

# The History of the Theology of the Incarnation

## The Story Continues: The Christology of the New Testament Church

Understandably, the early Christian proclamation was met with resistance and / or misunderstanding. The Gospels themselves relate that the disciples only gradually understood the nature and significance of this event. Nevertheless, once the conviction set in, it completely revolutionized their imagination. As the disciples continued to tell and retell the remarkable events they witnessed, they began to see Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection as the ultimate revelation of God to humanity. This process of telling the story is an act of Christology. Recalling the definition provided at the outset of this chapter, Christology is the attempt to formally articulate Jesus Christ's mission and identity, his relationship to God, and his significance for humanity. In the New Testament, several Christological statements and patterns attempt to say something important about his identity and mission. Let us briefly examine three.

### Jesus as “Lord” (*Kyrios*)

Early on in the primitive Christian movement, Jesus was hailed as Israel's “messiah” and “Lord.” In Greek, these words are *christos* and *kyrios*, respectively. Importantly, Christians attributed to Jesus titles such as these in the context of worship—while they gathered in community to remember Jesus' deeds, death, and Resurrection; as they prayed through and rediscovered the Scriptures; as they ritually enacted Jesus' last supper with his disciples before his death; and so on. The earliest Christians very much experienced the presence of the Risen Christ among them, even singing hymns to him in a way that, from an outsider's point of view, might seem as though they regarded him as God. This is not to say that the earliest Christians had yet developed a specific vocabulary to speak of Jesus as “God,” but the evolution of early Christian language and practice shows an unmistakable and steady process of coming to precisely this conclusion.

By hailing Jesus as “Lord,” the earliest Christians were not just acknowledging Jesus' authority as God's true emissary in the world, and thus one to whom his disciples owed allegiance, but they were also saying something about Jesus' exalted status after his death. By raising him from the dead, God has triumphed over chaos, violence, and death. Jesus is “Lord” of creation, sovereign in human history, sovereign among the world's powers, be they social, political, or religious. Paul summarizes this conviction in one of his letters as he writes that, although many people allege and worship other gods, “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:5–6). One cannot help but notice the closest relationship between “God” and “Jesus” in this passage. Though explicitly monotheistic, both the “Father” and the “Lord Jesus Christ” *together* are sovereign over creation and human history.

### Death and Resurrection / Exaltation Christology

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes an early hymn that epitomizes a second Christological pattern. It too tells a story but does so in a condensed narrative format, rich with meaning and mystery:



Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11)

Notice here the pattern of “descent” and “ascent.” Jesus, though in the “form of God,” empties himself (*kenosis*) and becomes the lowliest of the lowly, taking on a life of complete self-expenditure for others, even unto death on a cross. In Jesus, God’s shocking humility is expressed. God’s “power” is of the sort that it identifies with the powerless, itself becoming utterly vulnerable to the violent resistance of God’s own creation. The “descent” is one of love. Yet, precisely because of this self-expenditure for others, God “raised him high” and gave Jesus the “name that is above every name.” He “ascends” to the very honor of God the Father so that all should acknowledge Jesus Christ’s lordship over creation. The pattern here echoes the very subversion and paradox we find in so many of Jesus’ parables. Powerlessness becomes true power; humility becomes might; lowliness and service become transcendence and eminence. As Paul puts it elsewhere: “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25). Jesus is God’s living parable—his life, death, and Resurrection the very embodiment of divine wisdom and love.

## Wisdom and Logos Christology

A third Christological pattern exhibits what is sometimes described as “high Christology.” Its counterterm is “low Christology.” These spatial images are helpful when talking about Jesus as divine (high) and human (low). This Christological pattern begins by characterizing Jesus’ ultimate identity and mission in relationship to the eternal wisdom of God, even before Jesus’ historical existence. Let us look briefly at two notable examples.

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15–20)

Much could be said about this dense passage, but we must limit ourselves to just a few observations. First, this passage, also an early Christian hymn, draws deep from the well of Israel’s wisdom tradition, as can be found in such Old Testament writings as Proverbs, the Book of Wisdom, the Book of Sirach, Job, and many of the Psalms. What is distinctive about this Christological pattern is the way it speaks of Jesus as the personal embodiment of God’s wisdom: the same wisdom originally bringing forth creation, the same wisdom responsible for order and beauty in the cosmos, the wisdom that inspires all human wisdom. As the “image of the invisible God,” Jesus is the earthly and historical manifestation of divine transcendence. In Jesus, the fullness of God dwelt, reconciling humanity to God through the self sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Divine solidarity and forgiveness are together offered to



humanity in his life, death, and Resurrection. Because Jesus so thoroughly manifests God's original plan for creation, it is possible to say that all things were created in, through, and for him. Jesus is the completion of all creation. The future of creation is eschatologically realized *in* him.

