

Christology—Doctrine of Christ

Historical Perspectives on Christ

Who is Jesus Christ? What significance does He have?
What did He do for mankind?

I. Historical perspectives: the early church

A. Post-Apostolic Fathers

1. The men:

- Clement of Alexandria, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna

2. The doctrine:

- Opposed increasingly popular Gnostic and Docetic tendencies in the early church
- Mainly produced devotional writings during a time of intense persecution for the church

B. Second-Century Apologists

1. The men:

- Aristides, Tatian, Justin Martyr, Tertullian

2. The doctrine:

- Overly dependent upon Greek philosophy in their presentation of the faith.
- Christ was portrayed as ultimate good, pure life, and highest philosophy

II. Historical perspectives: the early heresies

A. Ebionism

- The descendants of the “Judaizers” of Paul’s day, this heretical Jewish sect denied the deity and virgin birth of Christ. The Holy Spirit descended on Christ at His baptism, qualifying Him to be Messiah.

B. Monarchianism

- Dynamic version said Jesus was made divine at baptism.
- Modal version said Jesus was just one manifestation or emanation of God (e.g., Sabellianism).

C. Gnosticism

- Its name, fittingly, is derived from the Greek word for knowledge (gnosis), for this pseudo-Christian sect taught that salvation comes by knowledge.
- Influenced by the Platonic dualism of Greek philosophy that matter was essentially evil, they asserted that Christ could not possess a material body, for corporeality would taint him.
- The God of the OT was equivalent to the demi-urge of Greek philosophy. The demi-urge got the ball rolling by creating matter.
- Christ was the highest emanation and is pure spirit. He simply appeared to be human during his life (Docetism). Some taught that Christ descended upon the man Jesus at baptism and left him just prior to the crucifixion.

D. Marcionism

- A version of Gnosticism which was quite popular toward the close of the second century AD. Marcion hated Judaism and the God of the OT.
- This sect denied the humanity, sacrificial death, and physical resurrection of Jesus.
- Assembled their own canon of Scripture, which included the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul’s epistles.

III. Historical perspectives: the pre-nicene period (before 325 AD)

A. Able defenders of the faith

- Origen, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius
- These church fathers rejected the assertions by Gnostics and other sects which denied the deity of Christ
- Opposed Arianism, which taught that Christ was created by God and of a different substance from God

B. Asserted correct doctrine

- Sought to find a formulation regarding the person and nature of Christ.
- Incorporated the following elements:
 - ¹Jesus’ full and true humanity
 - ²Jesus’ full deity
 - ³The union of deity and humanity in one person

⁴The necessary distinction between deity and humanity in the one person

IV. Historical perspectives: the post-nicene period (325–680 AD)

A. Error refuted

1. Apollinarianism

- Apollinarius taught that Jesus did not possess a human spirit, but instead Jesus Christ was the Logos with a human body.
- Refuted by the Council of Constantinople (381) which asserted the full humanity of Jesus (i.e., human body, soul, and spirit).

2. Nestorianism

- Nestorius taught that Christ was essentially two persons in mechanical union, perfect man morally linked to the person of God.
- Refuted by the Council of Ephesus (431) which asserted that Christ was one person.

3. Eutychianism

- Eutyches taught that Christ had only one nature, an unique hybrid human-divine nature.
- Refuted by Council of Chalcedon (451) which asserted the co-existence of the two natures, divine and human, in Jesus Christ.

V. Historical perspectives: the post-reformation period (1658–present)

- Since the Protestant Reformation (ca. 1517-1648) all unbiblical teachings concerning the person of Christ are essentially variations of earlier heresies
- Modern “Christology from Below” began with the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, David Strauss, and Friedrich Schleiermacher and culminated in the Quest for the Historical Jesus. Essentially it is a denial of the deity of Christ.

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The Person of Christ

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” --C.S. Lewis

I. The Deity of Christ

The Deity of Christ means that Jesus Christ, in addition to being fully human, is absolutely and truly God.

