Christological Controversies in the Early Church

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

A study of the doctrine of Christ as its understanding developed in the early centuries of the church.

SUMMARY

This essay will survey the developing understanding of the Christian doctrine of Christ in the first centuries of the Christian church and conclude with some reflections for today's Christian.

Introduction

When Jesus asked him who the apostles thought him to be, Peter stated that he believed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God (Matt 16:15–16). Peter's statement represents the belief of the church, maintaining that Jesus is both divine and human. To this day, a remarkable level of agreement exists between Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches when it comes to the person of Jesus Christ. A greater understanding of this biblical confession of Jesus Christ grew as thinkers in the early church were forced to respond to erroneous views that did not align with that faith which was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). While the confession of Christ's divinity and humanity is pivotal to the Christian faith, Christological doctrine developed in light of various erroneous teachings that arose from the earliest days of the church. The best way to sum up the Christology of the early church is an affirmation of the apostolic witness and development of the orthodox tradition and vocabulary. Early Christians proclaimed Christ as Lord based on the biblical testimony (apostolic teaching) which was reaffirmed in their writings, worship, and witness in the world.

Ebionism and Docetism

The earliest christological controversies in the early church include Ebionism and Docetism. The Ebionites, whose leader was identified as Ebion by various early heresiologists and historians (e.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.26.1–2, 5.1.3; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.27.2), were a type of Jewish sect in the late first and early second centuries. They maintained the authority of the Hebrew Bible, and thus held to the necessity of observing the Mosaic law. They argued that God adopted Jesus at his baptism, thus rejecting his preexistence and virginal conception. A similar view was espoused by a false teacher named Cerinthus (fl. c. 50–100) in the late first and early second century. He lived in Asia Minor and was deemed heretical by early church fathers (e.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.26.1; Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation* 7.21; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28– 35, 7.25.3). According to these sources, Cerinthus denied the virgin birth, taught that Jesus was a normal human who was exceedingly wise, and that he was empowered by the Christ-spirit upon his baptism. He appeared to affirm many facets of a Gnostic cosmology wherein the world was made by a lesser being, that Jesus spoke of a previously unknown supreme god, and that the Jewish law was created by the lesser being.

Another early Christological error to arise within the church was Docetism, which challenged the biblical testimony of Christ's full humanity. The Apostle John warned against this error, noting that some refused to acknowledge "that Jesus Christ as come in the flesh" (1Jn. 4:1-3). Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110) likewise warns against this erroneous view when he warns the church in Ephesus "do not so much as listen to anyone unless he speaks truthfully about Jesus Christ" (*Ign Eph* 6.2). Ignatius affirms that Jesus was "both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering then beyond it" (*Ign Eph* 7.2). There was no reason to suffer for Jesus, as the apostles and martyrs had done, if Jesus too had not suffered in the flesh.

Gnosticism

Another major challenge to the biblical witness of Jesus Christ was the complex system of Gnosticism. Though Gnosticism had numerous elements relating to platonic philosophy, it was also heavily influenced by Jewish and Christian theological elements. Much of the Gnostic system sought to wed biblical material to its complex cosmology. Gnostic texts, claiming to be from the hands of apostles, began to appear in the second century, with the most famous perhaps being the Gospel of Thomas. Other Gnostic texts, attached to biblical names, promoted the Gnostic cosmogony in various ways while shrouded with biblical language. The general tendency was to deny the goodness of the created order and emphasize a solely spiritual salvation. Christ was a savior who came to bring knowledge (gnosis) of this spiritual salvation, given only to a select few. The greatest proponents of Gnosticism in the early church included Valentinus of Rome (fl. 2nd cent) and Marcion of Sinope (fl. mid-2nd cent). Marcion was a member of the church in Rome and began to teach that the God of the Old Testament was really the demiurge (lesser god) of Gnostic cosmology. He was a vindictive god, evil, and therefore what he created was evil as well. In contrast, the god of the New Testament was a loving spiritual god who sent Jesus to demonstrate the way of love and peace and true salvation. Marcion edited the bible, dismissing the Old Testament entirely, and keeping only the non-Jewish sounding bits of the New Testament. He was excommunicated from the church of Rome and started a rival church, which continued to flourish for some time after.

