

WEEK 1 | INTRODUCTION

Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief. Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in His beams. Feel His all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in His almighty arms. . . Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him.

– Robert Murray M'Cheyne

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING CHRISTOLOGY

I. TO PROTECT AGAINST ERROR

The history of Christology is a history of addressing refusing error regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Stephen Wellum writes,

Given the centrality of Christ in Scripture and theology, it's not surprising that to misidentify him is so serious. In fact, as Jeremy Jackson rightly reminds us, at the heart of *all* heresy and false understandings of the gospel and Christian theology is a distortion or denial of Christ. In many ways, one's Christology is a test case for one's entire theology. The more our Christology is off, especially in terms of the Son's unique, exclusive identity and all-sufficient work, the more our theology will be wrong in other areas. 'Ideas have consequences,' and the most central 'idea' to get right is who Jesus is vis-à-vis the triune God. There are many beliefs that distinguish Christianity from other worldviews but none as central and significant as who Jesus is.¹

In the first few centuries of the church error abounded as people sought to grapple with Scripture's presentation of who Jesus is and the many apparent contradictions in his person:

2nd – 3rd Century AD

A. Ebionism – Jesus was an inspired man, fully human but not divine.

This faulty view of Christ was founded in the 2nd century AD by the apocryphal Ebion, a name derived from the Hebrew term for "poor." It was a Judaistic, legalistic sect who "observe and

¹ Stephen J. Wellum, *The Person of Christ: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 178.

defend circumcision and the law.”² They rejected the preexistence of the Logos, believing that Jesus was a normal man predestined to be the Messiah, a new prophet who had come to expand and enforce the Law.

B. Gnosticism – Jesus was a man indwelt by divine power

This 2nd century heretical movement was heavily influenced by platonic philosophy, positing a sharp dualism between spirit and matter in which spirit is “good” and matter is “evil. Gnostics taught that the God of the Old Testament was the Demiurge, one of many eons that emanated from the “highest god” who was unknowable and indescribable. The Demiurge was a mediary demi-god, the abominable offspring of divine Sophia (wisdom) who conceived apart from the highest god’s consent. He was disowned by his mother Sophia; in his loneliness, his anger and conceit grew unchecked. He created and shaped the material world, a world marked by ignorance and maliciousness in reflection of his own character.

Christ, like the Demiurge, was an eon from the highest god, an emissary who came upon the man Jesus at his baptism and departed at his crucifixion. In between those events, the highest god provided a special knowledge that provided salvation for its hearers through the lips of the man Jesus. Salvation, then, is through Jesus’ teaching, not his atoning work on the cross.

C. Docetism – Jesus was God appearing as a man but not truly human

Docetism was an early heresy related to Gnosticism. Drawing on the same platonic dualism between spirit and matter, Docetism taught that Jesus was only a powerful spiritual being that appeared as a man but did not have a physical body. Jesus was a phantom but not flesh and blood. It is likely that when John wrote his first epistle, he was in part responding to this docetic heresy.³

D. Dynamic (Adoptionistic) Monarchianism – Jesus was a man whose reason was overwhelmed by a divine power

Dynamic Monarchianism, or Adoptionism, was an early heresy that sought to reconcile the deity of Christ with monotheism. Adoptionists sought to maintain the unity of God by rejecting a plurality of persons in the godhead. Thus, they believed the divinity of Jesus was just a power or influence by which the human Jesus was deified. Jesus, then, was only a man anointed with supernatural power.

² Tertullian, *Persec.* 33.

³ In chapter 1 he writes of Jesus who “we looked upon and *touched with our hands*” (1:1), emphasizing the physical body of Jesus. Later he writes, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus has come *in the flesh* is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist” (4:2-3a).

E. Modalistic Monarchianism – Jesus was God appearing in the role of the Son

Modalistic Monarchianism, or Modalism, also sought to reconcile the divinity of Jesus with monotheism. To do this they taught that the one God took on different modes or manifestations at given times and for given works. For example, the Father was manifested in creation, the Son was manifested in Christ, and the Spirit was manifested after Christ's departure—yet in each manifestation it was the same one God in a different mode or form. Jesus the Son was the Father and revealed himself as the Father to those who approached him.⁴

4th – 5th Century AD

F. Arianism – Jesus was a man whose reason was overwhelmed by a divinely created being

Arius, an elder of the church at Alexandria, taught that the Son was a second god, a mediator created by God and given the office of creator and redeemer. Thus, the “Logos” was pre-existent and created the universe but was not himself fully God but a created being; he is not equal to the Father in essence. Arius famously said, “If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows *there was a time when he was not.*”⁵ He believed that the Son indwelt the human soul (reason) and became the Christ. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Council of Constantinople (381 AD) were both convened in response to Arianism and condemned it as heretical.

