

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. (John 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!” (John 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 NT 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 CE. 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.

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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" (from the Greek word *sōtēria*, meaning "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 NT, 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 Nicea (325 CE)

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 Nicea in 325 CE, 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. 336 CE). 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* was 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 Colossians, 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 Nicea 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 Nicea 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 Nicea 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 (381 CE) to the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE)

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 Nicea. 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. 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 NT's insistence that Jesus was in every way like a human being, except sin (Phil 2:5-8; Heb 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* (Matt 1:23).

Questions about the Text

1. What are the three touchstones that structure Christological reflection?
2. What does the word *Christ* mean?
3. What does the word *eschatological* mean?
4. What does the "kingdom of God" mean?
5. What word and its meaning are conveyed in the image at the beginning of John's Gospel?

CONCLUSION: THE NEVER-ENDING QUESTION

The councils of Nicea 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.

6. What was the theological concern at the Council of Nicea? At the Council of Chalcedon? Explain the development that led from Nicea to the conclusions at Chalcedon.

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