

The Doctrine of Christ

How Many Wills Does Jesus Have? The Importance of Christ's Humanity and Divinity

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The Chalcedonian Definition of 451 has been the touchstone of orthodox Christology for the past millennium and a half. In this definition was found the resolution to the complex Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries. Here, Scripture's teaching of the hypostatic union was codified for the church: the incarnate Christ is one divine person who subsists in two distinct yet united natures, divine and human. He is not two persons, as the Nestorians taught, but rather "one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son." Nor does He subsist in only one nature, a divine-human hybrid, as the Monophysites taught, but rather is to be "acknowledged in two natures inconfusedly [and] unchangeably... the difference of the natures being in no way removed because of the union, but rather the properties of each nature being preserved." One person, two natures. This is the doctrine of the hypostatic union, a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith.

But as brilliant as the Chalcedonian definition was, it did not answer every question that was to arise in the succeeding decades. In the late sixth and early seventh centuries, a debate arose over whether Christ had one will or two. Sure, He had two natures, one divine and one human. But did that mean He had two wills, one divine and one human? Or, since He was one divine person, did He have just one divine will?

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THE MONOTHELITE CONTROVERSY

This debate has been dubbed “the Monothelite controversy.” Those who taught that Christ had only one divine will were called Monothelites (*monos*, “one,” *thelēma*, “will”), and those who taught that He had two wills—one divine and one human—were called Dyothelites (*duo*, “two,” *thelēma*, “will”).

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The disagreement basically boiled down to whether the faculty of *will* is a property of a *person* or a *nature*. If the faculty of will were a property of a person and not a nature, we would expect Christ, who is one person, to have only one will. But if the faculty of will were a property of a nature and not a person, we would expect Christ, who has two natures, to have two wills. So which is it? Does will belong with person or nature? Does the incarnate Christ have one will or two?

The debate was hashed out in earnest in the events leading up to the Third Council of Constantinople in 680 and 681, when 164 bishops convened to decide the matter. The Monothelite cause was taken up by Macarius I of Antioch, but the majority of the bishops agreed with the writings of Maximus the Confessor of Constantinople (ca. 580–662), a learned monk who argued vociferously for a Dyothelite Christology. The Sixth Ecumenical Council concluded that Christ had to have both a divine will and a human will. Monothelitism was condemned as a heresy leading to Monophysitism, Macarius was deposed, and Dyothelitism was codified as orthodox Christology.

ONLY A HUMAN WILL?

But what was the case against Monothelitism? Well, in the first place, if the incarnate Christ had only one will, which will did He have, and which did He lack? On the one hand, you could argue that part of becoming truly human required the Son to have a human will, and if He could only have one will, then it must have been the divine will that He lacked.

But this raises a number of problems. If Christ, being one person, has only one will, then will must be a property of person rather than nature. This would mean that, from eternity, the Son, being a divine person, had a divine will—up until the incarnation, that is. For when the Word *became* flesh and took on a human will, He would have had to shed the divine will that He possessed from all eternity. This would be to predicate genuine change in the Second Person of the Trinity, undermining divine immutability. He would have transmuted from (a) a divine person with a divine will to (b) a human person with a human will.

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But of course Christ did not become a human person (*anhypostasis*), as even the Monothelites stipulated. He was a divine person who assumed a human nature into personal union with His divine nature. For this reason, it has not been argued that Christ's one will was human.

ONLY A DIVINE WILL?

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Well, if the incarnate Christ had only one will, and it wasn't a human will, it must have been a divine will. This is what the Monothelites argued. The eternal Son was a divine person, and thus had a divine will from all eternity. When He assumed a human nature in the incarnation, He remained a single divine person and thus retained a single divine will. But because (they argued) will is a property of person and not nature, the incarnate Christ did not have a human will.

But does the Bible support that claim? There are at least four reasons to answer in the negative. Monothelite Christology is fatal to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, fatal to the doctrine of the Trinity, fatal to the humanity of Christ, and fatal to the Gospel itself.

