

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF JESUS IN THE FORMULATION OF CHRISTOLOGY

(QUESTION #2, INTEGRATIVE PAPER)

In this paper, I will explore the dichotomy between the Jesus of faith and the quest of some scholars who are engaged in the “search for historical Jesus” and its impact on Christology. I will also examine how the historical Jesus influences our Christology regarding the divinity and humanity of Christ. Historical philosophical perspectives in relation to Christology will be addressed along with its impact on the church today. An in depth analysis of how Christians can affirm the full humanity of Christ by avoiding past heresies will be assessed in the conclusion of this paper. It is quite thought provoking to contemplate the role of Jesus in the formulation of Christology, This concept is a recurring theme in Chapter 30 of Erickson’s book and a central theme in Christology. Erickson contends that there are three primary issues in contemporary Christianity regarding the methodology of Christology.¹ These three issues are 1) the relationship between faith and history; 2) the relationship between the person of Christ and the work of Christ and 3) the literalness of the idea of the incarnation.² Erickson examines the dichotomy between history and Christology. He explores a controversial subject in the church for centuries by asking the metaphysical question: How can the divine nature and the human nature coexist within one person?³ The author notes a paradigm shift in the twentieth century. Scholars began to contrast the Christ of faith tradition with the actual Jesus of Palestine who walked, taught and worked among the disciples and the crowds⁴, This culminated in what is known as the

¹ Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology*. (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids), 2013., p.604.

² *Ibid*, p.605.

³ *Ibid*, p.606.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.606.

“search for historical Jesus.”⁵ Scholars who advocate the search for historical Jesus tend to be more liberal protestants as per the author and have strayed from traditional orthodoxy. For example, the author cites Adolf Harnack who believes Jesus’ teaching emphasize three primary points. They are as follows: 1) the Kingdom of God and it’s coming; 2) God the Father and the infinite value of the human sole; and 3) the higher righteousness and commandment of love.⁶ Another scholar, Albert Schweitzer, perceives Jesus as an Eschatological figure whose Parousia would take place at the end.⁷ He did not perceive Jesus as a modern figure as per the author. In contrast, Erickson contends that our belief should be based on the “Geschichte” or significant history which contends to the impact he had on the disciples.⁸

Erickson does an excellent comparative analysis of Christology from above” and Christology from Below. Erickson cites authors (Karl Bath, Rudolph Bultmann) who espouse Christianity from Above. Erickson notes that these authors adhered to strict orthodoxy and there was no use of the historical reliability of scriptures.⁹ Three crucial points supporting this view given by the authors cited are 1) the basis of understanding of this view is the kerygma (proclamation) not the historical Jesus; 2) Christology from Above has a preference for Paul and the Fourth Gospel (John); and 3) Faith in Christ is not based on legitimate rational proof,¹⁰ One has to assess this traditional perspective for its relevance to the church in the twentieth century context. In my opinion, those who have a high view of scripture will prefer this method because it adheres to Christian orthodoxy as taught by the Church fathers. Erickson also cites Emil Brunner’s perspective that emphasizes the Christ in the flesh and the Christ after the flesh.¹¹ I

⁵ Ibid, 607.

⁶ Ibid 608.

⁷ Ibid.608

⁸ Ibid.609

⁹ Ibid.609

¹⁰ Ibid.609

¹¹ Ibid.,653

agree with Brunner's perspective that "the witness of the church and Scripture always includes the picture of Jesus."¹²

On the other hand, Christology from Below" popularized in 1954 with Ernest Kaseman's work regarding building upon the belief that it was necessary to "search for historical Jesus." Erickson cites Wolfhart Pannenberg who expounds upon "Christology from Below by emphasizing three primary points. They are 1) the task of Jesus is to offer rational support for belief in the divinity of Jesus; 2) he criticizes Christology from Above as neglecting the divinity.. of Christ and 3) Christology from Above is only possible from a God perspective and not a human perspective. Pannenberg's extensive analysis makes valid points. Furthermore, I believe Pannenberg's makes his strongest point when he states " Historical inquiry behind the kerygma of the new Testament is both possible and theologically necessary." ¹³

Two important concepts introduced by Erickson discuss 1) the Person and work of Christ and 2) the Incarnation Viewed as Mythology; As per the author, the Person and Work of Christ were closely connected in the early Church. Paul Tillich expounded the concept to address Christology as a function of soteriology. ¹⁴ Bultmann developed the demythologization of Christology. His perspective of demythologization entailed not eliminating but reinterpreting the New Testament texts. One scriptural reference discussed by Bultmann is Matthew 14: 22-33 which entails Jesus walking on water. Bultmann proposes the Scripture writers used myths to demonstrate what happened to them existentially. Bultmann also asserts the incarnation is mythological. and is the rise of a more generalized view of Christ. Bultmann strongly emphasized demythologization.

