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Research Paper
The Formation of Christology in the Early Church

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Thesis:

The study of Christ throughout church history is very significant to understanding where the church is now and remains alive with many issues and questions.

Introduction

This research paper will seek to provide an epigrammatic walk through the development of Christology in early church history. This journey will begin with the apostolic fathers to current. Since the fact that throughout church history Christology was developed along with the struggles of heretical thoughts, this paper will recapitulate historical and modern controversies to support a Christological foundation. The study of Christ throughout church history is very significant to understanding where the church is now and remains alive with many issues and questions. This should not be surprising since it is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who constantly leads Christians, of every age, to a deeper knowledge, and so love, of Jesus - who he is and what he has done for us. The present day concerns are both old and new. Actually, many of today's questions arise out of the past and so, while the answers of today may be in some sense new, yet these new answers must of necessity find their foundation and source in the past. We will

examine some these new Christological issues in the light of the Church's traditional teaching.

The doctrine of Christ's divinity is the core of Christian doctrine; it is the historical foundation of the church triumphant. To comprehend the purpose of the church, we must understand the development of Christology in the early church to present. Jesus Christ is the central figure of Christianity and he is revered by most Christian churches as the Son of God and the living form of God in flesh. The main sources of information regarding Jesus' life and teachings are found in the Bible, particularly in the three synoptic gospels. Much is to be known about the life of Christ as one must explore spiritual and natural aspects of his life. To understand Christ's divinity is to understand God's incarnation and purpose among humanity. The life of Christ plays a major role in History and the future of the church. History has proven and unchanging Christological of truth that has been consistent throughout time. The development of Christology in the church has great implications for the church as we know it today. Future creation can rest on the redemptive of Christ on the cross as it provides hope and grace to those that believe. Christ is the promised Messiah and extends his plan for all creation both Jew and Gentile, through his establishment of church. It is evident through history that Christ is our hope.

Christology is the division of Christian theology and doctrine regarding the identity and the personage of Jesus Christ. Christians undoubtedly must answer the universal expressed question, "Who Jesus Christ is?" Sustaining in belief throughout almost 2000 years history of the church, Christians believe in the humanity of Jesus Christ as he is a real, historical person, born in the Land of Israel, during the Roman Empire. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the incarnate of God, as the Bible teaches. However, historically, the orthodox doctrine has endured a lot of controversy in its development in throughout the early church history. The doctrine of Christology is still much relevant today, as we are still battling with contention many unorthodox and heretical teachings about the person of Christ, e.g., the Jehovah's Witness, the Mormonism and the "apostolic oneness" theology. Retrospectively looking on the history of the developments of Christology can certainly help us to preserve, defend and proclaim our orthodox Christian faith.

Although Christology can also have a soteriological side to include the work of Christ, the main focus of the early church theologians on the study of Christ was on the theology proper side¹. The majority of the debates and controversies were about the person of Christ - his deity and humanity, and the

¹Berkhof, Louis, The History of Christian Doctrines, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, pp 101.

relationship of the two. The orthodox doctrines of Christology were established during this period of time, along with other important orthodox doctrines such as the Trinity. However, orthodox Christology did not come into place automatically or easily. In the early church history, there were a lot of unorthodox teachings and controversies about the person of Christ. The orthodox doctrine was developed out of continual debates and fighting with these erroneous doctrines.

There are plenty of descriptions about Christ's deity and humanity in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testaments. The early apostolic fathers (AD 90-140) emphasized on both the deity and the humanity of Christ. Ignatius acknowledged the true deity and humanity of Christ when he referred to "Jesus Christ our God" and the "blood of God"². Clement began his sermon by "Brothers, we must think about Jesus Christ as about God, as about the judge of living and dead..."³. At a slightly later time (AD 165-175), Melito of Sardis spoke clearly of Christ as both man and God: "he was by nature God and man... he is buried, and so he is man; he rises again, and so he is God."⁴. In his apologetic work,

2 *Ignatius, "The Second Epistle to the Ephesians", <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-25.htm> (Dec. 2017)

3 *Clement, "The Second Epistle of Clement", <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/2clement.html> (Dec. 2017)

4 *Melito of Sardis, "Prayer in Praise of Christ", <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/pray0247.htm> (Dec. 2010)

Justin Martyr of the same time expressed his belief that Christ is the "logos" and has personality. However, he seemed to view Christ as another God who is inferior to the highest God (Subordinationism)⁵. The teachings about Christ in this period of time lacked clarity and awareness of the problems involved.