Second, as an instance of "high Christology," this passage speaks of Jesus' ultimate identity by highlighting his preexistence. The exalted status of Jesus as "Lord" of creation revealed to his disciples after his resurrection is the identity Jesus always possessed, not only throughout his life but even prior to his historical existence, prior to creation itself. What God accomplished in and through Jesus Christ was God's plan for humanity all along. Jesus' ultimate identity and origin are not afterthoughts to creation but found in the heart of the eternal God.

This style of Christological reflection is even more explicit in the Prologue of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. . . . He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him . . . he gave power to become children of God. . . . And the Word [*Logos*] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (1:1–3, 10–12, 14)

The Greek word *Logos* used here, translated as "Word," bears important philosophical and theological implications for the history of Christology. John's Gospel consciously weaves Jewish and Greek philosophical thought to describe Jesus as both the decree of God's will for humanity and the incarnation of the divine intelligence. In Stoic philosophy, the *Logos* is the intelligent and creative power bringing forth and sustaining creation. By poetically portraying the *Logos* as "becoming flesh" and "dwelling among us," John's Gospel articulates a mature theology of incarnation, where the divine and preexistent Son of God enters into the world out of love in order to save it from sin, disorder, and darkness. As such, we find here a bold ascription of divinity to Jesus Christ, the same sort of ascription found later in John's Gospel as it relates the Apostle Thomas's reaction to encountering the Risen Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

In answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" the Gospel of John weaves poetry and narrative, Jewish and Greek thought, to say something that marks both the culmination of a process of Christological reflection in the New Testament and the indispensable foundation for all later Christian doctrine: He is the Son of God; the preexistent Wisdom of God become human; God's eternal Word who entered the world, was crucified, and rose to reveal God's saving love and glory.

## Faithfully Interpreting the Story: The Christological Councils

Our final task in thinking Christologically is to understand something of the nature and purpose of the later Christological doctrines of the Church, particularly from the fourth and fifth centuries AD. To do so, let us review where we are now with the three touchstones that are our "grammatical rules" for properly speaking about Jesus, his relationship to God, and his significance for humanity.



## The Three Christological Touchstones

### All Christology derives from story.

Christian revelation is not primarily concerned with the production of abstract propositions about the nature of reality but with the telling and retelling of a story of salvation. God reveals God's self in the dramatic unfolding of historical events—in the story of Israel and, in a more focused and definitive way for Christians, in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life is not just a parable lived out in the context of Israel's story but also one that reshapes and fulfills that context.

### All Christology derives from an experience of salvation.

In Jesus, the earliest Christians encountered the liberating and forgiving love of God in a way that surprised and overwhelmed them. In the particulars of Jesus' life-story, God broke through the power of death with new life, overcame violent rejection with peace, and met sin with an unexpected offer of forgiveness. Formal reflection upon this experience of salvation is what Christian theology calls "soteriology." (*Sōtērion* in Greek means "deliverance.") As we have seen in our study, soteriology and Christology are closely related, and both are rooted in the story of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection. It is from the experience of salvation that the earliest Christians came to worship Jesus and more clearly understand his relationship to God. As Christians called to mind all that Jesus had said and done and what God had done for Jesus by raising him from the dead, they experienced the presence of the Risen Christ among them. From this communal context of worship emerged a reflective process that would produce oral traditions, hymns, titles, epistles, prayers, and textual portraits that together form the basic linguistic and conceptual materials for all subsequent Christology.

### All Christology derives from the conviction that in Jesus, God's presence in the world has taken hold in an unprecedented way.

This presence was so powerful that the earliest Christians felt compelled to ask this fundamental question: Who must Jesus be if in him salvation has come about? Put somewhat differently: If, in Jesus, God has been revealed in a new and decisive way, who, in the final analysis, is this Jesus? This line of questioning proceeds from what Jesus "does" to his "person," or his "being." To employ a technical term, we are moving here from a functional consideration to an *ontological* one. (*Ontology* in philosophy is the study of "being.") In the former case, we reflect upon Jesus' work of proclaiming and bringing about the Good News of salvation, that is, the Kingdom of God. In the latter case, we reflect upon the "being" or "person" who in fact mediates this salvation. The fundamental logic of all Christology, one whose development we can trace in the New Testament, moves toward the affirmation of Jesus as God in human form. In Jesus, it is God who personally enters into human affairs.

