

## C is for Christology (modified)



Sometimes people will try to correct a swearing friend by pointing out that *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. Those who employ this gentle chide may not understand exactly how theologically important their little quip is.

Christology is another epic topic that, like atonement and baptism before it, has everything that we are looking in our journey through these ABC's of theology: the perspectives are diverse, the topic is inherently multifaceted, different views have developed over time, many of those views have changed or adapted over time, and there is contemporary work being done on the subject. Christology can also be contentious. This is significant because it is nearly impossible to say *anything* about *any aspect* of Christology without drawing the ire of some group, camp, or school of thought. This makes sense at one level: what we believe about Jesus and how God was at work in Jesus (that is the Christ part) is so central to our faith and identity as believers that the stakes are quite high. Both the implications and the applications of our Christology have real-world, concrete consequences. Christology is not abstract speculation (though sometimes it can stray toward this) or just semantics. As Elizabeth Johnson says about our 'God-talk', something is getting itself done in our language.<sup>1</sup>

*Reading note: if you are not enjoying the next section, just skip down to \*\*\*\*\*.*

Let me introduce the basics – then we will dig deeper.

Christology attempts to navigate two paths which end up overlapping in a dynamic place.

1) Jesus was a man. The way that we attempt to talk about his 'divinity' – or as I prefer – the way that he participated in the divine, is vital to any understanding of who and what Jesus (the man) was.

When we speak of 'Christ' we are speaking of *the Logos* or that aspect of Jesus which channeled, hosted, or was the divine presence on earth.

2) The two primary ways that thinkers approach this conundrum are classified as:

- Christology from Below

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<sup>1</sup> Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God by Elizabeth A. Johnson

- Christology from Above

*This is not to be confused with a 'High Christology' and a 'Low Christology'.<sup>2</sup>*

'From Below' means that you begin with the baby in the manger and figure out in what way he embodied the divine presence of God. 'From Above' means that you begin in heaven with the pre-incarnate Christ and figure out how downsized/reduced/kenosis into the human form of a baby.

*Technically you can start 'from below' and end up with a High Christology. It is just that there are a lot of steps one must undergo. That is for another time.*

The Greek word that gets translated into English as "Christ" is very similar to the Hebrew term Messiah that means "anointed one." They are slightly different because the Jewish expectation of that historic figure and the Greco-Roman expectation comes with some significant military elements. This term gets more elaborate because the New Testament adds that extra element (or layer) which points to the deity of Jesus.

Christology is essentially trying to answer these two questions, one related to the person and one related to the work.

Who is Jesus? (the question of his identity)

What is the nature or significance of the incarnation? (the question of his work).

Side note: we will encounter the question of Christ's 'saving' work again when we get to S is for Salvation and get into another theologically rich topic called *soteriology*.

*Justo L. González. [Essential Theological Terms](#) has a very helpful entry on Christology that I will try and summarize quickly.<sup>3</sup>*

From the earliest days of the what would become the Christian churches, believers have tried understand and to express who Jesus is and why that matters so much. The New Testament, uses terms like

- the Son of Man
- Messiah
- Lord
- Word of God
- Shepherd
- Lamb of God

The early Christians worshiped Jesus. Early in the second century, pagan writer Pliny says that Christians gathered "to sing hymns to Christ as to God." Right worship is one thing but soon the attention turned to right doctrine or right belief.

The earliest attempts were often too simple and were thus rejected and eventually declared as heresy. at one end of the spectrum you have those who believed that Jesus was a purely celestial

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<sup>2</sup> My cheeky way of explaining the difference is that in 'low' Christology you have Jesus as a man who touched the divine or who embodied the divine in some unique way – but who is not God. In 'high' Christology you have one who is worshiped as God but who was barely human or only temporarily human. This explanation is so crude as to almost be unhelpful, but it will at least get us started. The most robust Christologies wrestle to keep these two elements in tension.

<sup>3</sup> (*Kindle Locations 953-988*). Kindle Edition.

being, an alien messenger from above who was human only in appearance. The word Docetism means “to seem.” This view is best known because of the gnostic approach. We see echoes of its rejection in passages like 1 John 4:2, where the test of what ended up becoming the orthodox position which is the affirmation that Jesus “has come in the flesh.”

On the other end of the spectrum are those who see Jesus as purely a man, born like all men, who was given a special role by God because of his virtue and purity. This too was rejected by the church at large. Thus, from an early date it was clear that Christians wished to affirm that Jesus was both divine and human, but the thought behind this ‘mystery’ is difficult both to understand and to express. How can these ‘two natures’ be in union?

You might think that it is helpful to simply say that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. It actually opens a whole other can of worms and makes this difficult issue even more complicated. Consider, for example that Justin Martyr declared in the second century that the Word was a “second god”. This was not helpful and was soon abandoned. It was in the fourth century that this issue came to a head in *Arianism*, the claim that the Son was created by the Father and so was not co-equal with God nor shared the same *substance*.

The process of refuting Arianism and clarifying how the Word or Son is God led to the development and clarification of the doctrine of the ‘Trinity’. Thus, by the second half of the fourth century, the general consensus was that Jesus is divine because he is the divine and eternal Word or Son of God made flesh.

