Some are trained for certain functions, like herding animals or protection, while others seem destined to spend their days chasing their

tails. Yet, all of these different creatures are all called *dog*. Plato explains this by arguing that all of these creatures are physical manifestations of the form of dog—they are all individual, material occurrences of the immaterial form or idea (although I don't think he called it *dogginess*). When dogs cease to exist materially, the essence of the dog returns to the world of the forms. So it is with human beings. Of different colors, sizes, and shapes, all humans are material occurrences of the form of humanity. When we cease to exist in our physical lives, our souls reunite with the world of the forms.

Among the many implications of this understanding of the world stands the idea that this world matters little. This world functions as a vehicle back to the world of the forms. It is to be escaped from; it is to be overcome. Nothing of value comes from material things. *Soma toma*—the body is a tomb. The Bible poses a different worldview, a worldview that sees this world as having meaning, that sees the physical as a gift from God. When God surveyed the world he made, he pronounced it good, *very* good, in fact. The biblical creation account finds God grabbing a handful of dust and breathing into it, creating a being of matter and spirit with whom he desired to fellowship. And, due to humanity's sin, Jesus, the divine son, humbled himself, took on flesh, and became human. Plato has no room for the incarnation. It belittles The Ideal to even consider having it take on flesh.

Now we see why the doctrine of the incarnation faced challenges in the first few centuries. The idea that God would take on flesh proved unpalatable to Platonic tastes. To a Platonist, the incarnation smacked of unsophisticated, elementary thinking. In order to keep Platonism on the one hand and to keep some semblance of Christianity on the other required an adjustment. Jesus, it was held, did not really take on flesh; he only *appeared* to take on flesh. The Greek word for "appear" is *dokeo*, which gives this false teaching its name of *docetism*. Docetism is the teaching that Jesus only appeared in the flesh and was not truly

human. Unlike some of the other heresies looked at in later chapters, this heresy was not necessarily associated with a single individual. Instead this heresy popped up in various forms, in various groups, throughout the early church's life. Even today it manages to find mild expression in the tendency to view Jesus as sort of floating six inches off the ground as he walked upon the earth. Instead of any docetic understanding of Christ, the Bible presents Christ as hungry, thirsty, and tired. As the ultimate testimony to his full humanity, the Bible presents him as dying on a cross.

In those first few centuries, however, there was nothing mild about the form that docetism took. John informs us in his epistles that its adherents denied that Jesus had come in the flesh, that his humanity amounted to nothing more than a mask, a costume. He appeared to eat, he appeared to drink, and he appeared to go through the cycles of human development. He appeared to have bled, and he only appeared to have died in the flesh. Against this view, the author of Hebrews declares that Jesus had to be made like us, fully human in the flesh, in order for his death to have any significance. He is a faithful high priest because he is one of us (Heb. 2:17). This teaching echoes Paul's insistence that Christ was like us in every respect, except of course that he knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Pilate put it this way: "Behold the man!" (John 19:5; *Ecce homo* in Latin). But when the docetists looked, they didn't see a human being of flesh and blood.

DOCETISM

Valentinus (c. 136–c. 165) became one of the leaders of the docetists. Most of what we know about Valentinus comes to us from his theological opponent Irenaeus, who wrote no less than a five-volume work against Valentinus and his followers, who were called Valentinians. We have come to call Irenaeus's work *Against Heresies* (*Adversus Haereses*). From it we can

reconstruct Valentinus's teachings along the following lines. In the beginning there was the eternal Father, who dwelled alone in silence and with his thoughts—a dream world for a Platonist. This Father is incomprehensible, entirely transcendent. His silence eventually becomes realized in mind and thought, forming the first of thirty pairs of “aeons,” which are set off like a chain reaction. Eventually *Sophia* is produced, whose offspring is the *Demiurge* (Plato's word) who creates the material world. Valentinus took this *Demiurge* to be the God of the Old Testament. The “aeon” of Christ united with the human form Jesus to show humanity the way of salvation. While all this may sound like bad science fiction, it resonated enough with the Platonism of the day to get a following. Readers of *The Da Vinci Code* will immediately recognize the term *Sophia*. Thanks to Valentinus and others, this *Sophia* teaching found a home in gnosticism.⁹

The Valentinians considered themselves to be the enlightened ones who possessed this secret knowledge and entered the fullness, which they termed “pleroma” after the Greek word. They viewed other Christians, who lacked such enlightenment, as “psychic,” while they understood non-Christians to be merely material and doomed to eternal perdition. There were three classes of people—the spiritual, the ensouled (psychic), and the earthly. This, it is held, is taught in the Bible, with Cain, Abel, and Seth being the originators of these three classes.¹⁰