G. Apollinarianism – Jesus was fully God with partial humanity

Set in the context of the Arian controversy, Apollinarius taught that in Christ Deity replaced the human spirit (reason),⁶ so that Jesus had the full divine nature but only part of the human nature. He was fully divine with a human body but no human spirit. Apollinarius' teachings were closely related to Arianism and were also condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

H. Nestorianism – Jesus was a being in which the divine and human natures are totally separated so that there are two persons dwelling in one man

Nestorius, teaching and writing in the 5th century AD, sought to rationally explain and understand the incarnation of the divine Logos. In his zealous response to other heresies—

⁴ Today, Oneness Pentecostalism holds to the basic tenets of modalism; TD Jakes is a popular preacher who has made statements that could well mark him as a modalist.

⁵ To this, Athanasius replied, “Those who maintain ‘There was a time when the Son was not’ rob God of his Word, like plunderers.”

⁶ Apollinarius was a trichotomist, believing that human beings are composed of body, soul, and spirit. Whereas Arius taught that God replaced the human soul, Apollinarius taught that he replaced the human spirit. In either case, the humanity of Jesus is diminished.

principally Eutychianism (see below) as well as Apollinarianism—and his desire to protect the impassibility of God, he argued that Christ’s person “is a ‘union’ in external appearance only, a composite of ‘two personal subjects (the Logos and the man,’ which entails that there are *two* persons in Christ.”⁷ In this way, the Logos does not participate in the human events of Jesus’ life but stands in the background; when Jesus suffers on the cross, the Son or Logos is not suffering because God cannot suffer. The role of the Logos is to make important decisions in the man Jesus’ life.

I. Eutychianism (Monophysitism) – Jesus was a person with only a divine nature

Eutychus, a Byzantine Monk in the early 5th Century AD, taught that Jesus had only one nature rather than two. He believed that in the incarnation the human nature and divine nature were fused, and the human nature was fully and subsumed into divinity. Thus, Jesus had a divine nature but no human nature. This was an early form of monophysitism, which would come to predominate in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the late 5th and 6th centuries AD. It was condemned as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

5th – 6th Centuries AD

J. Monotheletism – Jesus was a person with two natures but only one will

Seeking to reconcile with the Monophysites of the east, Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, proposed Monotheletism, the teaching that Christ had one human-divine will. This was a rejection of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, which implied that the one person of Jesus had two wills, the human and the divine, as a consequence of having the two natures in one person. Monotheletism was rejected at the Second Council of Constantinople in 680 AD, where it was affirmed that the one person of Jesus had two wills, the human and the divine, as a consequence of having the full human and full divine nature.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD leaders of the church from throughout the Mediterranean came together and developed what remains today the standard orthodox statement on Christology, a summary of Scriptures teaching on the person of Jesus Christ. It reads:

"We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential (*homoousios*)] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin

⁷ Wellum, *The Person of Christ*, 100.

Mary, the Mother of God [*theotokos*], according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence [*hupostasin*], not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us."⁸

In their gospels Matthew and Mark recount for us a conversation between Jesus and His disciples. Walking through the area of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They respond with a variety of options: “Some say John the Baptist, and others say, Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then as now, there have always been many answers to the question “Who is Jesus?” The number of potential options is not the main issue, however. Jesus gets to the heart of the matter: “But who do you say that I am?” That is the question that every single person who has ever heard of Jesus must answer. Who is he? Is he just a man? Is he a god in the form of a man? Is he a lunatic? Is he a figment of collective imagination? Is he more myth than reality? Who is he?

At Chalcedon, the church expanded and clarified who Jesus was, a reflection of Peter’s succinct yet profound answer to Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” May we take care to be sure that we answer that all-important question rightly. As we go through our course we will refer back to Chalcedon and show how it reflects Scriptures teaching about who Jesus is.

II. TO PROPEL OUR DEVOTION

Michael Reeves writes, “Jesus Christ, God’s perfect Son, is the Beloved of the Father, the Song of the angels, the Logic of creation, the great Mystery of godliness, the bottomless Spring of life, comfort and joy. We were made to find our satisfaction in, our heart’s rest, in him.”⁹ We must remember that the Christian life and faith centers not on a set of rules or principles, but on a person. It is a person who redeemed us and it is a person that we worship. Logically, then, the strength and depth of our faith is inextricably tied to how well we know that person. As Reeves says, we were designed to be satisfied in Christ and in Christ alone. As an inexhaustible fountain, our satisfaction and joy in him will be ever-increasing as we grow in our knowledge of him. Theology leads to doxology.