### The Council of Nicaea (AD 325)

Such a conclusion creates a host of challenging questions, particularly within the context of monotheistic belief. For example, how is it possible to affirm that Jesus is somehow God while avoiding the undesirable conclusion that there are two gods? If we adopt John's language, namely that Jesus is the *Logos* become flesh, is this *Logos* to be thought of as God properly speaking or some lesser



divinity? And how is it possible, if at all, for Christians to affirm that God “becomes” something when Christians also affirm that God is eternal and unchanging? Though these questions seem technical and perhaps unimportant, they actually created conflict and confusion within the Christian movement as it spread across the Mediterranean world and increasingly interacted with Greco-Roman culture and thought. Such confusion ultimately led to the need for Christian theologians and bishops to provide a conceptual framework to speak properly and consistently about Jesus’ identity. This occurred at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, a council convoked by the Emperor Constantine near his new city of Constantinople (Istanbul), and only twelve years after he declared Christianity a legal religion in the empire.

Precipitating this important council was the controversy sparked by the priest and theologian Arius (d. AD 336). Arius argued that the only philosophically respectable and consistent position for Christians to hold was that the *Logos* is not eternal like the Father but created. While it is true that the Gospel of John describes the *Logos* as preexisting the creation of the world, this does not preclude claiming that the *Logos* is created by God the Father as the first and greatest of all creations. Only the Father is eternal; everything else is by definition a creature. In point of fact, argued Arius, God is utterly simple in being and unchanging. If, as Christians say, the *Logos* “became” human, we have already admitted that the *Logos* is not eternal and unchanging like the Father. In the end, the *Logos* is created, even though it is the greatest of all creations. As Arius was fond of putting it, “There was a time when the *Logos* was not.”

If, from one point of view, Arius’s position could claim a certain degree of philosophical coherence, it could not quite account for the way in which Christians actually encountered God (and not some lesser divinity) in Jesus Christ. By saying that the *Logos* was not God properly speaking but only a creature, Arius could not adequately explain how the “fullness of God” dwelt in Jesus, to refer to the previous passage from Philippians, or how the *Logos* was both “with God” in the beginning and “was God,” as John’s prologue reads. The need to clarify matters in view of Arius’s public and influential campaign became increasingly evident, so a council of bishops and theologians in Nicaea addressed the matter in a way that would produce a formal confession of faith, one still recited today in the form of the “Nicene Creed” among the vast majority of Christians around the world. Couched in the middle section of this creed, we find a series of statements that directly respond to Arius’s challenge. In particular, the creed states that Jesus is not created but eternally flows from the inexhaustible creativity of the Father (he is “eternally begotten of the Father”). Moreover, Jesus Christ, as the eternal Son of the Father, shares in the Father’s very divinity. He is “one in being” (*homoousias*) with the Father.

While these statements are indeed technical, let us understand what they ultimately mean. By saying that Jesus Christ is “true God from true God” and “one in being” with the Father, the Nicene Creed is saying that in Christ, the very reality of God is available in a remarkably intimate and personal way. Jesus is God’s self-expression in the world. The difference between the positions of Arius and the Council of Nicaea might be illuminated by means of an analogy. If, on my wedding day, I sent someone close to me to stand at the altar with my bride, let us say my best friend who knows more about me and is closer to me than anyone else, someone I trust implicitly and for whom I have the deepest respect, still his presence would be only a substitute for mine. Though he may speak for me and have authorization to stand in my place, his presence would still not be me. And just imagine the reaction of my bride—assuming I still had a bride! The difference between Arius and the Council of Nicaea is analogous in this respect: The council is claiming that God’s very self is encountered in Christ, not just a creature of elevated status, not a proxy. Jesus is the personal manifestation of God in the world in such a way that we can exclaim, as did Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”



## From the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)

Perhaps understandably, this ascription of divinity to Jesus Christ led to an opposite problem, one that existed as early as the first century but would eventually require the Church to make a clarifying and corrective doctrinal statement almost 125 years after Nicaea. In the decades following the council, debate raged over how to understand the relationship between the humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ himself. If the Church believes that he is “one in being with the Father,” does this mean he is still human? If so, in what way? Such questions became pressing because some so emphasized Jesus’ divinity that it became difficult to account for his humanity. The bishop Apollinaris (d. ca. 390) of Laodicea, just south of the major Christian city of Antioch on the Mediterranean coast of Syria, intended to be faithful to the Nicene definition but ended up claiming that Jesus was a kind of “mixture” of humanity and divinity. Though Jesus possessed the body of a human, Apollinaris argued, his soul and mind were totally divine. To put it somewhat crudely, the *Logos* essentially inhabited the shell of a human body, somewhat like a driver sitting inside and operating a car.