All the elements of heresy may be found in Valentinus and the Valentinians. First, we see how heresy retools biblical teaching, conforming it to other ways of thinking rather than vice versa. In this case Plato's doctrines of matter and idea, as well as his cosmology, form the starting point for understanding what, if any, contribution biblical teaching makes to an understanding of the world. Second, we see how once a system has a faulty starting point, it sets off a chain reaction of false teachings. Heresy on one point, in other words, tends to beget heresy on others, which beget heresy on others still. Thirdly, we see how

heresies set up sects or groups of people who have a privileged status, having been enlightened, and are above others. This overinflated sense of their own selves is what tended to make the heretics so divisive in the early church.

Topping the list of docetists in the early centuries is Marcion (d. 160). Marcion, the son of a bishop, shifted so radically from Christianity that he eventually set up a rival church. Platonism so influenced his thinking that he nearly dismissed the whole Old Testament because it dealt so much with earthly affairs. The Gospels also came under his knife. Any elements that were too reflective of the Old Testament were gone, as were those elements that stressed the material and physical. Marcion cut out the birth narratives of Jesus altogether. His Jesus floats down out of the sky at the wedding at Capernaum. (No wonder they ran out of wine.) Marcion managed to gather quite a following, probably due to his emphasis on what he called the gospel of love versus the gospel of law. For him, grace ruled. He was excommunicated from the church in Rome in 144. Possessing great wealth, he managed to establish quite a network of followers and churches, whose influence was sadly felt throughout the next centuries.

One thing Marcion's heresy prompted was the church's recognition of the canon of the Old Testament, since Marcion was denying practically all of it. The other thing it set off was a full-blown defense of the humanity of Christ, since Marcion was denying that too. Tertullian led the charge against him, writing *Against Marcion* in 207–208. This work consisted of five books that laid out Marcion's teachings before dismantling them. Tertullian explains hypothetically what's at stake in Marcion's denial of Christ's humanity: "The sufferings of Christ will be found not to warrant faith in him. For he suffered nothing who did not truly suffer; and a phantom could not truly suffer. God's entire work therefore is subverted. Christ's death, wherein lies the whole weight and fruit of the Christian name, is denied." Tertullian continues to tease out the implication of

Marcion, noting that if Jesus was not in the flesh, he did not live, die, or rise again in the flesh, “and so our faith is in vain.” Tertullian then counters Marcion’s teaching by referring to Paul: “The Apostle asserts [Christ’s humanity] so expressly and undoubtedly real, making it the very foundation of the gospel, of our salvation, and of his own preaching.” Christ truly came in the flesh.¹¹

THE I’S HAVE IT

In addition to Tertullian, two others emerge in these battles for Christ in the first centuries: Ignatius and Irenaeus. Ignatius (b. ?–d. 110s) was bishop of Antioch, the city where the followers of Christ were first called Christians. Ignatius, too, used that term quite often. He also preferred Jesus the Christ as the way to speak of Christ. While we do not see in his writings the thorough and specific language of a two-nature Christology that would eventually come out of Chalcedon (451), we see him stressing the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ in his seven epistles.¹²

In his *Epistle to the Trallians* (to the church at Tralles in Asia), he writes of Christ as one “who was really born, who both ate and drank; who really was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who really was crucified and died.” In his letter to the church at Smyrna, he speaks of Christ as being “truly” born, persecuted, and crucified. Ignatius uses “really” and “truly” to contradict the term “apparently” as used by the docetists when speaking of Christ’s humanity. It mattered no less to Ignatius that Christ was God. He speaks of Jesus Christ as God in his letter to the churches in Smyrna and in Ephesus. His letters, all of which were penned around 110, reveal the firm belief of the early church in the deity and humanity of Christ. To be sure, the church would articulate these beliefs with more clarity and precision in the ensuing centuries. Nevertheless, the argument that the belief in the humanity and deity of Christ did not come

about until the 300s, as some scholars and *The Da Vinci Code* claim, is patently false.¹³

CHAPTER ONE SCORECARD

The Good

Ignatius
(d. 107)

Irenaeus
(130–202)

Tertullian
(c. 200s)

Hippolytus
(170–236)

The Bad

the Ebionites
(c. 70–400s)

Marcion
(d. 160)

Valentinus
(136–165)

Theodotus the Cobbler
(c. 190)

Paul of Samasota
(c. 200s)