Gnosticism covered a wide range of belief, and most of their teachings that we know today were obtained from the patristic Anti-Gnostic works⁶. In terms of Christology, Gnosticism believed that the Supreme God was incomprehensible and inaccessible, but from Him came a series of progressively lesser deities (*aeons*). Jehovah of the Old Testament is the lowest of these aeons, and Christ is one of the highest aeons. Since Gnosticism believed that all matter is evil, it usually had a Docetic view of Christ that he was a spirit being having only an apparent body or temporarily associated with a man Jesus who was a special emissary sent to the world to deliver mankind from the darkness⁷. In his anti-heretic work, Irenaeus listed out various Christological heresies that are due to Gnostic influence, especially the Docetic views⁸.

5 *Kaye, John. *The First Apology of Justin Martyr, Addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius*. Edinburgh: John Grant, 1912, pp. 55-56

6 "Gnosticism", *ibid.*

7 Berkhof, L., *The History of Christian Doctrines*, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, pp. 47-48.

8 *Irenaeus, "*adversus haereses*", I.xxiv.1-2, in McGrath, A. E., Ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995.

In the New Testament, these Gnostic views on the Godhead were already refuted, e.g., by John in his Gospel and other writings and by Paul in Colossians. The early apostolic fathers and theologians also had many works with the purpose of fighting against Gnostic teachings including its Christology. The debates contributed significantly to the development of orthodox Christology. Origen believed that Christ is the Divine Reason, and "the mediator between God and flesh". He noted that "through the whole of Scripture the divine nature is spoken of in human terms, and at the same time the human nature is accorded the distinctive epithets proper to the divine"⁹. He used the word "*homoousios*" to state that Christ has the same essence of the Father, but at the same time he seemed to be also a Subordinationist (e.g., he taught that the Logos was a "copy" of the original God and inferior to the Father). Irenaeus stressed the unity of God, but he did not have much speculation about the "Logos". The Son and the "Wisdom" were involved in the Creation. He emphasized that Christ was both God and man, and rejected the separation of "the heavenly Christ" and "the earthly Christ". He held a recapitulation (restoration) theory about Christ's Salvation¹⁰. Tertullian believed that Christ is fully God and

9 *Origen, "de principiis", II.vi.3, Section 4.5 in McGrath, A. E., Ed., The Christian Theology Reader, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995.

10 Berkhof, L., The History of Christian Doctrines, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, pp. 64-65.

fully man at the same time, and rejected the idea of "divine-human alloy". He stressed that the Logos is an independent Person who was begotten by (and thus proceeded from) God. There was still a little Subordinationism in his discourse of Christology, as evidenced in a crude form of a greater and lesser participation of the first and second persons of God¹¹.

Another heresy in church history is Docetism gets its name from the Greek word meaning "to seem to be". In the history of Christian theology this is the view that Jesus Christ was not a real man but simply appeared so. This undermines not only the incarnation, but also the atonement and resurrection. Through Eusebius we know about Cerinthus the Docetist who was the opponent of the apostle John at Ephesus. The origin of Docetism is not biblical but Hellenistic and oriental, and has the concept that matter is essentially evil. Alexandria was a melting pot of Hellenistic and Oriental ideas, and the home of some of the greatest Gnostic teachers. After the 2nd century, serious heretic teachings came into existence to challenge the early church about who Christ is. In the 2nd century, the biggest heresy was Gnosticism, and in the 3rd century it was Monarchianism. A few other controversies specifically concerning Christology followed in the 4th and the 5th century. By that time there were two schools of thoughts concerning Christology. The Alexandrian

¹¹1111 *ibid.*, pp 65-66.

School tends to stress the unity of the two natures of Christ and focused more on the deity of Christ. The Antiochian School tends to stress the distinction of the two natures and focus more on the humanity of Christ. As a result, there were two main controversies concerning Christology: the Appollinarian controversy and the Nestorian controversy.

Three Christological Truths of debate in Church History

Before we begin we must be clear about three incarnational truths. The early Fathers of the Church instinctively realized that in conceiving and articulating the mystery of the Incarnation these three truths must be maintained for they believed that such truths were at the heart of what Jesus revealed about himself and what the New Testament taught concerning him. Nonetheless, it must be said that they did not consciously articulate them in the systematic manner that I will now do.

1. It is truly *the Son of God* who is man. This truth emphasizes that Jesus must be truly the divine Son of God. The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) upheld this truth against Arius, who conceived the Son of God to be a perfect though created being, and thus not truly divine. The Council stated that the Son of God was 'God from God, Light from Light, True God from True

God, begotten and not made; one in being with the Father'. What is 'made' is always of a different nature (a different kind of being) from the maker. What is 'begotten' is always of the same nature (the same kind of being) as the begetter. Ants make anthills but beget other ants. Human beings build houses but beget other human children. God made the world but begot his Son and therefore his Son is God as the Father is God. Being 'one in being with the Father' equally meant that what the one being of God is is the Father begetting the Son. The very nature of the one God is the Father begetting his Son.