FATAL TO CHALCEDONIAN ORTHODOXY

The first problem with Monothelitism is that it is fatal to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, which is a biblically faithful synthesis of scriptural teaching concerning the person of Christ.

Recall that the crux of this debate is whether the faculty of will is a property of person or nature. If will belongs to person, and Christ is one person, then Christ can have only one will. If will belongs to nature, and Christ has two natures, then Christ must have two wills. Interestingly, Chalcedon weighs in on this question, and in so doing it commends Dyothelitism.

The Definition says that Christ assumed a human *nature* in order to be "perfect in manhood," "truly man," and "consubstantial [i.e., of the same nature] with us according to the manhood." Then, it defines the human nature Christ assumed by saying He was "of a rational soul and body." According to Chalcedon, a human nature is a rational soul and body.

But it is virtually universally acknowledged that the *will* is a faculty of the human *soul*, alongside the intellect. A rational soul is equipped with (a) a mind that interprets and understands the world and (b) a will that makes choices informed by that understanding. This means that Christ's human soul is that by which He thinks, understands, and

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makes *choices*. The faculty of the will is located in the rational soul, which Chalcedon says was part of that human *nature* that the Son assumed to be consubstantial with us.

In other words, Chalcedon locates the will in the soul, and it locates the soul in the nature, not the person.¹ Since will is a property of nature, and Christ subsists in two natures, Chalcedon constrains us to a Dyothelite Christology. In Chalcedonian terms, Monothelitism is inherently monophysitic, because one will implies one nature.²



FATAL TO THE TRINITY

Second, Monothelitism is fatal to the doctrine of the Trinity. In the first place, it runs afoul of an essential maxim that was universally accepted in early orthodox Trinitarianism: the doctrine of inseparable operations.

Versions of the phrase *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* (“the external works of the Trinity are undivided/indivisible”), along with its Greek counterpart, appear throughout the writings of such pro-Nicene fathers as Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine. It means that the acts of the Triune God cannot be divided up among the three persons, but that each divine person performs each divine act.³ Just as God’s *nature* is indivisible, so also His *acts* are indivisible.

This reasoning assumes that a person’s nature is the principle by which he acts. Whatever works a person performs, he does so by virtue of the nature in which he subsists. So, Christ sleeps by virtue of His human nature ([Matt 8:24](#); cf. [Ps 121:4](#)), but calms the storm by virtue of His divine nature ([Matt 8:26](#); cf. [Job 38:8](#)). In other words, the doctrine of inseparable operations is rooted in the notion that a person’s acts—which would include acts of his will—are a function of his nature.

¹ Interestingly, Wellum notes, “In the Patristic era, the word-flesh Christologies of Arius, Apollinarius, et al., also identified ‘person’ with ‘soul,’ ‘will,’ ‘mind,’ which orthodoxy rejected” (*God the Son Incarnate*, 338n101). If Chalcedon located will in the nature, while Arius and Apollinarius located will in the person, it’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that locating the will in the person is heretical.

² Besides this, I’d argue that most Christians implicitly know that will is a property of nature and not person. When we engage in the debate over the bondage and freedom of the will and man’s depravity, we explain the reality that, apart from regenerating grace, though man’s will is free to make choices, it is not free not to choose rightly. Man is not an automaton unable to choose between alternatives, but he *is* depraved, unable to choose righteousness. He has a will, but his will is bound to act in accordance with his *nature*.

³ For example, the Father creates ([1 Cor 8:6](#)), the Son creates ([Col 1:16](#)), and the Spirit creates ([Gen 1:2](#); [Ps 33:6](#)), but there is only one act of creating and thus only one cosmos created.

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In this way, pro-Nicene trinitarianism locates the will in nature rather than person, consistent with Dyothelitism. But if, as the Monothelites contend, will were a property of person rather than nature, then the external acts of the Trinity *could* be divided among the three persons, conceived as three separate centers of consciousness with three separate wills. When worked out consistently, the metaphysics of Monothelitism undermines a fundamental staple of orthodox trinitarianism.

