



Intoduction to the Person of Christ

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From the very beginning Christians have been a people who confessed certain tenets of faith. They were people of doctrine, of teaching. They expressed beliefs in both their worship and their witness. The most basic of these beliefs surrounded the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is believed by many scholars that statements like "Jesus is the Christ" or "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3) were simple formulas of confession for the earliest disciples. The rise of false teaching led to several of the letters we have in the New Testament. The Epistles of John, for example, call upon early believers to confess faith in Jesus as both true God and true man. This confession was written, most scholars of early Christianity generally assume, to counteract Docetism, an ancient heresy which denied the humanity of Christ, and Ebionism, which cast doubt upon Jesus' unique position as the Son of God.

Even the harshest critics of early Christianity understood what these followers of Christ believed. The Emperor Trajan, in writing to Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, said:

*They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath (*sacramentum*) not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind (italics mine) ¹.*

Aristides, an early writer, defended Christianity by writing:

As for the Christians, they trace their origins to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is confessed to be the Son of the Most High God, who came down from heaven by the Holy Spirit, and was born of a virgin and took flesh, and in a daughter of man there lived the Son of God.... This Jesus ... was pierced by the Jews, and He died and was buried; and they say that after three days He arose and ascended into heaven.... They believe God to be the Creator and maker of all things, in whom are all things and from whom are all things. ²

Irenaeus, another early writer, speaks of "The Rule of Faith" which was also called "the faith" or "the tradition." In it he writes of things early churches taught against heretics, including belief in "... one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation..." ³

It is plain that when these worshipers confessed "Jesus is Lord" they meant that He was God. One clear evidence of this is seen in how they took Old Testament references to Yahweh, the Lord, and applied them directly to Jesus, thus worshiping Him as God!

Yet at one and the same time these worshipers believed, with ancient Judaism, that the Lord God was one. The ancient shema, "the Lord our God is one God," was freely confessed.

How could both of these truths be understood? God is one God, but both the Father and the Son were fully God. (It becomes apparent that quite early on they also understood the Holy Spirit to be fully God as well.) The explanation and unpacking of these simple faith confessions led to serious doctrinal development. By the fourth century the church had some serious problems to address, relating particularly to the teaching of these affirmations. During the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries councils were convened and creeds were written. These addressed two primary areas of concern. First was the doctrine of the Trinity. Second was the doctrine of Christ, as God and man. This is what we call Christology, or the doctrine of Christ's person.

Various statements were written, seeking to redress the errors being taught by many in these early centuries. One such statement, called the Nicene Creed, reads (in part):

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through Him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
He came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
He became incarnate of the
Virgin Mary, and was made man,
For our sake He was crucified under
Pontius Pilate;
He suffered death and was buried.
On the third day He rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and His kingdom will have no end. ⁴

These early centuries were times "... of unparalleled importance in the formation of Christian theology," writes David Wright. ⁵ Creeds and doctrinal formulations were being written which would guide the church for centuries, distinguishing between what would and would not be allowed in understanding the fundamental teaching of the New Testament regarding the central person in Christianity, Jesus Christ.

The most basic of all these early formulations came in A.D. 451. This definition, drafted at Chalcedon, spoke of Jesus as

... the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten,
recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without
division, without separation; 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 and subsistence, not so parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ....⁶

Here the clearest thought came to open expression. Jesus was a person in whom there were two natures, that of God and man. He was one person, with a human nature and a divine nature. He was not two persons, but one. He was fully God and He was fully man. The two natures were not mixed or confounded in the one person.

For some 15 centuries the church held faithfully to the teachings of these early creeds and councils. Then, with the rise of modernism and liberal theology all was called into question. Schleiermacher, Hegel and Ritschl challenged the historic Chalcedonian formula. They wrote of a unitary divine-human nature. More recently Rudolph Bultmann rejected Chalcedon, believing it presupposed supernatural realities outmoded by modern thought. Defections from Chalcedon are now legion. While the church has continued to confess its faith in the words of these old creeds, multitudes of pastors and teachers (and growing numbers of lay members as well) have opted to say the words without really believing that they mean what they meant in the past. (One would wish for a more basic honesty in this, but error hardly ever comes screaming openly, "Here is error, beware!")

In our own time we have "Christs" of liberation, feminism, blackness, functionalism, universalism and postmodernism. Can we respond to the huge shifts in thought in our time without denying Chalcedon? To put it another way, can we still hold to Chalcedon, confessing Jesus as fully God and fully man, and at the same time respond adequately to the late twentieth century?

This may sound like an academic exercise appropriate for intellectual giants and seminary trained ministers. What does all of this have to do with my following Jesus in simple faith? I answer, "Everything!"

An example of the importance of theology and its relationship to simple faith joined with godly living occurred to my own mind as I was praying this morning. Each day I take a portion from the helpful book, *Operation World*, and pray for a country, the church in that land, and the unreached peoples of the world. Today's entry concerned the country of Burundi, in Africa. The entry read as follows:

The East African revival stirred the church in the 1950s, but liberalism and promiscuity have seriously damaged the credibility of many congregations. Pray for the Holy Spirit to be poured out afresh. Liberal theology has also made many inroads. Praise the Lord for stirrings of new life in some areas and among young people in secondary schools and in the university (IFES). This movement has begun to deeply affect churches around the country.⁷

True theology and theological reflection should guide the mind and fire the heart as well. True theological reformation will lead to personal revival. Revival will bring fuller obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ in every realm of society. It will issue in changed lives and changed culture. At the heart of such an awakening will be love for Christ. Love for Christ must be grounded in the person of Christ who is revealed to us in the New Testament. Nothing could be more basic to our prayer for revival in this day than a recovery of, and current application of, orthodox Christology. Such should lead to an attendant rise in devotion for and worship of the living Christ! True devotion to Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is the *essence* of true revival.

Our prayer as this issue is sent out to readers around the world is quite simple:

Lord, lead Your church into a full recovery of the great truths concerning Jesus that were confessed by the earliest Christians. Give us contemporary understanding that is healthy, and give us wisdom to apply it to our culture and generation. Send Your Spirit, with power from above, and revive Your people so that they might declare Your glory to the nations!

Notes:

¹ Pliny, *Letters*, x:96, AD 112.

² Tim Dowley, ed. *The History of Christianity*, Batavia, IL: Lion Publishing Co. David F. Wright, "What the First Christians Believed," p. 115.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴ Taken from *The Alternative Service Book*, quoted in Dowley.

⁵ *Ibid.*, David F. Wright, "Councils and Creeds," p. 164.

⁶ Henry Bettenson, selections and ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd. ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 51–52.

⁷ Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*, 4th Edition, p. 124. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1986.