Both Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 202) and Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240) provided extensive defenses of biblical Christology in the face of the Marcionite heresy. Irenaeus responded to the Gnostic heresy by focusing on the foundational nature of both the Old Testament and New Testament as the work of the one true God. The human authors of the various books of Scripture had been given perfect knowledge by the Holy Spirit and thus were incapable of proclaiming error (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1). Scripture is a harmonious whole according to Irenaeus. He states, "All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found to be perfectly consistent … and through the many diversified utterances (of Scripture) there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things" (*Against Heresies* 3.5.1). For Irenaeus and the early church, the whole of Scripture must be used to understand the redemptive work of God. Merely piecing together certain texts to fit one's theology can never produce the "beautiful image of the king," but rather, it produces a distorted image of "a dog or of a fox" (*Against Heresies* 1.8.1). Contrary to the Gnostics who distinguished between Christ, a being of heavenly origin, and Jesus, the earthly man, Irenaeus declared that "Jesus Christ is one and the same," an expression which was later incorporated in the Chalcedonian Definition (*Against Heresies* 3.16.2; 3.17.4). Tertullian, likewise, addresses the error of Marcion in his use of Scripture. Marcion adulterates the gospel by not recognizing that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (*Against Marcion* 4.1). Using the book of Luke, the only gospel Marcion accepts albeit in edited form, Tertullian demonstrates Marcion's error of dividing God, Christ, and the Scriptures (*Against Marcion* 4.5ff).

Dynamic and Modalistic Monarchianism

The twin errors of monarchianism sprang up in the second and third centuries, yet they were not a monolithic system. The common emphasis was the oneness of God (Greek – *monarchia*) to the detriment of God's personhood. Though there were differences among monarchian theologians, there were two prevalent forms: adoptionism and modalism. Theodotus of Byzantium (fl. late 2nd cent.)—called "the Tanner" or "Shoemaker"—taught that the Father and Son were distinct but Jesus, being an exceptionally virtuous man, became God's son through adoption at his baptism. The descriptor "dynamic" comes from the Greek *dynamis* (power) to describe the means by which Jesus became God's son. Theodotus brought his views to the church in Rome and was soon excommunicated, though his teaching continued through others into the third centuries. Paul of Samosata (fl. mid-to-late 3rd cent.) was the most prevalent of the adoptionists.

Noetus of Smyrna (fl. mid-to-late 3rd cent.) and Sabellius of Rome (fl. early-to-mid 3rd cent.) were two leading modalist thinkers in the second and third centuries. They believed that the Father, Son, and Spirit were not distinct persons, but different ways or modes of acting of the one God. These thinkers and their followers sought to uphold the oneness of God and the divinity of Christ, yet believed that asserting the Father and Son as distinct amount to bi-theism. In so doing, they denied the unique role and personhood of each member of the godhead in order to prioritize the *monarchia*, or oneness, of God. The Son was simply a mode of appearance. Tertullian provided a thorough defense against these erroneous views. He summarized the teaching of a modalist which Tertullian identified as Praxeas (fl. mid-to-late 3rd cent.) by saying that he "put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father" (*Against Praxeas*, 1). In his response, Tertutullian developed a trinitarian grammar for the Western church. According to Tertullian, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons (*personae*) "not in condition, but in degree, not in substance, but in form, not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and one condition, and of one power" (*Against Praxeas*, 2).

Arianism

In the fourth century, numerous Christological errors arose and required an extensive defense from Christian leaders. The first major error was Arianism. Arius (256–336), a presbyter in Alexandria, began teaching in 313 that the Son was created rather than being the co-equal eternal Son of God. According to Arius and his followers, Jesus was a created being, not ontologically equal to the Father. To help spread this teaching, he even wrote out songs which incorporated his belief about Christ stating, "There was a time when he was not." The church dealt with this error at the Council of Nicaea in 325, a council called by the emperor Constantine (c. 272–337). They declared that Jesus is "begotten not made," "light from light," "true God from true God," and "of one being (or essence) with the Father," using the word *homoousias* (Greek – *homo*: "same"; *ousia* – "substance") to describe the relationship of essence between Son and Father. This word, though not from Scripture, was used to express the biblical relationship revealed in Scripture, and denounce the unbiblical view of the Arians. Arianism would take many forms following the Nicene declaration, with groups affirming doctrine similar to Arius while seeking to avoid the actual error itself. Some groups affirmed the Son as *homoiousias* (Greek – "of like substance"). Depending on the reigning emperor, Arianism and related doctrines received a more favorable audience. This explained how church leaders who vigorously defended Nicene orthodoxy, such as Athanasius of Alexandria, repeatedly fell in and out of favor with authorities. At one point, Arian doctrine had pervaded the church to the point that Jerome (c. 347–420) later wrote, "The whole world groaned and marveled to find itself Arian."

Apollinarianism

Apollinaris of Laodicea (d. 390) believed that in taking on human nature, the Word became united with a body only. So eager was he to avoid the Arian error and emphasize the deity of Christ and unity of his person that he denied Jesus as having a human soul. The soul was replaced with the divine Word, or *logos*. Jesus, in other words, was not an ordinary human being. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) addressed this issue and related it to the heresy of docetism, stating that in this view Christ's flesh was merely "a phantom rather than a reality" (*Letter* 102). If he lacked a soul, therefore mind and will, then it is not proper to call Christ a man. Gregory contended elsewhere that "if [Christ] has a soul, and yet is without a [human] mind, how is he man, for man is not a mindless animal?… How does this relate to me? For deity joined to flesh alone is not man" (*Letter* 101). For Gregory, Apollinarianism only offered a partial salvation because the Savior was only partially a man. Thus, Apollinarian views were condemned at Council of Constantinople (381), where church leaders also reaffirmed the declarations and doctrinal formulations of Nicaea over fifty years prior.