The chief problem with this approach, however, is that it makes Jesus no longer fully human. He only possesses the appearance of being human when in fact his inner makeup and consciousness are divine. Such a view would hardly satisfy the New Testament’s insistence that Jesus was in every way like a human being, except sin (Philippians 2:5–8, Hebrews 4:15). Moreover, it contradicts an axiom that had prevailed in Christian theology for some time, an axiom that flows out of a fully developed theology of the incarnation: “What has not been assumed is not saved.” What this phrase means is that God saves humanity by assuming (or personally taking on) all aspects of the human condition with the purpose of transforming and elevating humanity toward its ultimate fulfillment. If Jesus were without a human soul, then we are left with the absurd conclusion that the human body has been saved but not the human soul. Salvation is the transformation of the whole person, so the logic goes, not just a part of the person.

Such were the counterarguments of Apollinaris’s opponents. And, in fact, Apollinaris’s position was formally rejected by the Council of Constantinople in 381. However, among those who opposed Apollinaris in order that Jesus’ full humanity might be protected, some quite publicly introduced other kinds of errors that would eventually require clarification. For example, a bishop from Constantinople named Nestorius (d. ca. 451) so emphatically insisted on distinguishing Jesus’ divine and human natures that he could not properly account for the unity of Jesus’ person. This became particularly evident as Nestorius argued that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not the “mother of God” (*Theotokos*), as she was celebrated to be in Christian hymns at the time, but only the mother of Jesus’ humanity. For Nestorius, this distinction was necessary to safeguard the integrity of each nature. Unfortunately, this solution only created the opposite problem of suggesting that in Jesus Christ there are two distinct persons, one divine and one human. The confusion this unseemly conclusion produced required yet another definition for the Church to debate and finally articulate, which it soon did. The initial debate took place at the Council of Ephesus in 431, with a subsequent debate taking place at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

The formal definition of the Council of Chalcedon reads as follows:

[We teach believers] to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance [“one in being”] with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance [“one in being”] with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead,



begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer [*Theotokos*]. . . . The distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person.

This statement affirms that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, not partly one or the other, contrary to Apollinaris. Moreover, the human (“manhood”) and divine natures are united in one person, the one Jesus Christ, so that it is proper to say, contrary to Nestorius, that Mary is the God-bearer, or *Theotokos*. She does not just bear the humanity of Jesus but the whole person of Jesus Christ. The implication of Nestorius’s position would lead to an intolerable split between Jesus’ humanity and divinity. Chalcedon stresses the unity of his person.

In sum, then, in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God is expressed in human form. He not only most fully and definitively reveals God to human beings, but he also reveals the fulfillment of the human person. He is humanity at its most actualized, precisely *because* he is united with God. As a human person, he is “God-with-us,” *Emmanuel* (Matthew 1:23).

## Conclusion: The Never-Ending Question

The councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon provided an enduring conceptual framework for Christology for over fifteen-hundred years. As a summary expression of the Church’s mature faith in Jesus Christ, they function like a set of grammatical rules to assist Christians in properly understanding and speaking of the mission and identity of Jesus Christ. As doctrines, they do not replace the story of Jesus found in the NT; rather, they serve to establish the parameters by which Christians may continue to read, interpret, and reflect upon that story without falling into critical errors.

Yet, “thinking Christologically” is an ongoing and dynamic activity. Although these conciliar statements are fundamental to Christian faith, they should not replace the activity of actually doing Christology. Every generation of Christians is charged with the task of asking the question, “Who do you say I am?” Whether asked in the first or twenty-first century, this question invites new insights and unexpected perspectives upon God and humanity. As we have seen, it is just the sort of question that may radically challenge and even transform a person’s perception of the world and way of life. Perhaps appropriately, then, we end this chapter with a series of questions that ask students new to theology to continue thinking Christologically in their own context.

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