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*If Jesus cannot make the human choice to
withstand temptation and choose obedience
to His Father, He is not truly human.*

Further, Monothelitism strikes at trinitarian unity in another way. In [Matthew 26:39](#), Jesus famously prays that the cup of the Father's wrath might pass from Him. "Yet," He says, "not as I will, but as You will." Though this statement is fraught with mystery, pro-Chalcedonian Christology teaches that this was an instance in which Jesus submitted His human will (which righteously recoiled from an uninhibited sprint into the wrath of God) to the divine will. According to His holy humanity, there is some righteous backwardness that the Son feels when contemplating the punishment of the cross. But such hesitation is quickly remedied by submitting His human will to the divine will (the will shared by Father, Son, and Spirit).

But according to Monothelitism, Jesus had no human will. He must therefore be speaking of subjecting His distinct divine will to the Father's distinct divine will. Even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that these are distinct *faculties* of willing (by treating will as a property of personhood), could it be even theoretically possible for there to be a distinction in what the divine Son wants and what the divine Father wants? How can it be possible for two divine persons to will contrary to one another? On a Monothelite reading of [Matthew 26:39](#), it seems impossible to avoid positing a fatal disruption between the person of the Father and the person of the Son.

FATAL TO THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

A third problem with Monothelitism is that it is fatal to the genuine humanity of Christ. If Christ didn't assume a human will in His incarnation, it seems difficult to argue convincingly that Christ was and is truly human. To put it simply, genuine humans make human choices by virtue of their human wills! To be bereft of a human faculty of willing is to be deprived of the capacity to make genuinely human choices. Without that capacity, it would seem that our Savior would be decidedly *unlike* us in a most significant way.

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Specifically, the absence of a distinct human will seems clearly to run afoul of the notion that Jesus endured genuine temptation (e.g., [Matt 4:1–11](#)). [James 1:13](#) teaches that God by definition cannot be tempted, and so Jesus could not have been tempted by virtue of anything of His divinity. At the same time, the nature of temptation is a proposal to the *will* that it should consent to sin. Jesus connects temptation to the will when He counsels His sleeping disciples to pray that they may not enter into *temptation*, for though their spirit is *willing* their flesh is weak ([Matt 26:41](#)). Temptation is a proposal to the *will*, and one succumbs to temptation by *choosing* sin rather than obedience.

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Now, if Jesus could not be tempted by virtue of His deity ([Jas 1:13](#)), He could only be tempted by virtue of His humanity. But if temptation is a proposal to the will that it should choose sin, then Jesus must have had a human will to which temptation proposed sin. Only in this way could He be our sympathetic high priest “who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” ([Heb 4:15](#)).⁴

If Jesus cannot make the human choice to withstand temptation and choose obedience to His Father, He is not truly human. And since temptation is a proposal to the will to choose disobedience, He had to have had a human will. The alternative is fatal to His genuine humanity. To be truly human, Jesus must have a human will.

FATAL TO THE GOSPEL

And that is intimately related to the fourth problem with Monothelitism: it is fatal to the Gospel itself, for if Christ was not Himself truly human, He could not be the Mediator between God and men. Apart from Christ’s genuine humanity, the sons of Adam are left to cry with Job, “He is not a man as I am that I may answer Him, that we may go to court together. There is no umpire between us, who may lay his hand upon us both” ([Job 9:32–33](#)).

Maximus the Confessor famously argued this point by appealing to another well-known trinitarian maxim from the fourth century, this one from the pen of Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390). In defending the full humanity of Christ against the Apollinarians, who claimed that Christ assumed only a human body but not a human soul, Gregory famously argued, “That which is not assumed is not healed.”

That is to say, Christ is our Savior by His substitutionary saving work. He saves us first of all by taking on a full and true human nature ([Phil 2:7](#)), so that He is genuinely

⁴ Note, this is not to suggest either (a) that Jesus was peccable (He was not, [John 5:19](#)), or (b) that Jesus was tempted internally (He was only tempted externally, [John 14:30](#); cf. [Matt 4:1–11](#); [Jas 1:14](#)).