A. Biblical Evidence

1. **Christ is called God** (John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God”; cf. Heb 1:8; John 1:14; Isa 9:6).
2. **Christ possesses the attributes of God.** He is eternal (John 17:5), omnipresent (Matt 28:18–20), omniscient (John 2:25), omnipotent (Heb 1:3), and immutable (Heb 13:8).
3. **Christ performs the works of God:** creation (Col 1:16), preservation (Col 1:17), providence (Heb 1:2), forgiveness of sins (Luke 5:20–24), judgment (John 5:22).
4. **Christ seeks worship and honor due only to God** (Matt 14:33 “Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” [NIV]).
5. **Christ himself makes divine claims:** to hold authority over the laws and institutions of God (Matt 12:6), to be the object of saving faith (John 17:3), to have met in himself all the spiritual and eternal needs of humanity (John 7:37).
6. **Christ unequivocally affirms that he is equal with God** (John 10:30 “I and the Father are one”).

B. Summary

- “We confess that he is Very God and Very Man; Very God by his power to conquer death and Very Man that he might die for us” (Belgic Confession, 1562).
- “He continueth to be God and man, in two distinct natures and one person forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647).

II. The Union of Humanity and Deity in Christ

A. The importance

- To deny the undiminished deity or perfect humanity of Christ is to reject the Christian faith altogether. Equally essential is the belief that the two natures are inseparable and will remain eternally united in the person of Christ. Theologians call this doctrine the “hypostatic union” (from the Greek hypostasis [“nature, essence”).
- Apart from this union Christ could not have been mediator between God and man. If he had only been man, his death could not have atoned for sin. If he had been only God, he could not have died since God cannot die. If he had not been man, he would not have had a genuine link with humanity and would not have had perfect sympathy for mankind.

B. The doctrine

1. Christ is one person with two natures (human and divine).

- Nature and person are not synonymous. Persons have natures, yet personhood involves more than a nature. A nature is the sum total of all the essential qualities of a thing. It is that which makes something what it is (i.e., certain properties, characteristics, or attributes). A person is a nature with something added—*independent subsistence, individuality, self-consciousness, or self-determination.*
- In the incarnation the Son of God, who was one in person and nature (divine), became two in nature (divine and human) while remaining one in person. The eternal Son of God did not join himself to a human person but rather took on human nature. In this union of the human and divine in Christ each of the natures

retained its own attributes. That is to say, deity did not permeate humanity, nor did humanity become absorbed into deity. The two natures retain their complete identity even though joined together in personal union; thus Christ is not God-in-man or God-and-man but the God-man.

2. Biblical evidence

i. Biblical evidence for the singular personhood of Christ is abundant.

- He always spoke of himself as one. Christ never distinguished himself as a divine person from himself as a human person (John 8:18 “I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me”).

ii. Both of the natures of Christ are seen in Scripture to be united in one person.

- This fact is evident in passages such as the following. In Rom 1:2–5 Christ is “of the seed of David,” which stresses his humanity, and at the same time “declared to be the Son of God.” In Gal 4:4–5 Christ is God’s Son who is “born of a woman.” In Phil 2:5–11 Christ is “equal with God” and yet taking on the “form of a servant” and “born in the likeness of men.”
- Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, said of the person of Christ, who possessed two natures, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim 3:16). He also speaks of “God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself” (Col 2:2). We cannot completely comprehend truly the relation of the human and divine in Christ. Yet the fact of this mystery must not deter us from accepting by faith the biblical teaching.

C. The conundrum

B. B. Warfield wrote: “We can never hope to comprehend how the infinite God and finite humanity can be united in one single person; and it is very easy to go fatally astray in attempting to explain the interactions...of natures so diverse from one another” (*The Person and Work of Christ*, p. 69). We must

simply accept by faith this wonderful mystery of God manifest in the flesh for us.

D. Summary

The incarnation of Christ lasts forever. That is, the incarnation of Christ was not an arrangement solely for the time of his life on earth. Rather, Jesus' human nature lasts forever. This is seen in the following evidences: Christ's resurrected body was glorified and suited for existence in the celestial sphere. Presently he is seated at the right hand of God the Father and will return to earth as the Son of Man (Matt 26:64). Jesus appeared in a visible, physical body after his resurrection and was worshiped (John 20:17). Christ ascended bodily to heaven (Mark 16:19). At the present time he is the "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

III. The Earthly Life of Christ

A. Christ's "kenosis"

1. The meaning

- Theologians speak of the "kenosis" of Christ, which comes from the Greek κενόω ("to make nothing, to empty"), to denote the so-called self-emptying of Christ in Phil 2:5–11. Theologians have been sharply divided, however, over the meaning of this doctrine: viz., of what did Christ "empty" himself and how?