On this subject, there were two theological tendencies that clashed repeatedly. The first can be seen in the Alexandria school, which emphasized the unity of the divine and the human to such a point that it might seem that the humanity was dissolved or engulfed in the divinity. If need be, the Alexandrines were willing to deny some aspect of the humanity of Christ in order to affirm the union of the divine and the human in him. These positions were rejected by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

A second (and opposite) approach can be seen in the Antioch school which was with preserving the full humanity of Jesus, sometimes at the expense of its full union with the divine. This was the position of Nestorius, who declared that in Jesus there are two natures and two persons, and that the union of the two is one of *will* rather than of *nature* or of *person*. This was rejected by the Council of Ephesus in 431. Part of this rejection resulted in the *Communicatio idiomatum* (Latin: communication of properties) or the transferal of predicates from the human to the divine—in the person of Jesus Christ, so that whatever is said about him as human may also be said about him as divine.

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**If you have not enjoyed this section – don’t worry!** Here is what you really need to know: In 451 the Council of Chalcedon finally arrived at the formula that eventually became generally accepted by most Christians, that in Christ there are “two natures in one person.” While this did not solve the issue, it was simply stating that one must affirm Christ’s full divinity, his full humanity, *and* the full union of the two.<sup>4</sup>

The Protestant Reformers generally accepted the christological formula of Chalcedon and the decisions of the early councils on these matters, because they were more concerned over the saving work of Jesus than over the question of how he can be both divine and human and still only one

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person. Among the major Reformers, Calvin tended to emphasize the distinction between the divine and the human in Jesus, whereas Luther inclined in the opposite direction, emphasizing the union of the divine and human- insisting that we can see the divinity of Jesus only as it is revealed in his humanity, his weakness, and his sufferings.

I give you this overview only to show you how technical and laborious the debates around Christology can be. You can see why many theologians have preferred to leave these metaphysical problems behind and to focus on the work of Christ (or the work of God in Christ) instead of trying to solve the riddle of his *person* and how that works on the *essential* or *substantial* level.

Having said that, it is important to realize that much contemporary work is being done in the field of Christology. This is especially true because of the global voices that have joined the theological roundtable in recent centuries through missionary efforts.

Indigenous, Asian, Africa, Central and South American voices have brought new insights and new perspectives to the historic topic. In addition to this global conversation have come voices of correction or complexity in the form of feminist, queer, and postcolonial thinkers. If you are interested in different Christologies from around the globe I would suggest the book “Christology: A Global Introduction” by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen.

### **This brings us to our secondary ‘C’ word of the week: Constructive.**

Constructive Theology is a recent movement that seeks to move away from a ‘systematic’ approach to theology – which can be very formal and rigid – toward a more organic or emergent approach. Constructive theology also brings a severe critique of a systemic approach which it sees as a factory model that is too mechanical and manufactured.

Consider this: if all of your ‘doctrines’ have to be uniform enough – like gears in a giant machine – to interlock and work together, then you end up forcing them into a mold that they may not fit into. In order to make everything interlocking and uniform you have to make decisions to make some things bigger (emphasize) and some things smaller (or absent). Your ‘system’ then will have doctrines about God, Jesus, Trinity, Bible, Church, etc. (there are generally 10 categories in systemic approaches). They all have to work together and so you have to standardize them and conform them.

Here is the problem: if you look at the Bible, not every topic gets the same amount of attention or detail. Some things are clearly spelled out and get lots of print space, while others are only alluded to or are very ambiguous. In order to make them into a system – which became very popular in the industrial revolution of the past centuries – some data must be shaved off and other data must be added from some other source.

A constructive approach moves away from the assembly line mentality of the factory and moves back to the field or the meadow. In a more organic or emergent mentality, things don’t have to be uniform or all line up or even all work together. The meadow or the forest has all sorts of different elements and they emerge in interaction with one another. It is a more natural way to let theology grow and breathe and change. So, for instance, you might have a large and robust theology about God but not as much about Holy Spirit. Then as your thinking about the Bible emerges you might come to emphasize Christ as *the* revelation of God and that might mean that you have a lot more to say on one subject than on another. You also might have an experience with someone from a different religion that changes your understanding of Holy Spirit revelation

and thus your idea about God would be expanded to a much bigger idea than can be contained in your section about ‘the church’.

Constructive theology is a more organic, communal, and emergent approach to matters of belief and doctrine. It also comes with a strong criticism from feminist theologians who criticize the solo and academic approach of systematic theology that has become so standard over the last few centuries.

Finally, I will share a summary of my contemporary constructive Christology. When people ask me what I believe about Jesus I try to say something like:

Jesus was a unique human. Jesus was fully human in the way that we all are human with one slight difference that makes him special. Like many of us, Jesus was open to the presence of God in his life. Jesus, however, was open to God’s presence in his life to a degree that only a few other humans have ever been. This meant that God’s presence in his life began to actually form his character and allowed him to say something that not many others can: “I and the father are one – if you have seen me you have seen the father” (John 14:9).

What makes Jesus truly unique however was not this openness – for other exemplars have been this open to what God was calling them to be – what makes Jesus unique is *what* God called him to be: messiah for the whole world.

This approach recognizes that Jesus was unique in human history in that:

1. Jesus shows us something unique about God
2. God was present with Jesus in a unique way that comprised Jesus’ identity and character.

It avoids the dangerous temptation to say that Jesus was not fully human, only appeared human, or was a different kind of human. It also allows us to embrace Jesus as a model for full-humanity (to the Nth degree) and openness to God’s calling in our own lives.

At some point we will have to address the evolution from Jesus’ religion to a religion about Jesus. That is a tricky and complicated conversation, but I have seen it bear good fruit for those who are will to wrestle with it.