Nestorianism

In the early fifth century, Nestorius of Constantinople (c. 386–450) taught that Jesus Christ was actually two distinct persons. Nestorius struggled to affirm the traditional title for Mary as *theotokos* ("God-bearer"), as this seemed to deny the human qualities of Christ. He struggled to conceive how it could be that God was born from a human, or that God suffered and died. Therefore, Nestorianism posited that in Christ was both the human person and divine person, but that each operated independently. At one point it would be the divine person working, and at another point it was the human. In this way, Nestorians sought to deal with Scripture that spoke to both Christ's divine characteristics and his human ones. Cyril of Alexandria (375-444) addressed the theological error of Nestorianism and its effects. He asserted that in the incarnation "the two natures being brought together in a true union, there is of both one Christ and one Son" while also retaining their respective characteristics (*Fourth Letter of Cyril to Nestorius*). According to Cyril, the eternal Son of God took upon and personally united with a human nature, both in body and soul. Cyril's teachings would influence the Council of Ephesus in 431 to denounce Nestorianism as heretical, thus affirming the one person of Christ.

Eutchyianism

Teachings from the monk Eutychus of Constantinople (c. 380–c. 456), Eutchyianism combines the two natures into one single nature. The official term for this theological error was monophysitism. Eutychus believed that both natures existed before the incarnation, but following the birth of Christ, there was only one nature. The human nature according to Eutyches was a mere appearance, harkening back to views expressed by Docetists. This nature made him different from other humans. Thus at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, gathered church leaders affirmed the two natures of Christ (Greek – *henophysitism* or *miaphysitism*) with the two united "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Though this council took place in the Eastern portion of the Roman empire, Leo of Rome (c. 400–461) provide a summary of the Latin tradition of Christology, known as Leo's *Tome*. This *Tome* was a topic of debate at Chalcedon, yet became the accepted doctrinal formulation for the person of Christ and his two natures.

Post-Chalcedonian Christology

Chalcedon proved a major step toward defining Christology for the church, but it did not resolve every tension. One area of concern came over Chalcedon's statement that the Son assumed a human nature, but not a human person. This formulation was meant to combat adoptionism and deny that Jesus would have existed as a man apart from the incarnation, yet some questioned whether this affirmation legitimized Nestorianism. By the Second Council of Constantinople (553), which was called by Emperor Justinian I to clarify the Chalcedonian Definition and unite churches, *henophysitism* had been enlisted as the most clarifying way to describe the relationship of Christ's two natures to his one person. The affirmation at Constantinople clarified several aspects of Christology: 1) Christ was personal, as a man, by virtue of the union of human nature in the person of the eternal Son; 2) The incarnation is a dynamic act on the part of the person of the Son, but in triune relationship and action; 3) Christ's human nature was the same as any other human in its unfallen condition, except independent personal existence apart from the Son; 4) the Son is able to live a fully human and divine life; 5) The *imago dei* underpins the concept of *henophysitism*. Though challenges to orthodox Christology have always existed, the Church continues to rely upon the scripturally-derived doctrine of Christ hammered out in the early centuries of the church.

Considerations for Evangelical Christians

Christians today have much to consider and appreciate when it comes to the Christological settlement determined in the early church. First, the person and work of Jesus Christ has far reaching effects. The early church defended the doctrine of Christ so vigorously because the gospel and salvation itself was at stake. Only a Savior who is both truly God and truly man can secure man's salvation. Second, clear and unambiguous language is necessary for doctrinal discussion and formulation. This doesn't mean we fully understand every facet of God's nature and his redemptive work, but it certainly matters that we think clearly and provide meaningful language for the Church. This affects everything from teaching to worship to evangelism to one on one discipleship. Third, Christians should remain charitable but firm in matters of Christology. Again, not all the mysteries of Christ can be discerned but we should not bend when biblically orthodox doctrine regarding the person and work of Christ is challenged. Thus, any other faith system which affirms a place for Jesus, yet not as fully God and fully man according to Scripture, is erroneous. Last, through the teaching, worship, and discipleship ministry of the Church, Christians should be learning what it means to think about, talk about, and more faithfully worship the God who was made flesh on our behalf in order to rescue and redeem us from sin. The end result of Christology is humble worship of God and an increase of joy in the believer.

FURTHER READING

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