Sabellius
(c. 200)

Ignatius should be much better known than he is among contemporary Christians. His letters not only offer these teachings of Christ we've been emphasizing, they also give us a sense of the early church's view of Scripture. When Ignatius wants to make a point, he quotes Paul. When he really wants to make a point, he quotes a whole string of Paul. We also see in Ignatius's letters the structure of offices in the early church. Ignatius lays out instructions for bishops, elders, and deacons, in that order. Finally, we should remember Ignatius for the sacrifice he made to the church. He wrote to these churches because he visited them firsthand—on his way to Rome as a prisoner. When he arrived in Rome, he was martyred by the emperor Trajan. Ignatius knew how important the doctrine of Christ was to the

church, and he knew the gravity of the docetist threat. Before he died, he wanted to put these thoughts on paper.

Equally alarmed by the threat to the doctrine of Christ, Irenaeus (c. 115–c. 202) also took to writing in defense of the faith. He sat under the teaching of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna who was martyred in 156. Irenaeus eventually made it to Lyons, France, where he became bishop. He devoted his life to peacekeeping missions within the church. For him, keeping the peace meant not only striving for unity but also weeding out heresy. The gnostic Valentinus and his followers, the Valentinians, as mentioned earlier, found out just how capable and dedicated Irenaeus could be in defending Christian beliefs. Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* aimed at not only deconstructing these false teachings but also laying out for the church the proper biblical understanding of the doctrines of God, humanity, creation, incarnation, and resurrection.¹⁴

He stressed the oneness and unity of God, while at the same time offering an early teaching of the Trinity. Tertullian would coin that term, and the Cappadocian Fathers (see Chapter 5) along with Augustine would later give it full-blown development. Yet the basic understanding of the doctrine is found in Irenaeus's work. Irenaeus understood Christ to be the fully divine Son of God who became the fully human son of Mary at the incarnation. He stood against gnosticism's diminished view of humanity. For Irenaeus, the God-man Christ lived and died, and the God-man Christ rose again. Consequently, Christ vindicates life in the flesh.

In Book One of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus declares that the apostles proclaimed “the one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was enfleshed [incarnated] for our Salvation.” He then refers to Jesus Christ as “our Lord and God, Savior and King.” Irenaeus takes it a step further, noting that if anyone were “to preach to [the apostles] the inventions of the heretics . . . they would at once stop their ears and flee as far off as possible, not enduring even to listening to the blasphemous address.” Irenaeus is

saying in the strongest language possible that the teachings of the docetists and the gnostics are diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Bible.¹⁵

Irenaeus's life, like Ignatius's, felt the cruel hand of Roman persecution. While an elder at Lyons, he was sent to Rome by the bishop of Lyons to convey a message. During his absence an intense persecution occurred at Lyons and the neighboring city of Vienne. When Irenaeus returned, he found the majority of the church, including the bishop, martyred, while others had fled the city. Irenaeus was appointed bishop and set about rebuilding the church there. Through his writings, his influence extended far beyond that city. And through his discipleship of Hippolytus, his influence extended beyond his lifetime.

An early translator of Hippolytus's work put it this way: "Hippolytus was a disciple of St. Irenaeus, St. Irenaeus of St. Polycarp, St. Polycarp of St. John." Hippolytus (c. 170–236) was a presbyter at Rome. He attacked the teaching of Sabellius, referred to earlier. He also disagreed with Rome's bishop, Calixtus I. Hippolytus, by all accounts, should have been the bishop, but Calixtus I was too entrenched in the church and too well connected. It mattered little, actually, for in a few years both Hippolytus and Calixtus I would be exiled by the emperor to the island of Sardinia. Since it wasn't clear to the emperor who was really in charge, he simply exiled them both. Legend has it that the two reconciled during the exile. Hippolytus died in Sardinia in 236.¹⁶

While exceptionally prolific in his own day, Hippolytus fell from attention shortly after his death all the way until 1551, when a statue was discovered during the excavation of one of Rome's ancient churches. The marble statue is of Hippolytus seated upon a chair. On one side of the base there is a list of all of his writings, writings that had been lost to history. It would be another three centuries until, in the 1840s, some of his manuscripts were discovered in the monastery at Mount Athos in Greece. Among these writings the most significant is the rather