2. It is truly *man* that the Son of God is. From an incarnational perspective, it is of no value to uphold the full divinity of the Son if that Son is not truly and fully human. Thus, the early Church condemned both the Docetists, who claimed that Jesus' humanity was a mere pretence in that he merely took on the appearance of man but not the reality of man, and Apollinarius, who denied that Jesus had a human soul. The Son of God, if he were to save us, must live an authentic and genuine human life, and therefore he must be truly and fully human in every way, sin excepted.

3. The Son of God truly *is* man. This truth accentuates the fact that the incarnational 'becoming' must terminate in an incarnational 'is'. The divine Son and the man Jesus cannot be separate beings. The Son of God must actually exist as man. The Son of God must *be* man. Here the early Church at the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) condemned Nestorius.

Nestorius believed that if the Son actually 'became' man, it would mean that the Son would undergo change and mutation and so would lose his divine transcendent perfection. God cannot be born or hunger or weep, or suffer and die. However, the early Church grasped, in faith, that this was the whole point of the Incarnation. Again, it is of no value in upholding the full divinity of the Son and the full humanity if the Son of God does not actually exist as a man for it is through the Son's human existence - his human birth of Mary, the Mother of God, through his human life, and especially through his human death and resurrection that the divine Son of God inaugurates our salvation. Thus the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) declared that it is 'one and the same Son' who *is* truly God and truly man. The one Son who is God as the Father is God is the same Son who *is* man as other human beings are human.

These three truths are expressed in what has traditionally been termed 'the Communication of Idiom', that is, the predicating of divine and human attributes of one and the same

person – the Son. It is a way of accentuating the truth, and even the scandal, of the Incarnation. For example: 'God is born'. Such a statement embodies all three incarnational truths because it articulates that the Son is truly *God* and truly *man* and that the Son truly *is* man for only if he is man can he truly be born. Similarly, it is absolutely true that the Son of God suffers and dies. He does not suffer and die as God, but, since he actually does exist as man, then it is as man that the Son of God truly suffers and dies.

While the communication of idioms this is a strange and frightening theological term, what it means is actually pretty easy to grasp. It is about the mystery of the Incarnation and what that theological truth means for God's divinity and Jesus' humanity. How are we to speak about Jesus Christ and His two natures? What is true? What is false? Jesus Christ is *one person* with *two natures*. Indeed, all traditional Christians- Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants- share this theology (which is called Chalcedonian Christology, because it was affirmed by the ecumenical council of Chalcedon) while quasi- or non-Christian groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons do not.¹²

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<http://theblackcordelias.wordpress.com/2008/08/05/the-communication-of-idioms-and-the-eucharist-and-prayer-without-ceasing/>

Possibly one of the most earnest questions being asked in religious circles today is, "What is Christianity?" Although it is an important and relevant question for all people, it cannot be accurately answered without first asking and properly answering an even more important and relevant question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" The reason for this is that there can be no separation between Christianity and the person of Christ as Hodge rightly states:

"It is the grand distinction of Christianity that all its doctrines and all its forces center in the Person of its Founder and Teacher. In the case of all the other founders of philosophical sects and religions, the entire interest of their mission centers in the doctrines they teach, the opinions they disseminate. This was obviously true in the case of Zoroaster, Confucius, and Buddha, of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, of Moses and Paul. In the case of each of them the question was not what they were, but what they taught. But in the case of Christianity, the entire system, from foundation to superstructure, rests upon and derives its life from the Person of its Founder. The question of questions is what he was, rather than what he taught."

The question of "Who is Jesus Christ?" seems so relatively pragmatic at first glance, and yet the implications of the question are intensely profound. For a person's answer to that question is a determining factor in their eternal destiny. The Scriptures declare that eternal life is knowing God rightly, thru knowing Jesus Christ whom He sent into the world (John 17:3). Thus our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ is most critical to our eternal welfare. Let me offer a simple answer to each of our questions, and then in this section we will examine in greater detail the person of Christ.

Q. Who is Jesus Christ?

A. "Jesus Christ our Lord is undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person forever" (adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Catechisms)

Q. What is Christianity?

A. "And in accordance with this we would define Christianity as follows: Christianity is that redemptive religion that offers salvation from the guilt and corruption of sin through the atoning death of Christ"¹³

¹³A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology* pg.184.

In conclusion we find that as this brief survey of the development of Christology in the early church history has shown, most of the fundamental orthodox Christological doctrines were developed before the beginning of the Middle Ages through the struggle with the erroneous teachings. The discussions and important historical Christological issues help us to set boundaries from historical insight. They are valuable theologically for determining the important parameters. Although we still need to have space for further historical and theological discussion, they help us to avoid repeating the errors in the history. This is especially important in a time like ours when many of the historical heretic teaching are reappearing in old and new forms. After the 2nd century, serious heretic teachings came into existence to challenge the early church about who Christ is.

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