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“consubstantial with us according to the manhood,” able to stand in man’s place as a genuine man, representing us in every way ([1 Tim 2:5](#)). If there were an aspect of humanity that Christ failed to assume to Himself, then that aspect could not be healed by His substitutionary saving work. If Christ was to heal the human will (along with the rest of human nature), he had to have assumed a human will in His incarnation.

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Besides, the whole point of the incarnation was that our penalty had to be paid by a true man. Without a human will, Jesus lacks something that is constitutive of our nature, and is thus disqualified from standing in our place.

Still further, our Savior must not only satisfy the penal demands of the law by dying on behalf of sinners. He must also satisfy the positive demands of the law by obeying on behalf of sinners ([Matt 3:15](#); [5:20](#); [Gal 4:4–6](#)). Jesus is the Last Adam ([Rom 5:14](#); [1 Cor 15:45](#)), come to succeed precisely where the first Adam had failed ([1 Cor 15:21–22](#); cf. [Luke 4:1–13](#)). His obedience to the law of God would be the substance of the righteousness credited to those who believe ([Rom 5:18–19](#); cf. [4:3–6](#); [2 Cor 5:21](#)).

But that obedience had to be the obedience of a *genuine man*. If Christ, the Last Adam, cannot choose—as a man—to walk in obedience to God’s law, precisely in the way the first Adam failed, then He cannot stand in our place as our Substitute and accomplish our justification as our federal head.⁵ And He cannot make that choice as a man without a human will. Wellum is right when he says, “It is only by affirming that Christ has a human will that we can do justice to the obedience of the Son *as a man* which is so foundational to Christ’s work for us.”⁶

A BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

It’s often said or implied that such a doctrine, while historically well-attested and theologically necessary, lacks textual foundation. But that is not so. Scripture speaks of Jesus’ human will when it speaks of Him willing (θέλω) to do things that are not proper to deity, like moving from one location to another ([John 1:43](#)), drinking or not ([Matt 27:34](#)), or obeying ([Mark 14:12](#); [Phil 2:8](#)). Scripture speaks of Jesus’ divine will, for example, in [Matthew 23:37](#), when He says He often wanted to gather the children of

If Christ was to heal the human will, he had to have assumed a human will in His incarnation.

⁵ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 348.

⁶ Ibid., 346–47, emphasis original.

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Jerusalem throughout her history of killing her prophets and stoning God's messengers. He identifies Himself as the patient God who desired (θέλω), long before His incarnation, to deliver His people.

Another example of Christ's divine will is seen in [John 5:21](#), where Jesus grounds His equality with the Father (5:18) in their inseparable operations (5:19). In verse 21, He says that one of those divine works which He shares with the Father is giving spiritual life—a prerogative of deity—"to whom He wills."



It is true, as has been shown, that if you deny Dyothelitism, you cannot consistently maintain a Chalcedonian Christology or Nicene Trinitarianism, you undermine the genuine humanity of Christ by suggesting He lacks a human will, and thus you undermine the Gospel which is founded upon representative substitution. But it is also true that Dyothelitism is a biblical doctrine.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, what at first may seem like an arcane dispute about meaningless doctrinal minutia is revealed to be fundamental to the humanity of our Mediator and thus the ground of all our hope. The Third Council of Constantinople concluded the same and condemned Monothelitism, establishing Dyothelitism as the orthodox teaching of the church. The faculty of will is a property of nature, not person. And since the one man, Christ Jesus, subsists in both divine and human natures, He has two wills: divine and human. It was by virtue of His human will that He made human choices—choices to resist temptation, to obey God's law in the place of sinners, and to bear the curse of God's law in the place of those same sinners.

Notably, Dyothelitism also relates quite closely to a contemporary controversy in the evangelical church: the EFS/ERAS debate. Since (a) the Godhead is three persons subsisting in one divine nature, and since (b) will is a property of nature and not person, therefore, (c) there are not three faculties of will in God by virtue of the three persons, but one faculty of will in God by virtue of the one divine nature.

Consubstantial with one another, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exercise volitions by virtue of the identical faculty of willing. Since the single divine will cannot be "subjected" or "subordinated" to itself, there can be no eternal functional subordination or eternal relations of authority and submission within the Trinity.

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