ambitiously titled *The Refutation of All Heresies*. And indeed it is. He starts with the Greek philosophers and then runs through all of the heresies, including the docetists and Ebionites, Marcion and Theodotus the Cobbler. He then concludes with a discussion of “The Doctrine of Truth.” In it Hippolytus declares that Christ is both truly human—“He even underwent toil, and was willing to endure hunger, and did not refuse to feel thirst, and sunk into the quietude of slumber”—and truly God—“Christ is God above all.” And then Hippolytus adds that the God-man has “arranged to wash away the sin of human beings.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, even before we get out of the pages of the New Testament we see the two poles of heresies related to the person of Christ—denial of his deity and denial of his humanity. In the first three centuries of the church, controversy over Christ’s humanity dominated the discussion. The docetists, imbibing way too much Platonism for their own good, simply could not allow for a human, fleshly Christ. Their view of God wouldn’t allow it. Perhaps that shouldn’t surprise us all that much. The inimitable Martin Luther was amazed by all paradoxes. But the paradox that amazed him the most was that the God of the universe would deign to take on flesh and be born in a stable. It further amazed the Reformer that the God-man Christ would suffer and die on the cross. He who made all things and rules the universe was bound and put to death. Luther marveled at it all. Others, like the docetists and the Sabellians, stumbled over it. They were met, however, with those committed to the teaching of the apostles and to the true church.

We shouldn’t forget that while Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and others were laboring for the truth, they were doing so in a hostile environment. Christianity was illegal in the first few centuries, leaving Christians and the church’s leaders

open to persecution. The church faced challenges both from without by the empire and from within by the heretics. In 312 the tide would change as Constantine would reverse the attack on the church. No longer faced with the enemy from without, the church would still have to contend with the enemy within. And as we'll see in the next chapters, the doctrine of Christ would be at the center of the controversies swirling about.

Notes

CHAPTER 1: IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

1. The Koran puts a twist on this by referring to him primarily as “Jesus, Son of Mary,” a purposeful underscoring of Islam’s rejection of the deity of Christ.
2. See Arnold J. Hultgren and Steven A. Haagmark, eds., *The Earliest Christian Heretics: Readings from Their Opponents* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 116-126.
3. Eusebius, *Church History*, Book VI, Chapter 17, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 1: Eusebius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 264.
4. Eusebius, *Church History*, Book V, Chapter 28, 246-248, and Book VII, Chapter 27, 312.
5. The terms *monarchianism*, *modalism*, *patripassionism*, and *Sabellianism* are used interchangeably in referring to this heresy. See Tertullian’s work *Against Praxeas*.
6. Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” Chapter 1, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3: Tertullian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 521. For Plato’s idealism, see his *Republic*.
7. Incidentally, some credit Christianity as instituting male chauvinism. As can be seen from this rundown of Plato, he’s the guilty party. Furthermore, when set against the backdrop of the Platonist’s view of women as inferior beings, the Bible stands out for its anti-male-chauvinist stance. Adam may have been created before Eve, but both are in the image of God. Paul’s teaching of ontological unity and equality of the genders starkly contrasts with Plato’s understanding of the genders.
8. Again, see Plato’s *Republic* for his theory of the forms.
9. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Book I.
10. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter 7.
11. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book III, Chapter 8.
12. As Ignatius traveled to Rome, he composed seven letters. Polycarp,

- bishop of Smyrna, compiled these letters, and they were widely circulated in the early church. Scholars doubt the authenticity of other letters beyond these seven that have been attributed to him. See Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, AD 30–312* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 181-182.
13. Ignatius, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, A. Cleveland Coxe, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 66-72.
 14. See Dennis Means, “Truth and Tradition: Irenaeus,” *Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine*, Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 261-273.
 15. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter X, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I*, 330. For a discussion of the text of *Against Heresies*, see Richard A. Norris, Jr., “Irenaeus of Lyon,” *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Loith, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45-52.
 16. See A. Cleveland Coxe, “Introductory Notice to Hippolytus,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. V: Hippolytus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 7.
 17. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Book X, Chapters 29-30, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. V: Hippolytus*, 150-153. For a scholarly discussion of Hippolytus and his writings, see “Hippolytus, Ps.-Hippolytus and the Early Canons,” *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, 142-151.

CHAPTER 2: IN THEIR OWN WORDS: SELECT DOCUMENTS FROM THE EARLY CENTURIES

1. In keeping with Plato’s understanding of the world, the author(s) of *The Gospel of Thomas* consider the physical world a “corpse”; true reality lies beyond it.
2. This is a curious Trinitarianism: the mouth of the Father is Christ, the “embodiment” of truth, and the tongue is the Holy Spirit.
3. The crucial word here is *form*; Jesus was not truly in the flesh.
4. Ignatius is using his own willingness to suffer as a disciple of Christ