⁸ Philip Schaff’s translation, which can be found with footnotes here: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html#fna_iv.i.iii-p9.30

⁹ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 9.

The study of Christology, then, is not primarily an intellectual exercise but a devotional one. Not only do we want to make sure we are worshipping the right Jesus, but we want to know all we can about Jesus who is the object of our worship. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in John's vision of heaven in Revelation 4-5. The chapters opens with John entering heaven through "a door standing open" and at the command of a voice "like a trumpet" (4:1). John finds himself in a throne room gazing upon "one seated on the throne" (4:2) whose description is almost beyond words. "He who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald" (4:3). Lightning and thunder flash forth from the throne as it sits atop a sea of glass (4:5, 6).

Who is this Being seated on the throne? Whoever He is, He is worthy of worship. That is the song of the elders surrounding the throne:

"Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed
and were created" (4:11)

John is beholding God Himself, a vision of His glory and splendor reminiscent of what Isaiah saw in Isaiah chapter 6. His description is the attempt of man to describe something indescribable; words fail to accurately convey the glory of the living God.

Chapter 5 opens with John noticing a scroll in the hand of the One on the throne, a scroll sealed that "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open. . . or to look into it" (5:3). No one is worthy. John weeps in sorrow. It is in this moment of distress that another figure comes forward. One of the elders around the throne says to John, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:5). John sees this worthy One, "a Lamb standing as though it had been slain. . . he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne" (5:6, 7).

Immediately the creatures and elders occupying this throne room fall to their knees and worship the Lamb, singing,

"Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth." (5:9-10)

The cacophony of praise expands as, added to the voice of the creatures and elders are the voices of “many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!” (5:12)

Still not enough tongues have joined this song of praise. Soon “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” sing,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (5:13)

There is coming a day when all of creation, every creature, every living thing, will worship Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah and Lamb who was slain. He, and He alone, is worthy. He alone is worthy to be worshipped with God because He *is* God.

Though John’s vision is one that has yet to come to pass, Jesus is no less worthy of our praise now than He will be then. As people redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, we this very day worship Jesus Christ. He is worthy. This class seeks to develop a clear picture of who He is because He is worthy of being known and worshipped. As we see him more clearly, may we love him more dearly and worship him more sincerely. May our theology lead to doxology for the one worthy of all praise.

It is important as we go through this course to remember that Jesus is not just an object of study. He was and is real, a man, a person like us yet entirely unlike us, because He is the God-man, the Word made flesh. As we delve into what are some heavy, complex, at times murky theological concepts, let us never forget that we are seeking to know our Savior better. He is the Son of God who took on flesh and became like us to effect our redemption. He is worth knowing. As Michael Reeves writes,

But what *was* he like? Anything but boring and anemic! Here was a man towering with charisma, running over with life. Health and healing, loaves and fishes, all abounded in his presence. So compelling did people find him that crowds thronged around him. Men, women, children, sick and mad, rich and poor: they found him so magnetic some just wanted to touch his clothes. Kinder than summer, he befriended the rejects and gave hope to the hopeless. The dirty and despised found they *mattered* to him. His closest friends found that, as the Son of Man came eating and drinking, being with him was like being with a bridegroom at a wedding. . . . Generous and genial, firm and resolute, he was always surprising. Loving but not soppy, his insight unsettled people and his kindness won them. Indeed, he was a man of extraordinary—and extraordinarily appealing—contrasts.

You simply couldn't make him up, for you'd make him only one or the other. He was red-blooded and human, but not rough. Pure, but never dull. Serious with sunbeams of wit. Sharper than cut glass, he out-argued all comers, but never for the sake of the win. He knew no failings in himself, yet was transparently humble. He made the grandest claims for himself, yet without a whiff of pomposity. He ransacked the temple, spoke of hellfire, called Herod a fox, the Pharisees pimped-up corpses, and yet never do you doubt his love for you as you read his life. With a huge heart, he hated evil and felt for the needy. He loved God and he loved people. You look at him and you have to say, "Here is a man truly alive, unwithered in any way, far more vital and vigorous, far more full and complete, far more human than any other."¹⁰

¹⁰ Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*, 53-55.