2. The interpretation

- Christ did not give up his divine attributes or the complete use of the divine attributes. He did not give up deity in his incarnation (cf. the words of Wesley's hymn "Emptied himself of all but love").
- The kenosis means simply that Christ surrendered the independent use of his divine attributes and prerogatives, became subservient to the will of the Father in a unique way, and submitted himself to the power of the Holy Spirit.

B. Christ's life

- One difficulty in interpreting the Gospels is the need to understand that Christ's life, ministry, and death touched upon several spheres: the law of Moses, the kingdom

promised to Israel, and the multi-national church, which would become his body.

1. The Law

- The law of Moses and, indeed the entire Levitical system, was still operative throughout Christ's life on earth. He lived under the jurisdiction of the law (Gal 4:5) and often authoritatively interpreted the law (Matt 5:17–19). Jesus kept the law perfectly (2 Cor 5:21) and became "the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4).

2. The kingdom

- Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist, preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). The same message was proclaimed by Christ himself (Matt 4:17), his twelve chosen apostles (Matt 10:7), and the seventy he commissioned to preach (Luke 10:11). Christ offered the Messianic kingdom to the nation of Israel, but since the nation rejected Christ as their Messiah, the kingdom offer was withdrawn.

3. The Church

- Christ promised to build and sustain the church, though the church did not actually commence until the Day of Pentecost (Matt 16:18).

C. Christ's ministry

- Christ possesses the three offices of prophet, priest, and king. Although Christ fulfilled all three roles at the same time, a singular office comes to the fore during each of the successive stages of Christ's ministry.

1. Prophet

- During his earthly life, Christ primarily assumed the role of prophet, as he fulfilled the Mosaic prophecy of the coming prophet (Deut 18:15). Christ proclaimed God's message (Matt 5–7; 24–25) and predicted future events (John 13:26; 14:2–3; Matt 16:18; Matt 24–25).

2. Priest

- During Christ's present reign at the right hand of the Father (the kingdom of Christ), he primarily occupies the role of priest as he intercedes for his people ("he always lives to make intercession for them" [Heb

7:25]). Christ is qualified fully for the office of priest (Heb 3:1), is appointed for the office by God (Heb 5:1–10), is of the right order (viz., of Melchizedek) (Heb 5:6), was able to offer sacrifice and make intercession (Heb 7:23–28), and is eternal in his priesthood (Heb 7:25).

3. King

- When Christ returns to earth he will fully realize the office of king as he reigns over the promised earthly kingdom of David during the millennium (Matt 25:31; Rev 3:21; 20:4). This reign will consummate the provisions of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:16; Ps 2).

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The Present & Future Work of Christ

What is Christ doing in this world right now?

What will Christ do in the future?

I. The present work of Christ

A. The present ministry of our Lord is chiefly related to His people.

1. In the Church

- Christ is now building the church, which is His body (Matt 16:18).
- As ascended Head He gives gifts to men (Eph 4:11). These are essential to the proper functioning of the body.
- Our Lord is nurturing and cherishing the church (Eph 5:29). He is fostering the growth of His people with tender concern. And as the Head He also gives union and direction to the church (Eph 2:20–21).
- The Lord is preparing a place for our everlasting habitation (Jn 14:3). He is anticipating the day when He will take us to be with Himself by preparing for our arrival in heaven.

2. In individuals

- He indwells every member of the body of Christ (Gal 2:20).
- He is praying for His people.
 - Christ is the guarantee of his people's salvation (Heb 7:25).
 - It assures continued fellowship in the family of God (1 Jn 2:1).
 - It is a powerful preventive against sin in their lives (Jn 17:15).
- He is answering the prayers of his people (Jn 14:14), and the result will be even greater works than He did while on earth (Jn 14:12).
 - This means greater in scope (worldwide now) and greater in kind (involving all the spiritual benefits that the coming of the Spirit unleashes).

- He gives special help for particular needs (Heb 4:16), and the help is promised just at the particular time that the need arises, according to this verse. This includes help in times of temptation (Heb 2:18).
- He is concerned with the fruitfulness of His followers (Jn 15:1–16).

B. Of course, none of these ministries would be operative if Christ were not alive today!

II. The future work of Christ

A. He will come for His own in the rapture of the church
–1 Th 4:13–18

B. He will pour out wrath on the earth during the tribulation period
–Rev 6:16–17

C. He will return as the King of kings and Lord of lords to rule the world with a rod of iron
–Rev 19:11–16

D. He will have an everlasting reign—first over the millennial kingdom, and then forever in the Eternal State.