¹² Ibid.,653

¹³ Ibid.,654

¹⁴ Ibid.,654

One of the most sensitive subject matters in Christianity entails The “Deity of Christ. This subject matters was discussed and debated by the early church fathers. John 1:1 states “ In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. John 1;24 states the Word became flesh. Trinitarian Christians espouse this belief. The author cites the great historical debates in Christianity regarding the “Deity of Christ.” The author cites the following scriptural texts in relation to Christ’s Deity: (Mathew 13:41;luka 12:8-9; 15:10;Matthew 12:28, 19:24;21:41;43). The author cites the Gospel of John’s I AM formula. Erickson mentions the emphatic style of Hebrews and the witness by Paul of Christ’s deity: (Colossians 1;15-20).

Consequently, there were other pertinent sources of evidence which developed in the Church regarding the deity of Christ. First, as per Erickson, the book of Hebrews is “emphatic” regarding the divinity of Christ (Heb. 1:3).¹⁵ In my opinion, this is a well-taken point. Many biblical scholars believe the first rule of exegesis is grammar. If one examines the syntax, it will give credence to the New Testament writer’s view of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Second, Paul frequently writes regarding the deity of Christ.

Erickson explores another interesting concept. He discusses the term “Lord.” He cites the New Testament writers use of the word, “kurios” for “Lord.”¹⁶ He cites scriptural evidence denoting “high Christological connotations.”¹⁷ For example, he notes the tetragrammaton (YHWH) usually translated as Jehovah is used in the Septuagint and also references what he calls The “reverential (Adonai).¹⁸ Thus, Jesus is given the Old Testament name for God. Some of the scriptural references he quotes are Acts 20;-21, Romans 10:13, Joel 2: 31-32, and Isaiah 8:13. Lastly, Erickson concludes his support for the deity of Christ by stating “For Jews the term

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 629.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 631

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 631

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 631.

”Kurios” suggested Jesus Christ was equal with God. I believe the aforementioned points are credible scriptural evidence regarding the divinity of Christ.

There were heresies that existed, One such sect was the Ebionites. The Ebionites denied the ontological deity of Christ.¹⁹ This group can be traced to heretical movements which occurred in the New Testament period. As per the author, the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians addresses this issue. According to the Ebionities, Jesus was an ordinary man unusual but not superhuman or supernatural gifts of righteousness and wisdom.²⁰ Thus, the author’s view that the Ebionites denied sections of scriptural texts and tried to resolve tensions regarding the view of the deity of Christ hold validity.

Another dissident view was Arianism. This sect Arianism developed from the teaching of the Alexandrian presbyter named Arius. Arianism was much more widespread. It was condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325 CE and at subsequent councils.²¹ The debate regarding the deity of Christ comes is primarily based on two words. They are homoousios (One substance) and homoiousios (similar substance)²². Scriptural references such as John 14:9 also support Trinitarian Christianity. Non-Trinitarian sects of Christendom developed. There tension and disagreement among Trinitarian and Non-Trinitarian Christianity even in the 21st century. Much of these this ongoing debate is demonstrated on social media. Many of these religious organizations have relocated there headquarters to more conservative towns due to declining membership.

Erickson cites the doctrine of humanity is by far less debated. The author cites biblical evidence of the humanity of Christ. He states Jesus’ body indicates he was human. He also cites

¹⁹ Ibid, p.634.

²⁰ Ibid., p.634.

²¹Ibid., p, 634

²² Ibid., p. 634

the genealogy of Jesus found in Matthew and Luke. In addition biblical references cited by the author that refer to him as flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). However, he does cite views heretical that have permeated over the centuries. Two such heresies are Docetism and Appollinarism. Docetism entailed a denial of the reality of the humanity of Jesus.²³ As per the author this belief existed simultaneously with Gnosticism and Marcionism. Docetism much like the view of Ebionites existed in Galatia. Thus, this caused the Apostle Paul admonish the Church in Galatia regarding this heretical teaching.

Another heretical view, Appollarinism, entailed is a "truncation of Jesus' humanity."²⁴ As per the author, they believed Jesus took on a genuine but not complete human nature. There are many heretical views permeating in the 21st century church. One has to skillfully navigate through ministry in the church to eradicate this heresies and adhere to Christian orthodoxy.

Two modern scholars, Karl Barth wrote books on the humanity of Jesus. In Church Dogmatics, Barth develops the humanity of Jesus but does not perceive it He believed the deity of Christ was hidden in humanity. Bultmann divides the history of Jesus into the actual events of his life and the *Geschichte* (significant History). Erickson cites the sinlessness of Jesus.

Hence, there ongoing debates in the 21st century regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The first rule of exegesis is grammar (syntax). John 1:1 provides credible evidence of the divinity of Christ if one examines the syntax. The issue of the divinity and humanity of Christ will be an ongoing debate in the world of Christendom. I believe Erickson adheres to orthodoxy with scriptural credence regarding the divinity and humanity of Christ being coexistent.

²³ Ibid.,650.

²⁴ Ibid, p.650.